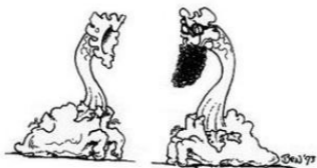


Triffid Tales Volume 4



Alan Robson

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Alan And The Fungi From Yuggoth

The back bedroom in my house had been invaded by Lovecraftian Fungi from Yuggoth and I was starting to think that it was time to do something about it. Black mouldy bits were spreading over the walls and the wallpaper itself was starting to peel.

"I'm worried about the Fungi from Yuggoth in the back room," I said to Robin. "I think they're carnivorous. Have you noticed the strange absence of spiders in the house?"

"Well," she said, "a couple of days ago I cleared up a pile of vomit from the kitchen floor which consisted mostly of diced carrots and spider legs. So I suspect it's much more likely that the cats have been supplementing their food supply. Unless you've gone on a strange diet again?"

"I'm on two diets at the moment," I said. "You don't get enough food on one."

"Let's do an experiment," suggested Robin. "You catch a spider and release it in the back room. I'll take notes."

To hear is to obey. I hunted down a spider and the experiment was conclusive. The spider died a horrible death.

"No, Alan," explained Robin patiently. "You were supposed to feed the spider to the Fungi from Yuggoth, not eat it yourself."

"Sorry," I said. "Anyway, it tasted really nasty without a side dish of diced carrots."

"Let's try the experiment again," said Robin. "And this time do it properly!"

Under Robin's strict supervision, I tried again. The spider screamed horribly as the Fungi from Yuggoth slowly ingested it. There was no doubt in my mind any more. The Fungi from Yuggoth would have to go before they ate all the remaining spiders in the house thus reducing me to only one

diet; a thought too terrible to contemplate.

The first step was to remove the wallpaper. That wasn't difficult; large areas were already hanging loose and all I had to do was grab hold of them and peel them off. The top layer came off easily, leaving the backing paper behind. This was stuck firmly to the wall and the Fungi from Yuggoth were well entrenched in it. Hideous chemicals would appear to be required.

I spread the chemicals lavishly and the backing paper came off in great swathes except in the places where it didn't. These were mostly the areas occupied by the Fungi from Yuggoth. Perhaps the Fungi had eaten the

original paste and excreted superglue. It seemed likely. I applied chemicals that were even more hideous than before, and I scraped away at the soggy walls. The Fungi from Yuggoth snarled, and bit huge chunks out of my scraping tool with their snaggly, spider-haunted teeth. But eventually I triumphed over them and all the paper was off. What remained of the Fungi from Yuggoth sulked in the plaster. Never mind – a chisel would soon take care of them.

Take that, you bastards!

The walls revealed themselves to be deeply pitted with acne scars. Craters abounded, smoking sullenly as the volcanoes beneath them fumed.

Various screws and nails had to be removed, and there was a curious hole about a quarter of an inch across that was plugged with blu-tac. I removed the plug and pushed a rusty nail through the hole. It fell down inside the wall and went *clink* as it landed on something clinky. Hmmm...

For no readily discernible reason the figure 605 was written in pencil just to the right of the window sill. The words '*Porl rote this*' had been scribbled below the light switch by somebody who couldn't spell his own christian name and who had learned to spell the word '*this*' by rote.

Pollyfilla was obviously the answer, though the question remained

obscure. Fill, scrape, sand – oh bugger! Every time I sanded down a pollyfilled chunk and smoothed off its edges, a new hole appeared. Large areas of the wall were covered in a thin plastic skin of what appeared to be improperly applied undercoat, and as I sanded across it jagged strips peeled off leaving large and slightly countersunk gaps that had to be filled up again. It became clear that I had seriously underestimated the amount of pollyfilla needed to complete the task.

"Robin, let's go to the hardware store."

"Oh, goody!"

Robin loves hardware stores. Put her down in front of a wall full of

power tools and she won't move for hours. Take her to the gardening section and she starts to dribble and sway. "Shiny," she murmurs as she strokes the solar lights. She grows them from seed and gets a bumper crop every year. One of her many skills.

Eventually all the gaps were filled and smoothly sanded. I'd put so much pollyfilla on the walls that the room was now noticeably smaller than it had been when I started; but at least everything was smooth.

Time to choose the paint. Robin consulted catalogues.

"What colour do you fancy?" she asked.

"Yellow might be nice," I suggested

tentatively. I'm not very good at colours so I tend to leave that kind of decision to other people.

"There's *mellow yellow* from one company," she said, "and *flower power* from another. I like those names."

"Perfect!" I exclaimed. "I've got a long-haired paint brush with a paisley head band, beads and granny-glasses. It would be just the thing for applying that kind of paint."

Robin was dubious. "What about flares?"

"No, no," I said firmly. "Flares would attract unwelcome attention from the Westpac Rescue Helicopter."

The shop that sold *mellow yellow* was closed when we visited it in the

middle of Sunday afternoon. So we went elsewhere and bought a large can of *flower power* instead. The man picked up a can of basic white and then consulted a complex recipe sheet. Frowning, he began to inject pigments into the white paint. A bit of this, a bit of that, absolutely heaps of the other. Then he banged the lid firmly on the can and put it into a fascinating machine that twirled, twisted and shook in eight dimensions as it thoroughly mixed my *flower power* for me. Robin watched open mouthed.

"I want one," she said firmly.

"?" I asked.

"Just imagine the milk shakes you could make with that."

As I applied *flower power* to the walls, it slowly became clear to me that the simple action of painting over the pollyfilla was causing huge new craters to appear above and below the pollyfilled areas (and sometimes to the right and left as well).

"They weren't there before I started to paint," I insisted to Robin.

"Of course not dear," she said soothingly.

I applied the paint thickly. Perhaps the hollows would fill with paint and vanish from view. It's a theory I formed about thirty years ago, but unfortunately I've never been able to make it work in practice. However I remain optimistic. Maybe this time...

One coat, two coats, three. The cats found the whole thing fascinating. They sat in a row and their heads moved up and down, right and left in unison as they followed the brush strokes.

"That's a pretty colour," said Bess and she poked the yellow wall with a paw. Then she shook her paw violently and began to chew the paint off.

"Yuck!" she spat, "that tastes horrid."

"I bet you could do that," said Porgy. "You could paint a wall." He admires his sister and is quite in awe of her brain power and her many skills. He's better than her at eating and sleeping, but she is better than him at everything else.

"Nonsense," said Harpo. "She's useless. She's just a girl. Girls can't do anything." Harpo is not an admirer of Bess and beats her up every time she shows off by doing something he can't do. That's why he's always covered in scabs – she's better at fighting than he is, though he refuses to admit it.

I gave Bess a paint brush. "Here you are," I said. "You can do the fourth coat. That will probably be the last one that we need." I left her to it and trotted off to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

When Robin came home that evening she went to admire the state of the back bedroom, just as she had done every day since I started work on it.

"Wow!" she said. "That looks

fantastic. There's no trace of the Fungi from Yuggoth any more. Why is Bess yellow; she was a tabby this morning?"

"She spilled some of the paint," I explained. "She put a bit too much on the brush to begin with. It took her a while to get the hang of it, but once she figured it out, she did an absolutely wonderful job."

"Are you telling me that Bess did this?" asked Robin.

"Yes," I said proudly. "She's inherited a lot of skills from her daddy. I must have really strong genes."

"Inherited?" Robin began to laugh. "She's a cat. She's got a leg at each corner, she's covered in fur and she has a tail. How can you possibly be her

father? Sometimes I think you live in a dream world."

"You're forgetting something," I said. "You married me because you think I'm absolutely wonderful and magnificent. You've only ever seen me when I'm wearing my super hero costume. You don't know what I look like without it."

"Yes dear," said Robin and she patted me on the head. I purred, and when she wasn't looking I tickled her with my tail.

Alan Goes Screwing

Robin looked at the far wall of the newly decorated back room and frowned.

"Shelves," she said firmly.

"You think we should put shelves on the wall?" I asked.

"Shelves," she agreed.

It seemed like a good idea to me, and so we got in the car and drove to Bunnings, which is the largest hardware store for miles around. The instant we walked through the door, a Bunning clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, approached us. He

brandished the magic chisel *Excalibur*, and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Shelves?" asked Robin tentatively.

The Bunning put down his magic chisel, and pulled out a map of the warehouse which he scrutinized with a pale pink scroot that he removed from secret orifice.

"Take a left turn at Aisle nine," said the Bunning. "Then go straight on until you come to a traffic island. Take the third exit and go past a pub called The Hard Wear And Tare."

"I've heard of that pub," I said. "Rumour has it that they do a very nice draught turpentine, though their methylated spirit leaves a lot to be desired."

"So true,' said the Bunning, "but they do feature a paint stripper every Monday, Wednesday and Friday lunchtime."

"Shelves!" hinted Robin.

"Turn right after the pub," continued the Bunning, "and then immediately left through the concrete jungle. Pay no attention to the garden gnome with his trousers round his ankles who is the principle water feature. Turn left again onto Aisle nineteen; you can't miss it, there's a plumbing display on the corner with a special discount on a transparent toilet that has goldfish swimming in the tank. Join the dual carriageway on Aisle forty two and take exit twenty seven.

It's signposted '*nut screws washer and bolts*'. Turn left, left and left again and there you are."

"Where?" I asked.

"Shelves," said Robin, and off we went.

The shelving section of Bunnings proved to be remarkably bereft of shelves. There were cupboards which had shelves in them and there were shelves which had wardrobes wrapped around them. But the closest thing to shelves that you could attach to a wall were flimsy, plastic covered wire contraptions with large holes in them for things to fall through. Nothing seemed suitable for our purposes.

"Shelves," said Robin wistfully, and

she shook her head.

"Never mind," I said. "Let's go and have a look at Mitre 10. I'm sure they'll have lots of shelves."

"Shelves!" Robin brightened immediately and we headed off to the car.

The door into Mitre 10 slid welcomingly open. A young man in a blue pullover picked his nose. It didn't quite fit, so he picked another one. Satisfied, he turned to us.

"Yes?"

"Shelves?" asked Robin.

"Over here." The young man gestured vaguely to the right hand wall of the store and ambled off into the middle distance. We followed him into

the shelf section. It wasn't far.

Shelves of every size and shape stood to attention against the wall. Brown support brackets festooned the racks on every side.

"I'll have ten of those," I said, pointing at the proudest shelves. "And thirty brackets. I think every shelf should have at least three brackets to support it."

"Good idea, squire," said the young man. "Nice and sturdy. But we've only got seven shelves in stock and eighteen brackets to go with them."

"OK – I'll take those. Can you order three more shelves and twelve more brackets?"

"No problem, squire. Anything else

I can help you with?"

"Shelves," said Robin.

"Screws," I said.

"Walk this way."

Hunching our shoulders, we lurched companionably across to the other side of the store where I found a jar of ideal screws. There was only one problem – it cost \$60. I sucked air through my teeth and shook my head sorrowfully.

"Have I got a deal for you!" said the young man, not in the least put out.

"Take a look at this! It's just incredible! Seeing is believing! What a bargain!!!!!!!"

Pocketing all the exclamation marks that had fallen on to the floor, he led me round the corner to a special

shelf labelled '*Screw Sale*'. There sat an absolutely identical jar of ideal screws with a price tag of only \$5.

I expressed bewilderment.

"No, I don't understand it either," said the young man. "They pulled all the sale screws on my day off. I have no idea what criteria they used.

Probably a random number generator. We've got one of those on special as well. Want to buy it?"

"No thanks," I said. "I'm trying to give them up."

We took the shelves home and I measured the wall more carefully than I had in the past. Eight things immediately became clear to me, and I rang Mitre 10.

"That order I gave you for three shelves and twelve brackets," I said.

"Yes?"

"Can you add two more shelves and six more brackets to it?"

"So that's five shelves and eighteen brackets in total?"

"Yes please."

"The brackets come in boxes of twenty." The voice sounded peeved.

"But I only need eighteen."

"Well I suppose we can put the extra pair into stock."

"Good idea," I said. "You'll be amazed at the wonderful flavour they'll add to your casseroles."

"You can pick the items up next week," said the voice, and it rang off.

I looked around thoughtfully. All I had to do now was screw thirty six brackets into the studs that were hiding behind the plasterboard and then attach twelve shelves to the brackets. Simple really.

First find your studs. I composed an advert – studs needed to satisfy a lady who wants shelves.

"Shelves," said Robin, deeply moved.

The advert failed to produce any studs. Only high technology could help me now. I invested in a stud finder – a gadget guaranteed to beep loudly and turn its green light red in the presence of studs. Such equipment, I am told, is *de rigueur* among builders

apprentices, who are much given to boasting.

Beeping and flashing, I set to with a will. However a multitude of semi-random results soon forced me to the reluctant conclusion that while there may well be lots of virile studs concealed beneath the surface of my yellow wall, there was also a plethora of dweebs, dwarves, dwangs and similar builders jargon in there as well. Mapping this confusing array of timber was turning into a problem somewhat akin to finding my way through a twisty maze of passages, all alike. And, Murphy's Law being what it is, I just *knew* that as soon as I drilled a hole it would bypass every single solid

block of wood and pierce itself deeply into insubstantial nothingness.

Walls are just like atoms. No matter how large and complex their internal structure, they nevertheless consist mostly of empty space. And just like atoms, the bits that make up the walls are in constant motion. When a solid particle is identified, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle guarantees that any attempt to drill into it is doomed to failure. As soon as you pick up a drill, the wood will move to one side. Your only hope is to take it by surprise. Mark the place carefully with your finger, distract the wood by singing a song (*I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK*) and drill straight into it. Put in

a screw immediately to hold it firmly in place and prevent any further movement. Then clean up the blood from your drilled through finger.

Using this infallible technique, I soon had thirty six solidly anchored brackets each one checked against its neighbour with a tape measure and a spirit level. Nevertheless, despite such care and attention, one shelf exhibited a slight list to starboard. I suspect the house may have twisted slightly when I wasn't paying attention.

As I fitted the shelves side by side across the wall, I realised that the room was a most inconvenient size. The shelves were not quite long enough to run all the way across. There was a half

inch gap between each pair.

It seemed to me that I had three choices. I could join the shelves together in the middle of the wall, leaving a quarter inch gap between each shelf and the two end walls; or I could put the shelves flush to the end walls and have a gap running up the middle of the wall. Or perhaps I could fill the gap running up the middle of the wall with a vertical support brace. I experimented – and found that two shelves standing on their edges filled the gap nicely and ran from floor to ceiling giving a most pleasing effect. I could easily anchor them in place by attaching small brass braces to the edges of the shelves and the upright,

which would have the additional beneficial effect of firmly supporting the edges of the shelves. Without some such construction, the edges had a tendency to go *boi-oi-oi-ng*, with possibly fatal consequences for anything stored too close to them.

There was only one problem. I rang Mitre 10.

"I need two more shelves," I said.

A very patient man took my order. And lo! It was done.

"Shelves," squealed Robin with delight.

Thirty six brackets, each of which required six screws; three into the wall and three into the shelves. Twelve brass braces each of which required

two screws. Two hundred and forty screws. That's a lot of screwing.

And it put a great big smile on Robin's face.

Alan And Robin Dry Out

Condensation has been an ongoing problem *chez robson* ever since we moved in.

Robin opened the curtains and wrinkled her nose at the water streaming down the windows, flooding the window sills, soaking the curtain and dripping on to the floor.

"It's worse than it was yesterday," she said.

I clambered out of bed and splashed through huge puddles to the shower. I

got myself clean and dry, and then I swam back to the bedroom to get dressed. I picked up the extra towel I keep in the bedroom and dried myself again before I put my clothes on.

Robin drew a stick man in the condensation on the window pane. She considered him thoughtfully for a time, and then she drew a stick woman to keep him company. She decided that they didn't look happy together and so she wiped them out.

"Yuck," she said, "my hand's all wet."

"It's the blood," I told her. "From the stick man massacre. It gets everywhere."

The cats tippy-toed into the kitchen

in search of food – they never look very grunted in the morning until they have had their breakfast, but when the condensation is at its worst, they look singularly disgruntled as they step carefully towards their biscuits, shaking each paw as it comes up from the water covering the floor.

"It's not good enough," said Porgy. He sounded angry. "You've got to do something about it. We can't carry on like this."

"I agree with Porgy," said Harpo. "Get it fixed or I'll bite you." He thought for a moment. "Perhaps I'll bite you anyway," he continued, "because I can."

Bess didn't say anything. She just

ate her breakfast before the boys stole it.

"I'll take care of it," said Robin, "don't you worry your fluffy heads about it."

"It won't stop me biting him," said Harpo, and he bit me just to prove the point. "Yuck!" he said, "you taste horrid. What have you been eating?"

Over the next few days hordes of sleazy house drying salesmen came to the door, summoned by Robin through the magic of yellow pages. Each attempted to convince us that their particular product was much more suitable than the rubbish being offered by those other salesmen whose business cards they couldn't help

noticing piled on the lounge table. Robin collected vast mounds of leaflets which she thumbed through carefully every night before she went to bed.

"Have I got a bargain for you squire. Low mileage guaranteed; one careful little old lady owner who only used it to drive to church on Sundays. You'd better buy it quick, it won't last long at this price."

"Why are you trying to sell me a second hand car?"

"Oh, sorry squire. Force of habit. That was last week's job. Now what am I selling this week? Oh yes – I remember..."

And then the man from HRV arrived to peddle his wares. He had a

clipboard, which immediately impressed us. He measured up the rooms and took copious notes. He drew little diagrams for us and sketched in arrows to indicate how the air should flow for maximum drying effect. It all seemed terribly efficient.

"Can I look in the roof?" he asked. "That's where we fit the fan and the ducting. I'd like to make sure it's roomy enough."

I carried a stool into the hallway and positioned it nicely below the trapdoor that opens up into the roof space. He climbed on the stool and stretched up towards the trapdoor, but he couldn't quite reach it.

"Bugger!" he said. "My arms aren't

quite long enough. Never mind! I have the perfect answer."

He reached down and unclipped his prosthetic left leg then, balancing carefully on top of the stool on his right leg, he used his left leg as a lever to push open the trapdoor. Once the trapdoor was properly open, he re-attached his leg, jumped up and grabbed hold of the frame and heaved himself into the opening. He looked around the roof for a time and then dropped back down onto the stool.

"That looks perfect," he said. "Isn't it amazing the number of things you can do with an artificial leg? It's so much more useful than having a real one. I'd recommend it to anybody."

Robin and I were in instant agreement. We didn't even have to talk about it. It was never going to get any better than this.

"Where do I sign?" asked Robin.

"Here, here, here and here," said the man from HRV. He scratched his left leg. "It still itches," he said thoughtfully, "even though it isn't there."

In the fullness of time, HRV engineers came and laid pipes throughout the roof. They put ceiling vents into all our upstairs rooms and connected the vents to the pipes. They attached the other end of the pipes to a mysterious humming mechanism. Wires ran from the mechanism to a

dinky little control panel on the wall in our hallway. The engineers pressed the on button and it beeped (always a good sign). Red lights came on, and mysterious numbers glowed. It was all very impressive.

Astonishingly, the instruction manual was only four pages long. Furthermore it was only written in English. I found this quite unnerving. These days even the instruction manual for the kettle is a hundred pages long and written in twenty languages. I began to wonder if perhaps we'd made a mistake buying something with such a thin manual. I read it nervously. The device seemed quite simple and straightforward. I felt worried all over

again.

Mostly the unit is completely automatic. It just sits and hums quietly to itself as it sucks moisture up through its vents. If the temperature in the roof space gets higher than the temperature in the rooms it starts to blow instead of suck, and all the hot air from the roof gets spread around the house. This is indicated by a little red light coming on. When the light goes out, the unit stops blowing and starts sucking again.

By pushing buttons in arcane patterns, the unit can be switched to burnt toast mode. This is a super suck designed to rid the house of horrid smells and fumes such as those produced by burning toast. Oh yes! I

had to try that. I pushed the buttons...

The unit in the roof began to hum as the fan went into overdrive. The ceiling vents vibrated slightly as air rushed up through them into the roof space. Vast draughts of air whistled past me as the fan sucked mightily. My hair stood on end and loose papers plastered themselves over the vents. Porgy the Cat gave a frightened squawk as the suction pulled him upwards. Fortunately I managed to grab him as he flew past me. I hid him safely in his favourite cupboard until the burnt toast mode turned itself off. Wow! That was impressive.

After a day or so of happy sucking we noticed a big improvement in the

condensation problem. Robin could no longer draw stick figures on the window in the morning.

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I think I'm going to miss those stick people. I felt I'd got to know them really well. And it was such fun, wiping them out every day."

Even the cats noticed the difference.

"Gosh," said Porgy, "it's so nice having dry paws at breakfast time."

"I like it when the kitchen floor isn't covered in water," said Harpo. "I think I'll bite you, just to show my appreciation."

He bit me.

"Yuck!" he said. "You still taste

horrid."

Alan Gets Crowned

I know how bodies work. I've read

Fantastic Voyage and **Fantastic Voyage II** (biology text books by Isaac Asimov). I've seen the instructional video that was made from Asimov's books, and I pay close attention to the documentaries that screen on television in between the programmes. So I am completely familiar with the armed forces that trudge up and down the highways and byways of my body fighting off infectious invaders and keeping my bodily fluids pure and

fresh. The minutiae of health care are as an open book to me. So I was somewhat annoyed when a recent rebellion in my mouth caused me a few problems.

It all started, as so many of these things do, with a slice of bread; an attractively brown slice of bread, nice and healthy, chock full of fibre, anti-cholesterol oats and lots of seeds. Some of the seeds appeared to have taken advantage of the cooking process to change their chemical composition slightly. They had undergone a rather arcane phase change, and now appeared to be made of a specially hardened chrome-steel alloy. This is not an

uncommon phenomenon. Trust me – I know these things; I've got a degree in chemistry. That's why I work with computers all day and every day.

I tried to avoid biting down on these devil seeds and I began to wonder if perhaps I should extract them from the bread and use them as reloads in my shotgun cartridges. They seemed almost to have been designed for the purpose. No sooner had I begun to consider this idea than I heard a great "Aha!" inside my mouth, closely followed by the ratcheting sound of a shotgun being made ready for use.

Bang!

Lumps fell off my upper right molar and the armed rebels in my

mouth began to cavort with glee.

"The revolution has started lads. Free vodka for the workers! Free white stick with every bottle!"

I rang my dentist and explained the problem.

"We can fit you in at 3.00pm."

"I'll be there."

The edges of my broken tooth were sharp and I had to be careful not to move my tongue across it in case I got cut. Volunteers from the rebel army tried valiantly to drag my tongue up and over to the tooth, but because it was right at the back of my mouth and was thus somewhat awkward to get to, they failed in their purpose. The revolutionary leaders had them shot,

and I spat the bodies into the gutter.

The dentist sat me down in a comfortable chair and reclined me at a suitable angle. A wide screen LCD monitor on the wall was connected to his computer and on it was displayed my dental records and a diagram of my teeth. He probed my mouth with his instruments and compared what he found in there with the picture on the monitor. Suddenly the computer's screensaver kicked in, and lines of green symbols extracted from the movie

The Matrix began to scroll down the screen.

"Wonderful," said the dentist. "It

matches the inside of your mouth perfectly."

"i 'a 'o," I said. "a's 'ood 'o 'ow!"

"Well," said the dentist, "actually it only matches for quite small values of perfectly. Your upper right molar appears to be on the point of disintegrating. Several large lumps have dropped off and there are cracks in the surface structure indicating that several more large lumps will drop off soon. I think I spotted a few armed rebels hiding in the cavities and they seem to be equipped with dynamite and detonators, so your tooth may not have long to live."

He swung me into an upright position and removed his instruments

from my mouth. He put the instruments carefully on his tray. There was a saxophone, a cello, a flute and a violin. The violin was a Stradivarius. Nothing but the very best instruments for my dentist.

"I could fill the tooth," he said, "but it wouldn't be a satisfactory solution. It won't be very long before the rest of it falls apart. What you really need is a crown."

"What's a crown," I asked with vague black and white memories of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953 floating through my head.

"One thousand two hundred and eight dollars and forty two cents," said the dentist. "And two more

appointments."

"No, really. What's a crown?" I asked.

"Well," said the dentist, "we reduce your tooth to a stump using an angle grinder, a pneumatic jackhammer, two steamrollers and possibly an atomic bomb. Then we superglue a lump of gold to the tooth and cover the gold with porcelain."

"Why do you cover the gold with porcelain?"

"So that nobody knows you've got gold in your mouth. It's a safety precaution to stop you getting mugged when you go out on the razzle of an evening."

"That sounds wise," I agreed. "But I

don't do much razzling these days, so I doubt that it will be a problem. How do you think the rebels in charge of the revolution in my mouth will cope?"

"I should imagine that they'll accept the *de facto* situation as *de jure*," he said, and I was forced to agree with that incisive insight. "But even if they don't," he continued thoughtfully, "they'll probably try to sell the gold on the black market to finance the purchase of more weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps I'll put two dabs of superglue on the crown so they won't be able to lever it off in the night when you're asleep."

The grinding proved to be less of a problem than I had anticipated. Atomic

bombs were not needed; conventional explosives were all that were required. The pneumatic drill *did* spin out of control and emerge from the top of my head in a shower of brains, but no serious damage was done. I wasn't using those particular brain cells for anything important. At the end of the process, the rebels surrendered and were safely incarcerated in an antibiotic camp.

Currently I have a temporary, plastic crown stuck to the stump with library paste so that it can be easily removed when the time comes to fit the real crown, which is being transmuted by dark alchemical rites from a lump of lead even as we speak. Apparently

this process takes at least two weeks. Since the temporary crown is designed for easy removal I have been forbidden to eat brown bread with shotgun-shell seeds and I have also been forbidden to floss. Both these actions, it seems, are likely to strip the temporary crown from the stump thus causing another, possibly very painful, revolution in my mouth.

But a crown, even a temporary one, is still a crown. I expect you to bow next time we meet.

Coaching Days

I was booked on quite a late coach back to Wellington from Palmerston North. As it happened, I managed to finish my business in Palmerston early, and so I went to the coach company to enquire about the possibility of changing the booking to an earlier time.

That was my third mistake.

The first mistake was making the original booking on that there intraweb thingy, and the second mistake was paying for it with my company credit card. Those actions immediately turned

me into a second class citizen of the coaching world, and help was not forthcoming.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the nice lady at the counter, "but I can't change an internet booking. I'm only allowed to make modifications to *proper* bookings. But I'll tell you what, here's an 0800 phone number to ring – you might be able to persuade head office to do something for you..."

She seemed genuinely sorry that the hidebound rules and regulations prevented her from helping me. She really wanted to please me by changing my booking, but since I'd made an improper booking in the first place, her hands were electronically tied and

there really was nothing she could do.

"Have you a phone I can use?" I asked.

"Of course, sir; you can use this one." She proffered a complex device that looked capable of controlling a cruise missile bound for Iraq. "Press button five, then press the blue button that says 'External' on it, turn the light emitting diode gauge to 4.5 on the Richter scale and then dial the number," she instructed me.

I did as I was told. Then I fought my way through the elaborate defences erected by the alarmingly vague automated menu which insisted on offering me choices that had nothing to do with what I wanted to achieve, and

finally I ended up talking to an extraordinarily dim and unhelpful American lady who appeared to have recently graduated with distinction from a course on customer dissatisfaction.

I explained that I'd like to transfer to an earlier coach from Palmerston North to Wellington and that the lady behind the counter couldn't do anything for me because the original booking had been made on the internet.

"How can I help you sir?" asked the American lady.

I said it all again.

"Do you have a booking number?"

"5995536", I told her, and I could hear her computer grinding as it

extracted me from her database.

"That coach ride was booked on the internet," she said.

"Yes, I know that," I told her.

"That's why I'm ringing you. The lady here at Palmerston North said that you would be able to do the transfer for me."

"So how can I help you sir?"

I explained again what I wanted.

"But it was booked on the internet," she said, puzzled.

"Yes," I said. "So can you transfer the booking to an earlier coach? I'm told there is one at 4.50pm."

I heard a distinct *clang* as the penny finally dropped. Lightbulbs sizzled and glowed above her solid ivory skull. "I'll

see what I can do, sir."

There was a long pause and I could hear keys clattering as she typed furiously at her computer. Then she said, "There's a coach from Palmerston North to Wellington at 4.50pm."

"Thank you," I said, raising my eyes to heaven. "Can you transfer me on to it?"

"There's a surcharge fee of \$1 for the transfer," she said. "How would you like to pay for that?"

"Oh I'll just give the cash to the lady at the counter here in Palmerston North," I said. "I have a shiny new dollar in my pocket which I can dedicate to the purpose."

"I'm sorry," said the American

lady," but the original booking was made on the internet and paid for by a credit card, so we cannot accept payment across the counter. You will have to put it on the credit card. Can I have your credit card number?"

With a superhuman effort, I refrained from asking her why she had given me a choice of methods for paying the \$1 surcharge, since only one acceptable payment mechanism existed.

"Don't you already have it?" I asked. "After all, you've got a complete record of the original booking."

"I really need you to give me your credit card number at this time," she said, her language becoming more

impenetrably American as the task she was facing began to overwhelm her with its complexity. I decided to just go with the flow and I quoted the number to her.

"And the expiry date?"

I told her.

"And the name on the card?"

I told her that as well.

"That's the original fee of \$34 and a \$1 surcharge, making \$35 dollars in total for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said, slurring thirty into *thirty*.

"It's a transfer," I said, "not a new booking. Shouldn't you just be charging me \$1?"

"The original booking was made on

the internet and paid for with a credit card," she explained to me.

"Yes, I know."

"So that's the original fee of \$34 and a \$1 surcharge, making \$35 dollars in total for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said again, in the robotic tones of a *Star Trek* computer.

I could almost hear her brain frying under the stress of my unusual and complicated requirements.

"OK," I said, giving up the struggle.

"Booking number 5995536," she said. "I'll change it momentarily."

I winced, deeply hurt by this abuse of the language. Would she really change the booking for only a moment

and then, perforce, change it back again? But I kept quiet. If I said anything to her about the *proper* meaning of the word she had just inflicted on my eardrum, I was afraid that she might blow a circuit breaker and I'd have to start all over again. Anyway, the coach company already had its own definitions of 'proper' and 'improper'. Who was I to rock the boat?

"Booking number 5995536 is confirmed for the 4.50pm coach from Palmerston North to Wellington," she said.

"Thank you," I said, and she rang off.

"Well, I think the transfer has been done," I said to the Palmerston North

lady. "Can you check it on your machine and, if possible, print me a piece of paper with the details?"

"Of course," she said, "no worries." And thirty seconds later the paper was in my hand.

I await the credit card bill with interest. It seems highly likely that it will show a charge of \$34 for the original booking and an additional charge of \$35 for the new one which will almost certainly lead to some interesting arguments with the bean counters at work as they endeavour to figure out just what kind of ingenious scam I'm trying to defraud them with this time. It will take reams of paper and countless phone calls to clear up

the mess. The administrative effort involved will cost the company orders of magnitude more money than the cost of the original coach fare. As a direct result, profits in the next financial year will be seriously lower than forecast, the share price will tumble, bankruptcy will loom and all my friends will lose their jobs.

And it's all my fault.

Robin And The House Of Blue Lights

"Pfft!" said Robin's computer.

"Excuse me?" asked Robin,
somewhat taken aback.

"I said Pfft!" said the computer.
"Have you got cloth ears? Pfft!"

"But what does it mean?" asked
Robin.

"Mean?" said the computer. "It
means Pfft! That's what it means."

"Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Robin.

"Pfft!" said the computer with an
air of finality, and all its lights went

out and the gentle humming of its parts faded away into silence. Robin pressed buttons here, there and everywhere. Nothing happened; the computer remained silent, lifeless and pfftless, pining for the fjords.

"Ah!" said Robin. "So *that's* what Pfft! means. It means I need a new computer."

For many years, when overtaken with overwhelming techno-lust, I have been in the habit of slaking that lust in the welcoming wallet of my friend Helen who builds computers to order, stuffs them full of the sexiest electronics she can find, and then sells them for ridiculously low prices. In the days when we lived just up the road

from each other at the top of the North Island, this was an easy thing for me to do. However these days I live at the bottom of the North Island and she lives at the bottom of the South Island where her cats spend their days hunting sheep and their nights howling rabidly at the moon. But I couldn't see why the distance between us should make any difference to the habits of a lifetime and so I sent her an email:

Robin needs a new computer.

Once I had broached the subject, I retreated into the background while Helen and Robin spent some considerable time discussing the finer points of graphics cards and processor speeds before finally coming up with a

design for a super-computer housed in a gleaming silver case fitted with huge swirly ventilation slots that are protected by an embedded wire mesh behind which electrical components can be seen lurking slyly.

No sooner was the specification agreed upon than a courier delivered a large cardboard box to the door. Robin unpacked it and drooled.

"Careful you don't short circuit the motherboard with saliva," I warned.

Hurriedly she thrust cables into appropriate looking holes and turned the computer on. It glowed cool blue round the edges and through the sides. Perhaps the computer was so powerful that the electrons were moving between

the components faster than the speed of light and so we were being bathed in Cerenkov radiation. I adjusted my lead lined underwear appropriately and nodded with admiration while Robin explored the many features of this undeniably sexy box.

"Look at that!" she exclaimed with glee, pointing out the gauges and meters on the front of the case that were displaying the temperature of vital internal components.

"Oh wow!" she gasped as she watched the *blinkenlights* flashing on and off in boastful and hypnotically complex patterns. "Everyone knows how important proper blinkenlights are," she assured

me solemnly. "I can't think how we ever managed without them."

In addition to *looking* powerful enough to control the finances of a galactic empire while still having enough grunt left over to play graphics-intensive games in its copious spare time, this computer really *is* powerful enough to control the finances of a galactic empire while still having enough grunt left over to play graphics-intensive games in its copious spare time. For once, function follows form. I began to feel quite inadequate and more than a little jealous.

"If you are an extra specially good boy during the day," said Robin sweetly, "I'll let you touch the case for

five minutes in the evening before you go to bed."

What a thrilling promise! Fair sent shivers down me timbers, it did.

There was only one problem. Everything the computer did was done silently. Robin examined the sound card carefully. There were six identically unlabelled holes into which it was possible to plug the cable that connected the card to the speakers. The designers of sound cards appear to be in love with vague ambiguities. Robin took the cable out of its current hole and tried another one. It made no difference to the lack of sound so she tried again with another hole. Not unnaturally, it was only when she

plugged the cable into the sixth and last hole that the computer finally began to make noises. What a relief!

"I've got a birthday coming up," Robin hinted at me.

"Really?" I asked, as if I had forgotten all about the strategic reminder notices I kept finding written on the fridge with the words from the magnetic poetry kit we got given as a wedding present. Since the magnetic poetry kit is the erotic edition, there was more than a certain piquancy to the reminders, and I was quite looking forward to her birthday. Strange delights beckoned.

"Yes," said Robin, "I really do have a birthday coming up. Don't you think

my old beige monitor looks a little *infra dig* when set alongside the new computer?"

"It's got a nineteen inch screen," I pointed out.

"But it's *beige*," said Robin. "And it's bulky as well. It's got a really old fashioned cathode ray tube in it. It's so twentieth century!"

"But it's got a nineteen inch screen," I said.

The computer flashed a few of its *blinkerlights*. "It's *beige*," said the computer forcefully, experimenting with its new-found ability to make sounds. "And cathode rays give me a headache in all my diodes; particularly the ones down my right side."

"Don't you mean the ones down your left side?" I asked.

"No," said the computer. "I haven't got any diodes down my left side. I keep my spare capacity there. I've got rather a lot of that," it added smugly.

"OK," I said to Robin, "let's go to the shopping mall."

A new shop has recently opened in the shopping mall. It has a noticeboard outside it which proclaims, in large friendly letters: We Fix PC's. Because of the apostrophical misuse on the notice, I have always refused to enter the shop, but Robin is less sensitive to punctuational abuse than I am and she has browsed around inside it several times and has been quite impressed

with the things that she found there. It is a one man and a dog operation (I think the dog wrote the notice) and therefore they have a very small, but very carefully selected, stock of computer bits and pieces for sale.

"Can I help you?" asked the man.

"Wuff," said the dog, looking up from a complex spreadsheet displayed on a massive wide screen LCD monitor of fearsome proportions and alarmingly bold sensuality. He wagged his tail and typed a complex mathematical formula for calculating the tensile strength of a bone into a vacant cell. I began to change my mind about who might have written the notice.

"I want one of *those*," said Robin, pointing at the screen in front of the dog.

"Well hello there," smirked the screen in a sultry voice, "I'd really like to go home with *you!* Just wait 'till you check out the depth of my colours."

"Wuff," said the dog, ears drooping with disappointment.

"That's the only one we have in stock," said the man. "I'll go and get the box."

"I notice that you fix PC's," I said to the man when he returned with the box for the LCD monitor. "Do you, perchance, also fix PCs?"

"Yes," he said, looking slightly puzzled.

"We have a computer that said Pfft!" I explained. "Do you have any advice for us?"

"Ah!" he said wisely. "I know exactly what that means. Bring it in and I'll take a look at it."

"What does it mean?" asked Robin.

"Mean?" said the man. "It means Pfft! That's what it means. Could be quite serious. Or possibly not."

We brought the new screen home and Robin retired to her room to enjoy her hugely graphical games. It was obvious that I wasn't going to see her again until bedtime (and probably not even then) so I went downstairs to my distinctly primitive looking computer and clicked on the icon that connects

me to the internet.

"No dial tone," it said smugly. "And therefore no internet either. Go away!"

I picked up the phone that is connected to the same socket. It was dead as a very dead thing. I was not being lied to. Hmmm. What about the other phone sockets in the house?

I went up to Robin's room. She was absorbed in building the Roman Empire. The new graphics card and huge monitor allowed her to zoom in and micro-manage every blade of grass in Italy. She didn't even notice me come in to her room. I unplugged the cable leading from the socket and plugged the phone in. I was greeted by the warm, friendly sound of a dial tone

and the lights on my phone lit up. I plugged Robin's cable back into the wall socket and went downstairs.

"No dial tone!" said the internet connection icon. "It isn't your lucky day, is it?"

Fortunately there are two phone lines coming in to the house. I used the other one to phone TelstraClear.

"I understand simple words and phrases," said the TelstraClear robot that answered my call. "Please tell me which of the following options best describes your needs."

It gave me several choices.

"Report a fault," I said.

"Did you mean debauch a sloth?" it asked.

"Report a fault," I said again.

"I do not know how to deport a malt," said the robot. "I will connect you to a human being who is an expert in divorcing vaults."

The phone rang in my ear and then a human voice said, "Salt department. How can I help you?"

I explained my problem.

"We'll send a technician round tomorrow," said the human voice.

The technician tested my socket and found it wanting. I showed him Robin's socket. He was greatly impressed.

"That's live," he said as he unplugged himself and put Robin's cable back.

He carefully traced the phone line from the top of the gently rotting pole out on the footpath to a mysterious grey box attached just to the right of my front door. Then he dismantled the box and attached meters to various cables. He examined their dials with a frown on his face.

"That's not possible," he said, and he did it all again with the same result. Desperate measures seemed to be called for, so he scratched his head. As it invariably does, this worked perfectly and the answer was revealed to him. All he had to do now was reveal it to me.

"The cable from your new computer is shorting out the phone

line," he said. He unplugged the cable from the socket in Robin's room. "Now go and check your socket downstairs."

I did so and was greeted with the melodious hum of a dial tone.

He plugged the cable back into the wall. "Now go and test your socket again."

Dead as a dead thing. A small pile of dodo corpses lay rotting around the phone.

"See?" he said triumphantly.

I stared suspiciously at the back of Robin's computer. For the first time I noticed that the phone cable was plugged into the network socket. It wasn't a perfect fit (the plugs are the same shape, though a slightly different

size) but it fitted well enough to make contact with some wires that disagreed with it and which gave it indigestion of the phone circuit, thus causing dodos in the downstairs room. I carefully removed the cable from the network socket and plugged it into the modem socket where it belonged.

Dial tones! No dodos. Scarcely even any dodo's.

The technician packed his bags and left, happy with a job well done. Robin, glowing blue, returned to Rome. I went downstairs to check my email.

Alan And Robin Go Overland

It is a truth known to all travellers that interesting journeys always begin at uncivilized hours of the morning. And so, bleary eyed and tetchy, we took a taxi from our warm, comfortable bed to Wellington Railway Station where we joined the check in queue for the Overlander; the train that takes at least twelve hours to travel between Wellington and Auckland.

The man in front of us pushed his ticket through the window and the lady

examined it suspiciously.

"Wednesday 26th?" she asked.

The man nodded. "Today," he said.

"No," said the ticket lady.

"Yesterday."

They began to argue. Eventually they came to an agreement of some kind and he slouched away. It was our turn now and the lady was in a bad mood.

"Tickets," she snapped. I handed them over. "Mr Robinson?" she asked as she checked my name against the list of approved passengers and failed to find it.

"No," I said. "Mr Robson." I read her list upside down and showed her my name on it. She looked bewildered,

but nevertheless drew a line through my name and wrote my seat allocation on the ticket. "Carriage Q, seats 11C and D," she said and handed the ticket back. We went off to check our luggage in.

"Where are you travelling to today?" asked the baggage check lady.

"Auckland," I said.

"Auckland?" She sounded surprised. "Really? You're going all the way to Auckland?"

"Auckland," I confirmed. "Right to the end of the line."

"All right. If you say so."

She tied a green ticket to our two bags and gave me the receipts. We had a black wheelie case and a backpack.

She dumped the bags in a higgledy piggedy pile of other luggage on the concrete floor of the station. A man with a trolley came and picked up some of the bags and trundled them off to the baggage car. Our black wheelie case vanished but our backpack remained forlornly behind. The trolley man came back for another load but still our backpack remained unclaimed. It was now sitting about six feet away from the few remaining bags; guaranteed to be forgotten. I couldn't stand the suspense any more.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "I think I'll take this as hand luggage." I picked up the backpack.

"No worries," said the baggage lady.

We went to the platform to get on the train. It had four carriages labelled A, Q, B and C. Railway staff use an odd alphabet of their own devising. We entered carriage Q and took our seats. The man who was travelling yesterday was asleep across the aisle.

The train pulled slowly out of the station and our journey had begun. An incoherent lady came on the PA system and explained that we weren't supposed to put heavy things in the overhead rack and that the café counter would open soon for the serving of refreshments. There was a menu in the seat pocket in front of us.

At least, I think that's what she said. Her syntax was so twisted and her

words so out of touch with each other that she was impossible to understand. A stream of utter gibberish would be followed by a very long silence as she realised that there was no way at all that she could ever bring the current sentence to a successful conclusion. So she would leave it in mid-creek without a trace of a paddle and start a new one. Also every sentence started with the word also.

To be fair to the lady, we learned later that the person who usually made the announcements was on holiday and she was standing in for him. She was probably scared stiff at the thought of talking to a train full of people; fear does strange things to the syntax.

I went to the café counter and ordered refreshments. The man behind the counter was new and had never seen a coffee machine or a till in his life before and didn't know what to do with either of them. Aeons slowly passed as he tried to figure them out. When I got back to my seat, noticeably older and greyer, I checked the prices on the menu in the seat pocket. He had overcharged me by three dollars, but I had no proof; it was too late to complain.

Later in the journey, I went grumpily back to the café counter. We went through the same tedious rigmarole and this time he undercharged me by five dollars.

Again, I said nothing. I felt that my net profit of two dollars was fair compensation for the strain and stress of watching his utter incompetence.

The train went up hill and down dale across indescribably beautiful crags and crannies. Sheep and cattle ran away from the noisy monster and a man called Kevin waved enthusiastically to us as we passed his farm. He makes a point of always being there to wave at the Overlander. Nobody knows why. Recently there were rumours that the Overlander service would be cancelled. Kevin went into a deep depression. However, the news that the service was not being cancelled after all soon cheered him up

again.

As we trundled over the central plateau the snow-capped mountains brooded on the horizon. I took lots of movie footage of their stationary majesty. They were a little shy and kept hiding behind trees. We stopped at the station at National Park and now they couldn't escape. I took lots more movies of them as they sat silently aloof.

The south bound Overlander shot past on its way to Wellington. We found this surprising as our crew had told us that they were swapping with the south bound crew at National Park. However a few minutes later the mystery was solved as the train

reversed in to the station and parked neatly behind ours. The crews duly changed over and then the south bound train pulled slowly out of the station chased enthusiastically by a small yapping dog who came prancing back to us, extremely proud of his courage at scaring the noisy monster away.

Onwards ever onwards. We crossed spectacular viaducts and wound our way down the Raurimu Spiral to the (relatively) flat lands a long way below. And so to Auckland where we stayed with friends.

A few days later it was time to repeat the journey in the opposite direction. With sparrows farting all around us, we made our way to the

modern, hi-tech Britomart station in Auckland. A large group of confused people milled around. There was no obvious place to check in as there had been in Wellington. Everybody asked each other what to do and nobody knew the answer. Eventually the PA cleared its throat and made an announcement:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed to the top end of platform 3 where the train manager will allocate seats and you can check your baggage."

Platform 3 is straight and flat. It has no slope whatsoever. It has two ends, but neither one is obviously a top or a bottom. Where to go? What to do? Somebody stopped a passing, railway-

uniformed man.

"Which end is the top end of platform 3?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "No spikee eenglish!"

We milled around some more. The PA got very annoyed:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed **immediately** to the top end of platform 3 where the train manager will allocate seats and you can check your baggage."

Nobody moved. The PA got really pissed off:

"Will all passengers for the Overlander proceed **immediately**, in other words **right now to the top end of platform 3.**"

Somebody spotted a dot in the distance. It was a desk with an angry lady sitting at it. She waved impatiently. A queue formed.

Eventually we got our boarding pass and we checked our baggage. We were sitting in carriage Q again. We waited for the journey to start. The lady at the desk continued doggedly to check people in. She worked at the speed of a rheumatic snail; one of the endangered ones that are too slow to escape from predators. The train left Auckland twenty minutes late.

The journey proceeded. Every so often, the PA would announce:

"We have just passed *tangled-name*..."

It would then spend the next ten minutes telling us about all the magnificent things we would have seen if only we'd known about them before they passed us by.

I went to the café counter in search of refreshments. Again a bewildered person took my order.

"Twelve dollars please."

I was fed up with this. "No, I said. It's nineteen dollars."

"?"

"Add it up again," I advised.

There was much head scratching and pushing of buttons. Several other people were consulted and they all stared suspiciously at the till. Eventually a consensus was arrived at.

I was right!

"Nineteen dollars, please."

I passed over a twenty dollar bill. Rather surprisingly, they managed to work out the correct change. I took my refreshments back to my seat and got there just in time to wave to Kevin, though he probably couldn't see me through the smoked glass.

Children threw stones at the train and once we shuddered to an emergency halt and an engineer got down from the cab and removed a bicycle that was lying across the track. We got into Wellington very late and very tired.

But despite all that we'd both do it again in an instant. It's a wonderful

journey with so much to see. However
next time we will take our own
refreshments...

Alan Gets A Toy

I'm writing this article on my new computer. It's about the size, shape and weight of a large(ish) paperback book – a slimline stand-alone novel by somebody like Joe Haldeman, you understand; not an immense door stopping wedge of a book which is itself only one volume of a twelve part forest-destroying trilogy by Robert Jordan.

When I've finished using my new computer, I can close it down and slip it into a pocket or a bag and carry it to my next destination. In terms of system

resources and general computing grunt it is approximately 10 million times as powerful as the mainframe computer I worked on in 1971. Indeed, this one small computer sitting on my lap probably has more computing oomph than the sum total possessed by the entire world in 1971.

And it fits in my pocket.

The machine is an Asus Eee. The three ee(e)s stand for Easy to learn, Easy to work, Easy to play. I'll stop writing for a moment so you can go away and vomit.

Ready to carry on?

The basic machine costs only \$599. I got a memory upgrade and some extra storage so in fact I ended up spending

\$748. But it's still a bargain, however you do the arithmetic. It is the neatest gadget I've ever owned and I'm passionately fond of it. Who would have believed, in 1971, that computers would ever be as small and as powerful and as cheap as that? Only science fiction writers and their devoted readers. We're very, very special, you and I.

Robin Gets Cut Up

"Does this hurt?" asked the doctor as he poked Robin in a pokeable place. She let out an Australian shriek and leapt for the ceiling. The nurse reached casually up, pulled her down again and settled her back in the bed. By and large, you can't surprise a nurse; they've seen it all before.

"I'll take that as a yes," said the doctor. "Nurse, I think we need some pain relief here. Go and get the morphine syringes."

He scribbled a signature on an authorization form and the nurse

bustled off. Soon she was back with two syringes filled with a colourless fluid. She injected the first one into Robin who began to relax a bit. For the first time since arriving at the hospital an hour ago, the pain was at a bearable level. The nurse frowned for a moment and then used the second syringe. Robin relaxed completely.

"I feel a bit light headed," she said.

"That's only to be expected," said the nurse. "You've got two syringes full of morphine in you."

"Nice," said Robin dreamily. "Can I have some more?"

"We're taking you up to the ward now," said the nurse. "We've made an appointment for a scan so we can find

out exactly what's happening inside you. It's likely that you'll have to go into surgery at very short notice, so you aren't allowed any food. But you are allowed an occasional sip of water."

Robin nodded. She didn't care; she had two syringes of morphine in her. She was pain free and as a bonus she felt deliciously swimmy. They wheeled her up to the ward, attached a drip to her arm and hung a "Do Not Feed The Animals" notice on the foot of the bed.

"There's a call button here," said the nurse. "If the pain comes back and you need more pain relief, just press the button."

The hours drifted by. Every so often someone came and gave Robin a

sip of water. Eventually the morphine started to wear off and they gave her some pills to take the edge off the pain again. Robin began to get bored. More hours passed.

"When is something going to happen?" she asked.

"Soon," said the nurse. "We work on hospital time here. It's a bit like the Spanish concept of mañana, only not nearly so hasty. A hospital minute is at least an hour in real time; sometimes longer. We'll be taking you to the scanning machine in about five minutes. So just be a very patient patient. You'll like the scanning machine when you get to see it. It goes buzz."

"I'm hurting again," said Robin.

"Can I have more pain relief?"

The nurse went to get the tablets.

When she returned, there was a doctor frowning over Robin's chart. "What a lot of tablets they've been giving you," he said.

"My tummy hurts," said Robin. The doctor poked her pokeable place again.

"Ow!" said Robin. "See?"

"I've brought some more pain relief tablets," said the nurse. "Can I give them to her?"

Just then Robin's tummy emitted a gigantic gurgle.

"Aha!" said the nurse, the light of understanding dawning on her face.

"You're not really in pain – those are

stomach cramps. You're just hungry, that's all."

"Better give her the tablets anyway," said the doctor. "It's going to be a very long time before she eats again."

"Pain relief tablets for hunger pangs," muttered the nurse. "I don't know what the world's coming to."

Five hospital minutes later they wheeled Robin off to the machine that went buzz. Eventually it disgorged a blurred and blobby picture and everyone gathered round to examine it. It didn't take long to reach a verdict.

"You've got appendicitis. We'll operate this afternoon."

"I told you it was appendicitis two

days ago," said Robin.

"Two days ago you were thirty years too old to have appendicitis," said the doctor. "The symptoms were quite atypical. We all knew that whatever you had it couldn't possibly be appendicitis. We were absolutely certain it was something else."

"Thank goodness you've got a machine that goes buzz to tell you when you're wrong," said Robin.

"One of the first things I learned in medical school" said the doctor, "is that under conditions of constant temperature and pressure the organism being studied will do whatever it damn well pleases. That's why we need machines that go buzz. They help to

keep us humble."

A gaggle of nurses gathered around Robin and presented her with bits of paper.

"This is a consent form for the operation. Please sign here, here and here so that we can cut you up into little pieces. This is a form for the anaesthetist so that he can make you unconscious. Sign here and here.

"What do you want us to do with your appendix after we take it out? Do you want to keep it? It is yours after all."

"Oh yes please!" said Robin eagerly. "Of course I want to keep it."

"Ewwww!" The nurses seemed quite taken aback. One of them flipped

frantically through her pieces of paper.

"I haven't got the form that lets you keep it," she cried. "Nobody's

ever asked me if they can keep the slimy, rubbery bits we cut out of them before." She bustled off in search of the special form.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked one of the other nurses, consumed with prurient curiosity.

"I thought I'd put it on the coffee table in the lounge," said Robin. "It would make a nice ornament."

"Ewwww!" The nurses pulled faces at each other.

"Perhaps I'll have a dinner party when I get out. I could put the appendix

interested.

"This one was last reprinted in 1958," said the nurse. Robin smiled with secret satisfaction as they wheeled her away, knocked her out, cut her open and took her appendix out. And she hasn't stopped smiling since.

Harpo Gets A Hair Cut

Harpo the cat came for a cuddle. He went straight to Robin because he hates me. I'm no good at cuddling. All I'm good for is putting food into bowls. Apparently I do that quite well. He comes back for more food almost every day, when there's a 'q' in the month. But right now he wanted a cuddle. He climbed up onto Robin's chest, thrust his head into her armpit, inhaled deeply and began to purr with pleasure. Robin scratched his head, checking out the

scabs from his latest fight. They seemed to be healing well. She ran her hands all over his long black fur and he wriggled with ecstasy.

"Gosh," said Robin. "His fur is really thick and matted in places. It's just a solid lump. He's never going to be able to untangle it himself. I think we ought to cut it off for him."

"He's not going to like that," I said. "Remember, he's got lots of pointy bits and he knows how to use them."

"We'll put clothes pegs on his neck," said Robin. "He's a wonderful clothes peg cat."

The theory goes that since mother cats carry their kittens around by the scruff of the neck, pressure on the

scruff will make the cat go all limp and pliant so that mum can take care of it. Clothes pegs on the neck apparently feel just like mum, and many cats will let you do almost anything to them as long as the pegs are in place. Others, of course, will just try to rip your arm off and hit you with the soggy end if you put pegs on them. We've been very lucky with Harpo – he's the best clothes peg cat that's ever owned us.

I went to get the pegs, Robin went to get the scissors. I held the end that bites while Robin snipped at the matted fur on the other end. Despite the pegs, Harpo wriggled and cried. He obviously didn't like what we were doing at all.

"I think it's hurting him," said Robin. "I think there's more than just matted fur here. There might be a wound underneath it."

Harpo shrieked with sudden anger and tried to bite me. The pegs simply weren't working.

"I think we'd better go to the emergency vet."

The emergency vet picked up an electric trimmer and buzzed it over Harpo's matted fur. It came off in great heavy black lumps. Harpo protested loudly but it did him no good. The vet continued to trim the fur. Then he gave his official diagnosis.

"Daggy bum," he said.

"Is that all?" asked Robin. "No

wound or anything?"

"Just a daggy bum," said the vet.

"So why did he complain so much when we were cutting it?" I asked.

"Because he's a cat," said the vet.

"Probably he was just telling you to stop messing with his bottom. I can't say I blame him. I'd tell you to stop messing with my bottom if you did it to me."

He shaved off some more fur and peered closely in order to confirm his diagnosis.

"Yes," he said. "That's all it is."

He turned to his computer and typed "daggy bum". The computer didn't seem to mind.

"Now comes the bad news," said

the vet, smiling sweetly. "The diagnosis and treatment comes to \$88."

"Shit and corruption," hissed Harpo. "Just wait till I get you home!"

Soothing The Savage Breast

Back in the days of my youth, when dinosaurs roamed the West Riding Of Yorkshire and television sets were powered by steam, music was a hugely important part of my life. Generally speaking, I was a folkie; most other people that I knew were rockers. Naturally we didn't talk to each other. They were musical philistines. So, presumably, was I; in their eyes at least.

My father would sit in his chair

moaning bitterly about "twanging guitars" whenever *Top Of The Pops* was on the television. I was always glued to the screen because all the girls on the dance floor wore very short skirts and the cameraman had a knicker fetish. He kept trying to peer up the girls' legs as they twitched like epileptics to whatever group was currently miming a hit. Every so often, if you were *very* lucky, you'd get a flash.

"They can't be good songs," said my father. "If they were good songs, The Black And White Minstrels would sing them."

"Yes, dad."

I didn't think much of most of the

music on *Top Of The Pops* either. But I'd have died before I admitted it to my father. I got my real musical thrills late at night beneath the bed covers as I tuned my transistor to Radio Luxembourg. It crackled and whined and faded in and out, but in between the interference and the adverts a whole new musical world opened up for me.

No knickers on the radio though.

I spent my teens and twenties travelling round to obscure pubs where folk singing was committed. I learned many things – I learned that *Whiskey In The Jar* is a cliché and it must never be sung on pain of being booed. I learned that after six pints of Guinness,

anybody can sing a folk song and usually they will. I learned that folk singers stick their right forefinger in their ear when they sing, unless, of course, they are called Martin Carthy (who played, on occasion, with Steeleye Span). He would stick his right forefinger in his right ear and his left forefinger in his left ear when singing, thus making it hard for him to play the guitar accompaniment. Memory insists that he stood on his right leg and ran his left foot up and down the frets, strumming the strings with his willy. But that may well have been a hallucination induced by six pints of Guinness.

Many musicians started to marry

the folk tradition to contemporary rock music. I heard them on John Peel's radio show and I hunted down their albums and, on rare occasions, I saw them in the clubs. Most of the groups consisted of two or three men playing instruments and a woman with a golden voice that was almost an instrument in its own right singing all the songs. I fell in love with Maddy Prior, Sandy Denny Jacqui McShee and Annie Haslam. Many of the groups performed the traditional finger-in-the-ear songs but they also wrote a lot of their own material. Some of it even had a driving beat. Suddenly folk music was modern and trendy. Perhaps I wasn't a complete philistine after all. Sometimes I saw

bewildered rockers looking very out of place in the folk clubs.

"Nice Guinness!"

"Yes it is. The blackness of the drink matches your tee shirt perfectly and the white head looks just like the ones around your nose."

"When does the head banging start?"

"After they sing *Whiskey In The Jar*."

"They don't play very loudly do they?"

"Pardon? I can't hear you over the noise; they've really got the amplifiers turned up high tonight."

We didn't have a lot in common.
Then somebody clicked their

fingers and forty years passed, just like that. Wellington was hosting a weekend of rock and roll.

Superannuated wrinklies with corrugated iron skin and no eardrums were playing a concert in the stadium. Rumour had it that their contract stipulated that there must be wheelchair access to the drum riser at all times. Scores of groupies were recruited from the Malvina Major Retirement Village in Khandallah. They had their hair done specially, and they were all of a twitter.

Robin and I took the bus into town. It was our wedding anniversary and we were going out to dinner.

The bus stopped at every blade of

grass, and lots of people in black jeans, black tee shirts and tattoos got on. One individualist was wearing a white tee shirt and they made her sit in a seat all by herself. They carefully left their beer bottles behind in the shelter and dutifully stubbed out their joints before they climbed on to the bus. They knew that smoking and drinking were forbidden on the bus and they were anxious to obey the rules like the good little rockers they were. They were all high and happy; they'd been preparing carefully for the concert for hours and hours. One of them had his eyeballs rolled so far up in his head that he'd had to drill holes in the top of his skull in order to see out.

"How much to the stadium?"

"\$3.00," said the bus driver.

There was much scrambling around in pockets for loose change. They were all from out of town and none of them had a magic bus card. One of them picked up a single dollar coin and gave it to the driver with an air of triumph.

"The fare's \$3.00", said the bus driver.

The rocker looked puzzled. "Yeah," he said vaguely. "That's right. Three."

One of his friends reached over and handed the driver another two dollars. "He's a bit out of it at the moment," explained the friend. "I don't know what he's been on, but he's seeing three of everything."

"Then god help him when Ozzie Osbourne comes on stage,' said the driver as he handed over the ticket. "Three of him will be a sight too terrible to see."

Most of the rockers were teenagers. They were far too young to remember Ozzie's first bat (mind you, it's doubtful if even Ozzie remembers his first bat these days, so they had lots in common with him). There was the occasional middle aged greaser looking very self-conscious in his torn and faded twenty year old reunion tour tee shirt and stick on tattoos, but mostly they were teenagers, chattering gaily and txtng thr frnds.

The driver closed the doors, ready

to pull away from the stop.

"Wait, wait!"

One of the young rockers raced up to the driver and began whispering and gesticulating wildly. The driver sighed and opened the doors. The young man got out and ran down the road. He looked round the corner and began jumping up and down and waving his arms.

"The bus is here," came the faint and distant cry. "Get your finger out. Stop doing that you evil pervert, and get over here right now!"

He shambled back to the bus, giving his mate plenty of time to finish whatever unsavoury thing he was doing. Presently a harassed looking

rocker appeared and raced towards the bus. He was trying to multi-task, running and drinking at the same time. Being a man (sort of), this was utterly beyond him, and his bottle was still quite full when he arrived panting and choking at the bus. He laid it rest among the corpses of its brothers and climbed aboard.

"How much to the stadium?" he asked.

"\$3.00," said the driver patiently.

The closer we got to town the more excited the rockers all got.

"Is this the stadium stop?"

"No, it's not this one."

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Here we are!"

Buses from all over town were disgorging snakes of black clad rockers which wended their gothic way to the stadium. Ours joined them and we wished them well.

"Enjoy the concert," I said. "Have a great time."

"Rock on dude!"

Robin Flies West

Robin was off to Australia to celebrate her mum's 80th birthday. The cats and I were looking forward to two weeks of eating mice, and sharing our lizards in the bed.

The first thing Robin needed to do was pack a suitcase. Like many things in Robin's life, her suitcase is purple. She claims it matches her hair, and who am I to argue with something that is so demonstrably true?

She opened a few dressing-table drawers at random and tossed a bra, a

sock and a knicker into the suitcase. Then she held them in place with a tee shirt and a trouser. Now all she needed was her toilet bag. This was difficult – she had two to choose from. Naturally she chose the wrong one.

"My toothpaste tube is too big to fit into the bag," she complained, brandishing something the size and shape of a small alp.

"Fold it in two," I suggested, and she gave me a purple glare.

"Never mind," I said. "I can easily fix the problem. Pass it over here."

Somewhat dubiously, she gave me her toothpaste tube and I went into the bathroom where I swapped it for a smaller tube that I just happened to

have lying around. However when I got back to the bedroom where Robin was busy with her suitcase, I found that it wasn't needed. She'd changed her mind.

"I think I'll use the other toilet bag," she said. "It's bigger."

She began transferring things from the old bag to the new one. "Can I have my original toothpaste tube back, please?"

I retrieved it from the bathroom. "Thanks," said Robin vaguely, as I handed it to her. She was too deeply immersed in the intellectual problem of deciding which items needed transferring and which ones she could do without to pay much attention to me.

"Shampoo?" she pondered. "Yes, I think so." It went into the new bag.

"Conditioner? Yes, my hair is in a delicate state at the moment.

Toothbrush? I suppose so, since I'm taking the toothpaste. It would be a shame not to use it. Nail clippers? No, I don't need those. Motor bike?"

"Motor bike?" I asked.

"A girl never knows when she'll need her motor bike," said Robin as she retrieved the small plastic model from one toilet bag and placed it carefully in the other.

I left her to her packing and went to watch the television. I had 42 channels to choose from but there was nothing on any of them, and so I watched the

blank screen instead. Have you ever noticed how well designed screens are? They are just perfect for watching. I've tried feeling them and smelling them and tasting them and even listening to them, but nothing works nearly as well as watching them.

Robin's plane left at sparrow fart which meant that check in time was at evil-o-clock. The alarm went off at 3.00am.

"Yippee!", said Porgy The Cat, wide awake in an instant, and eager with the anticipation of breakfast. "Yummy, yummy. Feed me now."

"Me too, me too!" Bess was anxious not to be left out.

"Hurry up with those biscuits,"

growled Harpo, "or I'll bite you in the goolies. Perhaps I'll bite you in the goolies anyway just because I can. I'm fluffier than you are and that counts for a lot; you just can't win against me. I'm wearing knickerbockers and white ankle socks."

With cats criss-crossing dangerously between my naked and moderately fluffy legs, I staggered into the kitchen, put some biscuits down and topped up the water bowls. Then I went to have a shower. As I was drying myself, Porgy wandered into the bathroom for his daily treat. He ambled into the shower stall and slurped up some shampooey water. Then he sat down in a puddle of it and watched me

pulling the towel back and forth across my damp skin.

"You look funny without your fur on," he said. "What colour fur are you going to wear today?"

"I think I'll wear black," I said to him, "so that I blend in with the darkness outside."

"Good idea," he replied and he wandered off, his wet bottom gleaming in the light of the energy saver bulb.

"Ahhhhhhh!!!", screamed Robin from the bed, where she was cunningly grabbing a few more moments of illicit sleep. "Porgy sat on my face! He's all wet!"

"Have a shower and wash it off," I suggested. She crawled out of bed and

began to ablate.

I got dressed and made myself a cup of coffee. I picked up the biscuits that Harpo had scattered all across the kitchen floor (he's a very messy eater) and put them back in the bowl as a surprise treat for Bess. Robin staggered sleepily from the bathroom to the bedroom to get dressed. "I wish I hadn't packed my motor bike," she said. "I could really use a motor bike just at the moment."

"Can't you make do with the stress turkey that's hiding in the dragon's hollow tree instead?" I asked.

"I suppose I'll have to," she said. "But it's not the same."

Once she was dressed we put the

purple case into the car and set off for the airport. It was about 3.45am. The man who lives in the house at the bottom of the street was mowing his lawn, and he waved as we drove past. The roads were full of traffic.

"Where are all these people going to and coming from?" I wondered. "Surely they can't all be catching a plane? If they were all leaving, the country would be empty! Oh wait..."

"I bet none of them have purple cases," said Robin proudly. I'm sure she was right.

"Did you remember to pack a book to read on the plane?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said. "I chose it very carefully. It's a bodice-ripper

called **Emma And The Persuasion Of Mansfield Northanger**. I picked it because it's full of purple prose, but with no sense or sensibility about it at all."

"Any pride?" I asked.

"Only prejudice," she replied.

The airport was full of hustle and bustle and bright lights. I dropped Robin off and gave her a hug. She purpled herself and her suitcase into the terminal building where she checked in and received a boarding pass with a luggage receipt stuck on the back of it. The luggage receipt was about an eighth of an inch wider than the boarding pass, and so it exposed a small sticky strip around the edge that

was just ideal for picking up pocket fluff and cat hairs, and for sticking firmly to the pages of a book and tearing them when you used it for a bookmark. I do admire such design perfection – it must have cost the airport authorities a fortune to get it just right.

I left Robin to the tender mercies of the airport administration and I drove off to Woolworths to do the weekly shopping. What else is there to do at that time of the morning?

Woolworths was deserted. The drunks were long gone, sleeping off the beer and wine they'd blearily bought two hours ago. Cashiers with nothing better to do chattered in a desultory

fashion, waiting for their shift to end so that they could all go home and sleep the sleep of the just finished work. As I pushed my trolley round the empty aisles, I could feel their suspicious eyes staring at me.

"Oooh look! He's put some vegetables in his trolley! Nobody's ever bought vegetables at 4.30am before. Do think we should ring the police? He must be up to no good."

I wandered past the meat counter and down to the bulk produce area.

"He's chosen some lamb! That proves it. He must be a terrorist. Look! Look! Cashew nuts! What's going on?"

I pushed the trolley past the chiller.

"Oh no! Yoghurt! There's no way

he can be an honest man. What is the world coming to?"

I paid for the things in my trolley and took them home. The man in the house at the bottom of the street had finished mowing his lawn and was now pruning his roses. The prunes kept falling off the thorns, and he was swearing at them.

I cooked a lamb korma with the ingredients I'd bought from Woolworths. It had finished simmering by 8.30am, and I put it to one side to cool down. It always tastes better after the ingredients have had several hours to mingle and rot. I would be eating lamb korma for my tea for the next four days. Ah – the joy of homonyms!

Time to put the washing on.

Perhaps I should vacuum the carpet or clean the windows. It was still very early, and the rest of day stretched endlessly before me. I was rapidly running out of avoidance tactics. Soon I would have to read a book...

Autobiographical Interlude

I am 25 years old and I am embarking on my first really responsible job. Serious things depend upon how well I work over the next few weeks – several years of environmental thinking are coming to a head. These days we'd call it a green initiative, but in the 1970s it is just another government programme, and not a very important one. Nevertheless I feel a deep sense of involvement. I've been working on things that can make a

difference to the way the world lives, and my colleagues and I are about to report to our peers and make some suggestions for future actions. I am on my way to the first Governing Council meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). I am a member of the British delegation and I am nervous – it's my first time in such rarefied circles and it all sounds very diplomatic and scary. However I am the low man on the totem pole. I make the metaphorical tea. I take comfort in that thought – it makes me feel less exposed.

The Swissair flight from London to Geneva takes off exactly on time. Even abroad the Swiss are a superbly

efficient nation. You can set your watch by their timetables. Geneva is in the French speaking part of Switzerland. Except for a very small enclave comprising about one percent of the population, the Swiss don't have a language of their own. Ever frugal, they use other people's languages instead. On the plane, I try to remember my schoolboy French but it all feels vague and foggy.

Geneva airport is clean and well organised. We pass through customs and immigration as if they are not there and we take a taxi to the hotel. It too is clean and well organised. The Governing Council meeting will take place at the Palais Des Nations; the old

headquarters of the disgraced League Of Nations. We walk from the hotel; it isn't far.

We can see out over Lake Geneva. It seems to stretch on forever. Today the weather is crisp and clear and the beautiful single jet of the fountain sparkles in the sunlight as it reaches up with gorgeous elegance high into the sky. It seems to be trying to drown the clouds, and they hover nervously, eyeing the enormous column of water with deep suspicion. There is a multi-level car park under the lake, reached by brilliantly lit tunnels that burrow far underground. A very efficient (and typically Swiss) idea. I hope the roof never caves in under the weight of the

water.

The Palais Des Nations is an old and elegant building with peacocks strutting proudly through the immaculately maintained gardens. Pompous diplomats arrive in shiny cars and the peacocks can see themselves reflected in the highly polished vehicles. This annoys them – enemies in the reflections! Screaming war cries, they charge forwards and peck furiously at the invaders. The drivers try in vain to shoo them away. Huge holes appear in the car doors. Automotive body shops in Geneva do a roaring trade in peacock repairs.

The Governing Council meeting takes place in a large auditorium with

rows of flip top chairs banked up at an angle like seats in a cinema. We have tiny desks on which we can spread our papers. A plaque on the desks tells people that we are British. We have headphones to plug into small sockets built in to the desks. Through the headphones we can listen to the simultaneous translations of the speeches that the delegates are making. When we get bored with the speeches we switch to the Chinese translation, which none of us understands and which never fails to make us laugh. Hee, haa, hoe, hoo go the voices in our ears.

The translators are sitting in booths above the auditorium. Headphones are

clamped firmly to their ears and they concentrate fiercely as they mutter into their microphones, turning the words that flow into their heads into words that flow out of their mouths. Ideally these words should form a continuous stream; they drop in at the top and they fall out at the bottom without a pause. Mostly this works well, except for those poor people who have to translate from the German.

Translators from the German have the hardest job of all. They have absolutely no idea what the speaker is saying until all the words are put into context by the verb. And in German, the verb is always the very last word in the sentence. Consequently the

translators have to hold untold levels of seemingly unconnected subordinate clauses in their minds as they wait desperately for the arrival of a verb that will finally turn the whole mish-mash into something that will, with luck, make sense. Only then are they able to translate it. Unfortunately some sentences are so long, and so twisted up with bureaucratic jargon, that by the time the speaker reaches the convoluted end of the sentence, the translator has long since forgotten the beginning. Therefore translators from the German often speak in long eloquent silences as they wait for the sense of the current sentence to unravel in their minds. They tend to say

"Ummm!" a lot, and they sometimes find themselves having to make inspired, artistically creative guesses about what might have just been said. And while they are muttering their translation of the current sentence, the speaker is already a long way into the next one, and the translator has probably missed most of it, being still heavily occupied with the work of translating the previous one. It is always a Red Queen's race and nobody ever catches up.

Further complications are caused by the fact that a native German speaker, faced with a new situation, will simply make up a new word on the spot to describe it. German lends itself

to this – short words are easily combined into longer portmanteau words that just don't exist until the speaker proudly declaims them. Thus the language is constantly evolving and it is always full of confusing slang. Everyone remembers that not so very long ago the American President enthusiastically assured a cheering, but slightly bewildered, crowd of German supporters that he was a jam doughnut. Simultaneous translators from the German are haunted by the fear of committing similar solecisms. Wars have been started for less.

The nervous tension induced by these terrors causes a high turnover in German-speaking translators and the

UN is always scouring the world for more of them.

People come and go in the auditorium without ceremony, delivering papers to their delegates and taking other papers away. The delegates pay no attention to the scurrying. They read their speeches in a calm, unhurried, very formal way. Everything seems minutely choreographed and well rehearsed. There are no surprises in the debating chamber.

The formal sessions are just a place to present foregone conclusions. All the real business of the Governing Council is discussed and settled at the evening parties where the drink flows

freely, lubricating the wheels of power. We schmooze with the best of them and put forward proposals which are tentatively adopted. Everyone has another gin and looks at things from a differently blurred angle. The next day, more dull speeches in a politically appropriate language fill the time in the chamber, and the members ratify what little they remember of the previous evening's drunken diplomacy.

A motion is proposed and seconded and discussed and passed. The Soviets are jubilant – this topic seems to be important to them. We supported their motion and the next day a member of the Russian delegation turns up in our offices in the Palais Des Nations with a

well chilled bottle of vodka and a large tin of caviare. It is only 9.00am, but that doesn't seem to matter. We drink very large shots of vodka, downed in one, and we chase them with Beluga Caviare; the very best caviare, we are informed. The rest of the day is a blur – but much more vodka features largely in it. The Russian delegation starts partying at 9.00am and stops partying at 9.00am the following day, which is when the next party starts. We join in enthusiastically.

Then we have a day off and so we go for a picnic – the hills around the French border are very pretty and nobody cares all that much if you stray too close to the dividing line between

the two countries. The French officials are jovial and not at all averse to sharing a glass of wine with us. We sit on something that might be an alp when it grows up and we eat our picnic food and we drink far too much red wine. Flies join in enthusiastically and swim in our wine glasses. It just adds protein to the day.

The French speak very fast and I cannot make sense of the gabble. The Swiss speak more slowly, more precisely and they are much easier to understand. I remember that when I was first learning French at school I used to listen to the speeches of General de Gaulle on the radio. Unusually for a Frenchman, he spoke

slowly and sonorously, enunciating every syllable very clearly. He spoke beautiful French and it was a joy to listen to him, even though most of his speeches consisted of him simply telling the English to get lost each time they applied to join the Common Market.

Geneva is an ancient city and the old town and the new town are quite distinct areas. We go out for dinner in the old town, where all the best restaurants are. We eat a fondue with sticky Swiss cheese and fresh French bread and then we have grilled sausages that taste of heaven and herbs. More wine!

One of the American delegation

attaches himself to us. Perhaps he's a spy! He works for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), an acronymic organisation that never uses one short word when ten long ones will do. His name is Lester Philip Needle – LP Needle. I pull his leg about this and he admits that his parents have an odd sense of humour (or humor, I suppose, since they are American). But he's got (gotten) used to it over the years.

Because the Soviets have obviously suborned us with vodka and caviare, Lester feels that it is his patriotic duty to emphasise the moral superiority of American ideas. He attempts to reverse their subtle socialist influence by plying us with Coca-Cola. He seems

bewildered when we reject it in favour of more vodka. We discover that he doesn't understand the difference between raw sugar (Coke) and refined sugar (Vodka). The refinement comes from the application of yeast, you understand. The difference may be small, but it is hugely important. We ply him with caviare diluted with vodka, and we speak to him severely in subtle tones. He soon comes round to our way of thinking.

The *lingua franca* of the Governing Council is French. Faced with such total immersion, my early language lessons soon come rushing back to me and I find that it isn't long before I am chatting gaily. I meet an Italian

delegate at a diplomatic party. We have a long conversation in French, the only language we have in common. Fuelled by wine, I tell him jokes in French. Fuelled by wine, he laughs in French, with an Italian accent.

Apart from the members of my own delegation, almost nobody seems to speak English. Even we don't bother with it much. By now I am fluent in French. After all, it is the language of diplomacy; and it has been for more than two hundred years. I begin to dream in French and the restaurants and cafés have no terrors for me any more. English fades to the back of my brain as the weeks pass by.

Eventually the business of the

Governing Council concludes and it is time to go home. At the Geneva airport I buy a Swiss Army Knife as a souvenir. I decide that I will refer to it in conversation as my Swiss Swiss Army Knife. I wonder if anyone will notice.

The Swissair flight from Geneva to London takes off exactly on time. I drink a gin and tonic; they have no vodka on board the plane. The stewardesses chatter gaily in French. The pilot makes a French announcement that it is raining in London. We land at Heathrow, on time to the scheduled second and, clutching my passport, I queue up at the immigration desk.

"Had a good trip?" asks the immigration official as he examines my documentation.

"Mais oui," I reply. "Merci bien!"

He gives me an odd look. I have no idea why, I haven't said anything rude. I pass through into rainy London and it is only when the taxi driver fails to understand where I want to go that I finally realise I have to start talking in English again.

skool daze

*Well i mite hav expected
it. The game's up. They
got me just when i thort
i was safe. So here i am
back at skool agane for
a joly term chiz chiz
chiz.*

-
Nigel Molesworth

There's a rather threadbare towel
hanging in my kitchen. I dried my

hands on it a couple of hours ago. It has a name tag on one edge, put there by the loving needle of my mother's sewing machine about forty five years ago and still firmly attached. Things my mother sewed always stay sewed. They would never dare to do anything else. The towel is the only physical object remaining from my school days; the only thing I have, apart from my memories, to prove that I was really there.

I have no other artefacts from that time of my life. I don't even have any photographs – all such memorabilia got thrown away after my parents died. By then I was living on the other side of the world and it seemed quite pointless

to spend money shipping things such a distance just for the sake of sentiment. So it all vanished. Today I rather regret their loss, but at the time it made sense. Recently, thanks to the kindness of old friends from school, I've been sent scans of those school photos, and I treasure them. One of the pictures now forms the background behind the login screen on my computer and people look at it and play the game of "guess which one is Alan". I always give them a clue:

"I didn't have a beard when I was at school," I tell them.

It doesn't seem to help.

When only memories are left, it can sometimes be fun to take them out and

prod them a bit, just to see what wriggles. Most of my time at school was spent listening to teachers haranguing me, so naturally most of my memories are of those teachers. Some were good teachers, some were bad teachers. Some were indifferent teachers and some were downright creepy teachers who probably should have been in jail. Nowadays I too am a teacher, and several times I've caught myself imitating some of those teachers of my youth who still dance and gibber in my head. Hopefully not the creepy ones, though.

The man who stands head and shoulders above all others in my memories is Mr Tennant, my English

teacher. He taught me to be proud of my writing. I've always been a writer – from my earliest days I've scribbled notes, snatches of dialogue, poems and stories. I used to feel slightly ashamed of this habit and tried to keep it secret; writing was what other people did, they were real writers. I felt that I was just a dilettante, a scribbler who couldn't hope to compete. Nevertheless I always spent a lot of time and care on the essays I wrote for Mr Tennant. Writing was fun and an essay for an English class was a legitimate reason for doing real writing. I was always looking for justifications for my writing (these days I don't – nowadays I know that it is its own justification; but I was much

less confident and less certain of things back then).

Mr Tennant never said much about my work in the class (apart from giving me good marks), but he certainly noticed what I was doing and in private he was always encouraging and supportive. Of course, being the man that he was, he couldn't do it without sarcasm. He had the sharpest tongue in the world. His words could make a week old corpse squirm with embarrassment.

He always claimed that he knew exactly who I was reading whenever I wrote an essay for him. I was a stylistic chameleon and my prose always seemed to transmute itself into the

authorial voice of whatever library book I'd borrowed that week. He followed me through Leslie Charteris, Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway (distinctive stylists all), though I was extremely puzzled when he accused me of Raymond Chandler since I thought I was channelling Len Deighton.

He kept telling me that I needed to find my own voice, to stop being so dependant on the voices of others and he assured me again and again that I really could do it. That early encouragement was very important in the development of whatever voice it is that I use in my writing these days.

Meanwhile, in the class, he provided me with the tools that I

needed to make my writing more effective. We took sentences apart, looked closely at all the individual bits, sneered at them and then put them back together again. He taught me the structure of the language, and he taught me about the subtle rhetorical and grammatical glues that stick the words together. He taught me to love words and the patterns that they make. When all the right words line up in a sentence, they go *click!* as they slot in with each other. There is no such thing as a synonym.

Recently I destroyed a few hundred thousand words of juvenilia, much of which dated back to those school day scribblings. Many, many hundreds of

thousands of words more remain intact. I've published two books and goodness only knows how many articles. I've written scientific papers and doggerel verses; computer manuals and comedy sketches; fiction and non-fiction. One year I made \$500 from selling my words to newspapers and magazines (that was a high point – I've never made as much money before or since). Probably none of it would have happened without Mr Tennant.

And as an added bonus, he played clarinet in a jazz band. How cool is that?

When I went into the sixth form, I had to choose the subjects I wanted to study. I followed the siren song of the

sciences and specialised in maths, physics and chemistry. I loved the logic and rigour of science. I loved the way it arrogantly took on the challenge of explaining the universe, trying to figure out what it all meant and how it all worked. Nevertheless, I embarked on that study with a real sense of regret. I could hear intellectual doors slamming shut all around me. I was reading C. P. Snow and that ominous phrase "two cultures" was ringing in my ears. I wasn't at all sure that I'd made the right choice.

One of the mandatory sixth form subjects was "General Studies", a catch-all course that tried, not always successfully, to round out our

education by giving us at least a nodding acquaintance with things outside of our specialised areas of study. Here Mr Tennant came back into my life. He ran a history of science course, an odd subject to be taught by an arts person, but he proved to be both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about it. He was particularly good on the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (he of the silver nose and exploding bladder) but as well as bringing the personalities to life, he managed to explain the scientific ideas that these people were exploring as well. This was an eye-opener for me. Here was a man who obviously had no time whatsoever for the two cultures. If you straddle the

fence, they don't always build the fence right through you. Sometimes your legs grow to compensate. I began to feel a lot more comfortable with my chosen specialisations. Another insight that I owe to Mr Tennant.

Of course, once I started to specialise in the sciences, I needed a firm grounding in mathematics. It's impossible to do any significant work in physics and chemistry without using maths. Unfortunately I was rather weak in maths. That was where Mr Ludlum came in. There's a certain cold pleasure to be taken from a mathematical proof. It isn't a coincidence that mathematicians refer to particularly clever solutions to any given problem

as "elegant". Mr Ludlum understood this perfectly, and he knew exactly how to share it. He kept my head above the mathematical waters in which I was swimming. It wasn't until my second year at university when tensors entered my mathematical life that my life jacket ruptured with an enormous bang! and the waters rushed over my head and I drowned.

As I struggled with the mathematical underpinnings of physics and chemistry, I always took solace from Einstein's grumbles about how hard he found mathematics to be and how difficult he found it to describe his insights in the mathematical terms that were really the only possible language

that could describe them and explore their implications. But at least he understood tensors, damn him, and he used them in his work. Perhaps that's why I didn't discover general relativity. Well, that and the fact that I was born fifty years too late.

Mr Ludlum's genius lay in making it all sound so easy. He would cover the blackboard with small, neatly lettered equations. He never missed a step out, he explained things clearly and precisely. Whenever he said "Therefore..." the conclusion he drew really did follow on from what went before it – it was never the baffling leap into magic and mysticism that it so often was when his colleagues used

the word. Like Winnie the Pooh, I am a bear of very little brain and I really appreciated the baby steps that Mr Ludlum took. And I loved his beautifully dotted i's and his neatly crossed t's.

My handwriting has always owed much to the stylistic school known as drunken spider. I am perfectly qualified to write prescriptions. However after a short exposure to Mr Ludlum's blackboards full of nifty squiggles I made a conscious effort to re-style my own writing after his. It looked so pretty! I got just as much of an aesthetic thrill from the appearance of a page full of neatly lettered equations as I did from the elegance of

the logic that underlay them. Perhaps that's an odd reason for working hard at mathematics, but nevertheless it was a real one. I'm sure Mr Ludlum would have understood, though I never discussed it with him.

I also enjoyed looking at a page covered with multiple instances of alpha, beta, gamma, delta, pi, epsilon, theta *et al* and thinking, that's all Greek to me.

I never claimed to have a sophisticated sense of humour.

Mr Brearley taught us religious instruction. The lessons were quite dull affairs during which we had many opportunities to practice falling asleep with our eyes wide open. Mr Brearley

did his best but even though he had an appearance and personality that consisted mainly of idiosyncrasies, and speech patterns that consisted mainly of impediments, he seldom managed to inject much flavour or interest into the subject. I suspect he might have found it as boring as we did.

He had a huge mole on his cheek from which sprouted a couple of long grey hairs. In moments of stress or elation he would clap one hand to his cheek and suck in a hissing breath. He had a broad Yorkshire accent.

One of the boys, Brian Teal by name, was the class clown and he could always be relied upon to add mirth to almost any situation. He was a

marvellously eccentric boy. He would run home every lunchtime so that he could go to the toilet (he found the school toilets too disgusting to use). By noon each day he was generally to be found with his legs crossed, bouncing up and down in his seat. Sometimes a teacher would construe this as eagerness to answer a question. But Brian had other things on his mind and seldom obliged with anything coherent. He was a great fan of the Beach Boys and in between classes he was often to be found playing the drums on his desk top and trying very, very hard to sing four simultaneous falsetto harmonies, with mixed success.

On one particular day, in one

particular religious instruction class, Mr Brearley was rambling on about Jesus' ministry and how it might have been perceived by the society of the time. Jesus really was quite radical in his thinking, quite scandalous in his teachings.

The hand slapped the cheek, the breath was sucked in with a mighty squelch and then expelled with a sigh as Mr Brearley said:

"...and Jesus lowered himself to speak to fallen women!"

As he said that phrase, every eye in the classroom moved to Brian Teal, who was sitting at his desk behind a pillar, concealed from Mr Brearley's direct view. Brian pantomimed staring

down a sheer cliff and waving hello to the people at the bottom.

The class erupted into hysterics. Mr Brearley looked puzzled for a moment and then slapped his hand back to his cheek again. The Yorkshire accent became particularly prominent as the stress got to him.

"Is it that choomp Teal, be'ind t'pillar?"

Games periods were loathed by the less sportily inclined among us. Many of us had a fundamental lack of eye-hand co-ordination skills and any excuse was taken to avoid the humiliation of being the last one chosen for a team. Peter forged a note from his mother to Mr Ryan, the games

master. It read:

Please excuse Peter from games
because I have a cold.

And at the bottom was the scribbled
signature:

Peter's Mum

Others were less inventive. Steven simply never turned up for games. Every games period would find him hiding in the school cellars smoking cigarettes. At the end of the year, most of us got the usual phrases written on our reports by Mr Ryan.

Could do better.

Lacks enthusiasm.

On Steven's report Mr Ryan wrote:
Who is this boy?

Some excuses were more legitimate. One term Malcolm was properly excused games because of illness, and he elected to do woodwork instead.

The woodwork class was supervised by Mr Gallagher. He taught us to make mortise and tenon joints, and dovetail joints. He taught us to plane a plank of wood square. He taught us to saw in a straight line (the only one of these skills that I retain to this day). I built a small bookshelf, a stool and a coffee table in his classes. All were sturdy constructions, all were useful and all were used. This pleased

Mr Gallagher.

Malcolm elected to build a coffee table. He measured and marked, cut and planed.

Mr Gallagher checked his work every so often.

"The edge is not square. Look – you can see daylight when I hold my set square against it. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more.

"It still isn't square. It has to be square. You can't make a table if it isn't square. Plane it some more."

Malcolm planed it more. Over the course of a ten week term, he planed and planed and planed some more. At the start of the term, the planks he was planing measured eight inches across.

By the end of the term, they were two inches across, still not square, and suitable only for building furniture in a doll's house.

The next term Malcolm voluntarily went back to playing rugby. It didn't demand a square field or a square ball and he felt much more at home with the irregularity.

The school had its own swimming pool which was quite a novelty for those times. A curious construction of concrete slabs rose from the side of the pool at the deep end. From these you could dive or belly flop into the water, depending upon your skill level. Set up in one corner was a small trampoline (we called it a trampet) upon which the

braver people would bounce up and down, going higher and higher with each bounce. Once the height and momentum was deemed sufficient the bouncer would alter the angle and project his body out into space, entering the water with a huge splash and a shriek of enormous triumph or, depending upon the angle of projection, enormous pain.

The boys changing rooms were on one side of the pool and the girls changing rooms were on the other side. A narrow corridor went from each changing room via a disinfectant foot bath to the pool. The sexes were strictly segregated and any lessons that involved use of the swimming pool

were carefully timed so as to be exclusively mono-gendered. Mostly it worked.

After a games period, many of the boys had developed the custom of showering and then having a swim. This was particularly their practice if the games period was the last in the day for then they could take their time over their swim and just mess around in the pool for ages. Nobody ever bothered wearing swimming costumes for these impromptu events. We'd seen each other naked so often in the changing rooms over the years that nobody really cared very much at all. There was nothing worth looking at.

One Wednesday, after a

particularly strenuous rugby game, the pool area was full of shrieking, naked young men racing around the pool, throwing each other in, diving from the steps, generally having a fine old time. One boy, Andrew, was bouncing up and down on the trampet, taking no part in any of the things going on around him. Bounce, bounce, bounce, lost in a trance, deep in a world of his own. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to us, the girls were just coming back from a particularly strenuous game of lacrosse.

"How about a swim?" someone suggested.

"Oooh, yes!"

They all changed into their togs ('cos that's what girls do) and padded off to the pool where they stood open mouthed with astonishment at the sight that greeted them.

Almost without exception, the boys stared for one horrified moment at the girls who were staring at them and then, one and all, covered their groins with their hands and jumped into the concealing safety of the pool.

Only Andrew, utterly lost in his trance, failed to notice the girls arrival as he went bounce, bounce, bounce on the trampet and with each and every bounce his little willy waved hello...

Teenage boys, of course, are simply hormones on legs and they think about

sex approximately four times a minute. When they aren't thinking about sex, they are thinking about food. And when they are thinking about neither sex nor food, they are thinking about football. This leaves almost no time left over to think about school work.

One weekend Mr Stone, our history teacher, got married. Our first lesson at 9 o'clock on the following Monday morning, was history. Mr Stone strode into class, much as he usually did, and began to regale us with an interminable discussion about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There is absolutely nothing titillating about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. Even teenage boys cannot find a double entendre in a discussion about

the Repeal of the Corn Laws. There being no immediate possibility of sex, food or football, tedium descended upon us all in thick clouds. One adventurous youth, stimulated by boredom, decided that something had to be done.

"Did you have a good wedding sir?"

Mr Stone seemed somewhat taken aback at being interrupted in mid flow, but he rallied well. "Yes thank you Withey. It was very nice."

"I bet you got really drunk on your stag night, didn't you sir?" continued my classmate. "Tell us how much you drank, sir?" We all sat up and began to take notice. This might be fun.

"I never touch it, Withey." Mr

Stone sounded quite indignant. "I never touch it at all."

"No sir," said Withey in tones of wounded innocence. "I was talking about what you were doing on your stag night sir, not what you were doing on your wedding night."

There was a moment of shocked silence as we all replayed the conversation in our heads. Had he really said that? Yes, he really had. Gales of laughter swept across the room.

"Harrumph!," said Mr Stone, glowing somewhat pinker than usual. "Boy, you are a buffoon! Now, after the Corn Laws were repealed..."

Latin lessons offered even more

opportunities for disruption. Double entendres were far too subtle for Latin lessons. In Latin lessons we got single entendres. We learned to count and the class had to chant in unison:

"Unus, duo, tres, quattuor, quinque, sex."

That was as far as we ever got. The forbidden word never failed to induce hysterical delight, much to the exasperation of Mr Rushworth, the Latin master.

Latin was not the only language that amused us. I still remember my first French lesson. I was eleven years old and I'd just started at Crossleys. Along with all the other new boys I sat in my classroom waiting for who knew

what? There was a clump, clump, clump on the stairs and the door was flung wide to the wall with a resounding CRASH. In came a begowned schoolmaster who strode to the front of the room and announced in ringing tones, "Bonjour toute la classe! Je me suis Monsieur Antoine."

For the next forty minutes he harangued us in French. Gabble, gabble, gabble. We all stared at him in complete bewilderment. Then the bell rang to signal the end of the lesson.

"Au revoir!"

He strode from the classroom slamming the door behind him.

For the rest of the year he taught me French. He believed in the total

immersion method and would not permit a single word of English to be spoken in his lessons. Outside the class Mr Anthony was a perfect English gentleman and total raving loony. He felt that hymn tunes were far too dirge-like so he sang them fast and cheerfully at morning assembly and was invariably two verses ahead of the congregation, much to the consternation of the pianist and the discomfiture of everybody else since his singing voice was powerful and tended to overlap and lead the crowd. Hymns invariably ended in total confusion with Mr Anthony looking puzzled, all the other masters looking angry and the school as a whole feeling

semi-hysterical.

Inside the class Monsieur Antoine spoke French, and only French. I still treasure the memory of the day he taught us the French words for various articles of clothing. As he named an article, he would take it off and wave it at us. Perhaps I should point out that to this day I do not know the French for "underpants" (but I do know "jacket", "shoes", "shirt", "vest" and "trousers"). I've had a soft spot for foreign languages ever since, though Latin tested that tolerance sorely, and it is probably worth pointing out that I learned more French in that eccentric year with Monsieur Antoine than I learned in the next four years with

more conventional teachers. I remember him very fondly and will always be grateful for the firm grounding he gave me in the one foreign language that I can claim to speak with a fair degree of fluency.

In *The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* Douglas Adams taught us just how important it is to know where your towel is at all times. Mine is hanging in my kitchen, wrapped around my schooldays. I dried my hands on it a couple of hours ago.

The Graunch That Didn't Steal Christmas

"Graunch?" asked my computer tentatively.

"No," I said, and thumped it on the side. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

"Sorry," it said and relapsed into silence.

For the next day or two it thought hard about what I had said. Then it decided to try again.

"Graunch?"

"No," I told it, thumping it again.

But this time it obviously felt that my bark was worse than my bite, because it completely ignored my orders.

"Graunch, graunch, graunch!" it declared. "GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

"Oh stop that," I yelled, thumping it even harder than before.

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

"Oh, for goodness sake!"

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH!"

I'd had enough. I turned the computer off and left it alone to sulk a bit. Hopefully once its temper had cooled it would be more inclined to behave itself.

The next day, I turned it on again.

"GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH,
GRAUNCH! GRAUNCH, GRAUNCH,
GRAUNCH!"

I turned it off and immediately rang the man at WeRepairComputers Ltd.

"My computer's going graunch," I told him.

"Ah yes," he said. "There's a lot of it about at the moment. Bring it in and I'll see what I can do."

I packed the computer up and drove down to the workshop. A young man was sitting behind the counter, playing solitaire on his laptop. Apart from him, there was nobody to be seen. It was obviously a quiet day in the computer repair business.

"I'm the person whose computer goes graunch!" I said.

"Oh yes," said the man as he moved a black jack onto a red queen. Then, his eyes still fixed on the screen of his laptop, he opened a drawer in his desk and rummaged around until he found a scrap of yellow paper. "Just write your name and phone number on this."

I did as requested. He took the paper back and turned away from his game for a moment. He looked at the piece of paper. I could see his lips moving as he read the words to himself.

"Put the red ten on the black jack," I suggested. "It frees up a column."

"Cellphone number?" he grunted,

handing me back the paper.

I wrote down my cellphone number.

"Thanks." He casually tossed the piece of paper back in the drawer and returned to his game of solitaire. Red ten on to the black jack. I was pleased to see him take my advice. I wanted to ask for a receipt, but I was afraid to break his concentration. He might not win his game if I interrupted him again. I left my computer sitting on his desk. Even though it wasn't plugged in, I could hear it say "Graunch." very quietly as I went back to my car.

Back home, the empty space where my computer no longer stood looked a bit sad. Cables dangled forlornly, eager

to be plugged into sockets. Filling the space became a matter of urgent priority. Fortunately I remembered that Robin had a spare machine hidden somewhere in her study. I opened the door to her room and peeked in. Piles of scrap paper and strange objects filled my field of vision. Huge mounds rose from where I vaguely remembered once having had a floor right up to where the ceiling might have been. In among the piles of unidentifiable bric-a-brac I spotted 12 expired book tokens, a collection of naughty postcards from Brighton, share certificates from companies that no longer existed, 42 beer mats, an aquarium in a cardboard box, a street

map of Redditch, 19 half-completed Sudoku puzzles, a machine for blowing soap bubbles, a wind up plastic monkey that turned somersaults, a partridge, a pear tree, a kitchen sink and a small jam jar full of gallstones.

"Robin?" I asked. "Are you in there?"

She rustled a hole through one of the piles and blinked owlishly at me.

"Yes?"

"Your old computer," I said.

"What about it?"

"Can I use it?"

"Of course," she said obligingly.

"I'm not using it for anything – it's just taking up space in here. If you remove it, I can squeeze heaps more heaps of

stuff in!"

"OK. Where is it?"

She looked vaguely around. "It's here somewhere," she said. I fetched a couple of long sticks and we poked them at random into miscellaneous piles. Eventually something went *clang!* "Aha!" said Robin. "That must be it."

We pulled screwed up papers, a bowl of breakfast cereal festering in rancid milk and the mummified corpse of a rat out of the teetering mound. "You've been letting the cats hide treasure in here again," I observed, tactfully saying nothing about the breakfast cereal.

Soon I was rewarded with a distant

glimpse of beige. "I think I can see it."

I reached in and grabbed hold and heaved a mighty heave. I staggered back with a computer clutched in my arms. Several hundred old Christmas cards fluttered after it. A stack of stickers crashed down into the space it vacated. There was a note taped to the top of the computer. Written on it were the cryptic words:

Luckley. Cullercoats. Shipwreck.

"Is this important?" I asked.

"Oooh!" said Robin, snatching it out of my hands. "I've been looking all over for that. Thank you darling."

"Don't mention it," I said, and I took her computer down to my own

paperless office where it breathed an enormous sigh of relief at the lack of clutter. I plugged it in and turned it on and it hummed efficiently.

"Graunch?" I asked it.

"No," it said smugly. "I don't do that."

A few days later, the man from WeRepairComputers Ltd. rang me up. "We've repaired your computer," he said.

"Good show! What was the problem?"

"The noise was coming from the CPU fan. I think the bearings are stuffed and it wasn't revolving much at all. I've replaced the fan and now it is beautifully silent. Not a graunch to be

heard."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll come and pick it up."

To think is to do. Do be doobe doo. I went and collected it immediately.

I was now faced with a problem. Robin's old computer was outperforming the job that my computer had once done and so I was reluctant to reinstate it. I decided instead to use my newly repaired computer to replace an extremely slow and ancient machine that was performing various network services and to retire the old machine. Step one – install Linux.

"Oh, no!" howled my computer in horror. "That's one of those nasty open

source things. I don't want anything to do with it. Take it away!"

The install process stopped dead in its tracks. Indeed, it was so dead and the machine was so hosed that even the mouse pointer wouldn't move across the screen. I had to hit the reset switch before it would take any further notice of me at all.

I found this rather surprising. I've installed linux hundreds of times and never once have I had any problems whatsoever. Normally it just works. Time for a different approach. I am an expert in the arcane art of skinning cats, just ask Porgy, Bess and Harpo. They've been at the receiving end of my skinning tactics all their lives long.

As a result of this experience I have bald cats (I can show you photos) and the ability to infiltrate Linux on to a computer in a myriad different ways. So I tried another approach...

It seemed to work, in the sense that the installation completed and the system rebooted. But rather to my surprise, about half the software I'd asked to be installed simply wasn't there. So I started to do it slowly by hand.

"I haven't got a clue what you are talking about," said the computer. "I can't do that."

But I insisted and so it tried hard. Strange error messages that I'd never seen in my life before appeared. Files

vanished from view even as I was looking at them. Hmmm...

"FSCK!" I yelled, only I yelled it quietly in lower case, because that's the only language linux understands.

"'ello, 'ello, 'ello," said the fsck program. "What have we here then? My goodness me, that's a stuffed up disk. I've never seen one quite as stuffed up as that before. I can try and fix it, but I can practically guarantee massive data loss."

I've never had fsck say that to me before, either.

I was now officially bewildered. Time to go to the tubes on that there interweb thingy for help. I giggled all the error messages and it soon became

clear that this was no laughing matter. I really was comprehensively fscked. Everything I read told me that what I was seeing was symptomatic of an overheated, very overstressed CPU that was probably about to kick the bit bucket.

In retrospect, it was clear that the graunch didn't steal christmas, but it *did* steal the cooling powers of the fan. At some time between the start of the graunch and the replacement of the fan, the CPU got a bit too hot and some vital bits were now dead.

Bugger.

In Which We Sit In A Box, Fly To Australia And Make A Phone Call

Books from

WarriorWomanWithOnlyOneBreast arrive in cardboard boxes. This is a law of nature. Cardboard boxes have to be sat in by cats. This too is a law of nature. In our house, Harpo, being junior cat, has been designated as the box sitter. The sequence of events goes

something like this.

A courier man bangs on the front door and runs away before I can catch him (courier men are notoriously shy and are seldom observed in the wild). Porgy and Harpo, who are asleep on the bed, wake up in alarm at the hideous noise and stare at me suspiciously as I open the door and retrieve a parcel.

"It's OK," I reassure them. "Just another book."

They settle down and watch me open the box.

"Hurry up," says Harpo, his red eyes gleaming. Harpo is a very impatient cat who belongs to the instant gratification generation. Slowly I unseal the box. Porgy generally finds

this boring and goes back to sleep, but Harpo is soon jumping up and down with frustration as I tease him with the prospect of a box.

Eventually the books are unpacked. Porgy opens a world-weary eye and watches as Harpo hops in to the box, turns round three times and settles down. Some boxes are too big and, feeling exposed, Harpo soon gets out again.

"That's a useless box," he says in disgusted tones as he stalks off to relieve his frustrations by beating Bess up. Hisses, spits and squeals from the back of the house indicate success.

Some boxes are too small and the sides bulge as Harpo squirms, seeking

a comfortable spot. Eventually, unable to support the strain, the box ruptures.

"That's a useless box," says Harpo in disgusted tones as he stalks off to relieve his frustrations by beating Bess up. Hisses, spits and squeals from the back of the house indicate success.

But just occasionally the boxes are exactly the right size and Harpo snuggles down to snooze in cardboard coated bliss. Bess, let off the hook, sleeps soundly on the back of the sofa.

One such box is currently sitting on the floor of the lounge. Harpo seldom leaves it except to eat. Scruffy though it is, I don't dare throw it away. Bess would suffer too much, and she needs her sleep.

Robin was going to Australia to visit her sister. The plane departed at sparrowfart and check in time was two hours earlier than that. All of which meant that we had to get up at THERE'S NO SUCH TIME o'clock in the morning. The cats were thrilled:

"Hey, wake up everyone," yelled Porgy. "Breakfast is early today."

He bounced into the kitchen, eager for food. Bess yawned and stretched and followed rather reluctantly. "If there's food going," she said, "I want more than my fair share. But really, at this time of day, I'd rather be asleep."

Harpo biffed her on the nose. "Shut up you silly girl," he said. "If you keep saying that, the big apes might go back

to bed and then we'd have to wait for hours before we had a chance at breakfast again."

I put some biscuits down for them. Soon their heads were down, their bums were up and the soporific sound of crunching filled the kitchen. I put a pot of coffee on to brew and went for a shower. Perhaps I'd feel better if I was wet.

I washed and dried and dressed. Robin stumbled, half-blind with sleep, into the bathroom, intent on ablutions. When she emerged, I poured coffee into her. Eventually she became capable of speech.

"What time is it?"

"Half past dark," I said. "We ought

to be going."

I carried her luggage out to the car and then we set off for the airport. The roads were empty and we made good time, though the closer we got to the airport, the denser the traffic became. Most of the people of Wellington, it seemed, were off to Australia this morning.

As we drove towards the terminal Robin spotted something interesting. "There's an Air New Zealand plane over there," she said. "I know it's an Air New Zealand plane because of the koru design on the tail. But the plane is green all over. Why is that, do you suppose."

"It's feeling poorly," I said. "Those

are the recuperation gates. It'll stay parked there until it feels better and its colour improves."

"Oh poor thing." Robin was immediately sympathetic. "I wonder what's wrong with it."

"Air sickness, I should think, " I said.

The telephone in the hall was looking a bit sad. The aerial had been chewed by a cat, the numbers on the buttons were so worn as to be barely legible and the buttons themselves could not be trusted to send proper signals down the wires. For the last three months we had been unable to ring any of our friends who had a 4 in

their phone number and we were getting an anti-social reputation as a result, since almost all of our friends had one or more 4s somewhere in their phone number.

"Let's go to Dock Smooth and buy a new phone," I said.

"OK," said Robin.

There were multitudes of phones on display. Big phones and small phones; pink, blue and green phones; slim phones and plump phones; self-satisfied phones and slightly anxious phones. "We'll take that one," said Robin when an assistant came to see if he could help us.

The phone we chose had a base unit with an answering machine built in. It

had three handsets the size and shape of a television remote control. Each handset could store an enormous collection of phone numbers. The caller-ID feature could be configured so that whenever any of our friends rang us up their name and number would display on the handset screen in large, friendly letters. We could assign each of our friends their own special display colour and their own special ring tones. We agonised for hours over the correct colour for Robin's mum and the correct ring tone for the president of the science fiction club.

"I wonder who will be the first person to ring us on our new phone?" asked Robin.

"Me!" I said, taking out my mobile phone and dialling my home number. The handset flashed red and played something vaguely Wagnerian involving lots of Valkyries a couple of dragons and a sword.

"Hello," said Robin.

"Hello," I said. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," said Robin. "What's the weather like over at your side of the lounge?"

"It's a bit cold," I admitted. "What's it like at your side?"

"Much the same," said Robin. "Bye, bye"

"Bye, bye."

We both turned our phones off.

"Well, that was fun," said Robin.

"What shall we do now?"

"Why don't we watch TV?"

"Will you pass me the TV guide, please?" asked Robin. I passed it across and she studied it and then picked up the remote to change the channel. She pressed a button. Nothing happened, so she pressed it again. Still nothing happened, so she tried one more time.

"Emergency. Which service do you require? Police, fire or ambulance?" asked an official voice.

"Oops, sorry," said Robin contritely. "I was trying to watch *Coronation Street* on channel 1." She turned the phone off and tried again, with the proper remote control this time.

In Which We Go Knitting And Breed Some Bacteria

"I want to knit you a cat," said Robin.

"Haven't we got enough cats?" I asked. "Remember, more than three cats and you are officially eccentric."

"No, no." She shook her head irritably. "I've got this book called *Beastly Knits*. It's got patterns for jumpers with animals integrated into the pattern. I want to knit you a

jumper with a cat just like Porgy draped across your shoulder. What do you think?"

"Hey," said Porgy, quite taken with the idea, "how about you knit me a jumper instead, with Alan draped over my shoulder?"

"Don't be silly," said his sister Bess. "Cats don't wear jumpers. We prance around completely naked." She lay on her back and waved her legs in the air to prove it. She has no shame.

"Do we?" asked Porgy, puzzled. "What's all this furry stuff then?" He held a paw out. "I thought it was a woolly jumper, just like Alan wears."

Suddenly he noticed the paw he was holding out and got distracted. He gave

it a tentative lick. "Hey! That feels good." He licked it some more and then worked his way up the leg and down his body. Then he concentrated on licking his bottom. "If I wore a jumper," he said, his voice slightly muffled, "I wouldn't be able to do this." He thought about it for a moment. "On balance, I think I'd rather lick my bottom than wear a woolly jumper. It's much more fun. So why don't you just go ahead and knit a jumper for Alan. But do make sure that the cat draped over his shoulder looks *exactly* like me."

"Definitely," said Robin. "Alan wouldn't have it any other way." She armed herself with a tape measure and

prepared to record dimensions. I regarded this with some trepidation – she's not all that clear about sizes and she tends to measure them in pounds, shillings and ounces, in the same way that her hero Winnie Ther Pooh once measured Tigger. Most of what Robin knows she learned from Winnie Ther Pooh (she even knows what "ther" means). On balance, I approve. There are worse teachers.

"Raise your left hand," she ordered.

I raised my left hand, and she took careful measurements, writing them down on a piece of paper in degrees Fahrenheit. Then she lost the piece of paper.

"OK," she said, "raise your right

hand."

I raised my right hand.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" asked Robin.

"I do."

"What's the meaning of econometrics? I've always wanted to know."

"Ah, the easy ones first.

Econometrics is pedagogic play-therapy. I thought everybody knew that."

"Well I do *now!*"

She settled down to knit and slowly the jumper grew. Every so often she measured me again, writing down the results in rods, poles and perches. Once

she took a chest measurement and wrote it down in hundredweights. Then she corrected herself and converted it to drachms with a remainder in scruples. She made me stand on the kitchen scales and measured my height in furlongs. Slowly the jumper gained weight. It began to look very jumper-like. But one thing puzzled me.

"What's the amorphous white blob?"

"That's Porgy," said Robin. "Don't you recognise him?"

"Now that you mention it, no I don't."

She took out a needle and threaded some dark wool into it. Then she stitched carefully into and around the

amorphous white blob. All of a sudden it leaped into shape – it had eyes and ears and a nose, whiskers, teeth and claws. My goodness me! Porgy smiled up at me from the jumper. I looked back to the sofa – there he was, sound asleep, exhausted after his bottom washing marathon. And yet, there he was as well, bright eyed and bushy tailed on my jumper. It was uncanny. I was very impressed.

"Now all I have to do," said Robin, "is attach the sleeves and then you can wear it."

She sewed and sewed and sewed and then it was done. I put it on. Hmmm...

Mostly it was perfect. But there

was something not quite right about the sleeves. They dangled about a foot beyond the end of my fingers. When I stood up straight, the ends of the sleeves brushed my kneecaps. It appeared as though Robin had been knitting a jumper for an orang utan.

"You measured these sleeves in firkins, didn't you?" I asked.

"What's a firkin?" asked Robin.

"The standard British measure of excess," I said. "As in these sleeves are too firkin long."

I rolled the sleeves up and examined myself in the mirror. Porgy, draped woollenly over my shoulder, looked happy.

"It's magnificent!" I said to Robin.

My problems began, as so many of these things do, with a tickle in the back of Robin's throat and a sniffle in her nostrils.

"I feel like there's a ton of quick drying cement in my nasal cavity," she said gloomily.

"That's your own fault," I said. "I told you it wasn't cocaine, but you paid no attention."

She coughed, sneezed and blew her nose; sounds I would become very familiar with over the next few days and weeks. Gloomily she examined the contents of her tissue, looking for traces of brain.

"Oysters!" she announced.

"Yummy!"

"Perhaps I could save all the bogies, dry them out and build a pyramid," she said musingly.

"What's the difference between bogies and broccoli?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

"You can't persuade children to eat broccoli," I said. "Boom-boom!"

"I think I might have a cold," she said.

"Nonsense!" I declared. "Having a cold is only a state of mind."

She blew her nose again and narrowed her eyes at me. I knew this look of old. It meant that the rest of my life would be nasty, brutal and short.

Two days later she got her carefully planned revenge. I awoke with a sore

throat. I felt somewhat light-headed, but I had no problem coping with it – I just wore a heavier hat. Somewhere deep inside my chest, clouds of bacteria clustered and fed, like maggots on a dead mouse. Soon I began to cough up interesting slimy things. Something the size and shape of a green shrew shot out of my mouth and ran, howling with fear, across the room with Harpo the Cat in hot pursuit. It hid under the sofa. During quiet intervals in the television sound track, we could hear it whimpering.

The next day the bacteria moved into my nose and I began to leak like Niagara Falls.

"I think I've got a cold," I said.

"Nonsense!" said Robin triumphantly. "Having a cold is only a state of mind."

"You don't understand," I said. "This is a man cold. They're the worst kind, utterly debilitating. They require fevered brows to be soothed and unending cups of coffee to be delivered to the sick bed where I writhe and moan."

"No," Robin explained.

In Which We Fall Down Stairs And Rip Up A Weed

This is the sound that Robin makes when she trips and falls down the concrete steps in the garden:

Bump, bump, bump, bump...Bump.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

Thus summoned, I raced outside to see what had happened. Robin was lying, pale, shocked and tearful at the bottom of the steps. I hurried down to her.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

"Can you stand up?"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

"Hang on to me and try and stand.

Then we'll get you inside and take a closer look."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

Eventually, taking slow, baby steps, we climbed back up and got ourselves into the lounge. I sat Robin down and examined her carefully. There was a small cut oozing blood on her knee and a ragged graze on her other knee. A small graze on her bottom looked quite insignificant, so I ignored it and concentrated on cleaning up the two cuts on her legs. I put sticking plaster

on them.

"I think you'll be OK," I said.

"You've been very lucky; there doesn't seem to be any significant damage."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

"Perhaps you ought to go to bed," I suggested. "You've had quite a shock and you need to rest."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh

The next morning she was very stiff and sore. The cuts on her legs had scabbed over nicely. However the graze on her bottom, which I'd ignored because it looked so superficial, had blossomed overnight into an enormous purple and red blotchy bruise that covered most of her hideously swollen left buttock.

"You must have taken most of the force of the fall on your bottom," I said. "Good job it's extremely well padded."

I ducked quickly in order to avoid the vase that she threw at me. She craned her neck and admired her left buttock in the dressing table mirror. "Purple," she said in tones of deepest satisfaction. "I like purple. It's my favourite colour."

"Well," I said, "I think you're going to have plenty of time to enjoy it. That is a *very* impressive bruise!"

"Purple."

The bruise was exactly the same shape as Australia. Interestingly it was exactly the same size as Australia as

well. Robin had to shuffle sideways into the bedroom. Continents can't get through doors broad side on; they can only infiltrate with their edges.

"What's that square, pink bit?" she asked, poking the Gulf of Carpentaria. A salt water crocodile swam up from the depths of Robin's bottom and snapped at her fingers. Fortunately she snatched them away in time.

I tried to take a photograph of her bottom, but I couldn't find a lens with a wide enough angle. I pondered the advantages of hitching a ride into low Earth orbit over Robin. Surely her bottom would fit in my viewfinder if I was high enough above it?

She took her bottom to the doctor

who was most impressed at the enormous size and the rich colour of the bruising. Nurses were called in to admire it, and there was talk of framing it and exhibiting Robin in the waiting room for the edification of waiting patients. Adverts were booked on the television, an interview was arranged on John Campbell's current affairs show and an eager queue formed outside the medical centre. A nurse was seconded to collect the entrance fee...

But no agreement could be reached on how to split the proceeds, and so the plan came to nothing. Arnica cream was prescribed instead; it seemed a reasonable alternative.

Since Robin couldn't really reach to

rub the cream in herself, twice a day I had the indescribable pleasure of saying sternly to her: "Right! Take your pants off and bend over!"

And she did. Oh! The power, the power!

Arnica cream is rather strong smelling. As I massaged it into Melbourne, Robin's sister and her children stuck their heads up and said: "Pooh! What's that horrible smell?"

I rubbed more cream into the Nullarbor desert and herds of feral camels fled in terror across the vast, trackless wastes of Robin's bottom and smashed themselves into the Indian Pacific train. Eventually the cream reached Perth where it made the

fairway on the golf course very slippery and completely messed up her father's game. He was furious. "Get that stuff out of here! You ruined a perfect hole in twenty one."

Over the course of the next few days, and after several copious applications of Arnica cream, the purple colour receded until it occupied only Robin's coastline. Sharks swam lazily up and down the fringes of her left buttock, feeding on careless surfers and the corpses of the pre-chewed get-well-soon rats that our cats brought in to comfort her. The interior of her posterior turned yellow and began to look much more like the vast deserts that actually make up much of

Australia. At night, when I put my head beneath the bedclothes, I could distinctly see the flickering flames of Aboriginal campfires scattered all over Robin's bottom, and I could hear the hollow, haunting rhythms of a didgeridoo. I watched, fascinated until olfactory evidence convinced me that it wasn't really a didgeridoo that was making that noise, and I was forced to retreat from Robin's weapon of mass destruction, back into the fresh air.

Over time, we eased off on the application of Arnica cream. Sales of gas masks in Australia dropped as dramatically as a Qantas aeroplane and the feral camels of the Nullarbor stopped their hysterically frenzied

attacks on the first class coaches of the Indian Pacific railway. The aborigines ended their corroboree and packed the didgeridoos away in the luggage compartments of their Daimler and Rolls Royce billabongs. Robin's father had a hip replacement operation to try and improve his golf game. It worked brilliantly, but he remained uncertain as to whether or not the lack of Arnica cream was a contributing factor. All the sharks died of starvation. The swelling died down and once again, Robin had a pristine bum and could walk forwards through doors.

And they all lived happily ever afterwards.

My garden was a jungle. Creepy creepers crept over the lawn and engulfed the shed. Triffids lurked in the weeds, stalking and ambushing the innocent travellers who waited patiently at the bus stop on the footpath just outside the gate. On quiet days the pathetic cries of strangling roses wafted in the wind. Deep in the foetid undergrowth gangs of Maori freedom fighters could be heard holding a hui on the application of Marxist-Leninist doctrine to iwi and hapu, and its effect on whanau in a post-Hegelian, post-Colonial society.

Drastic action was required. I made a desperate phone call.

"Help," I explained.

"I'll be there immediately."

There was a whoosh and suddenly there he was – Supergardener to the rescue! His torn cloak billowed in the wind. He wore a blue boiler suit with grass-stained underpants hanging loosely on the outside. He struck a dramatic pose. The dramatic pose struck him back, but after a brief squabble Supergardener triumphed.

"Show me this garden, squire," he commanded, and I obeyed.

"Oooohh. Sheeee...," he sucked air through his teeth. "It's a big job, squire. Lots to do. And it's a bad time of year." He paused and thought for a while, supporting himself on the dessicated corpse of a Mormon missionary that

was slowly digesting in the belly of the enormous Venus Fly Trap that coiled around the front gate. "I'll tell you what," he continued. "Because it's you, I'll give you a special rate and we'll clear the lot for a small fortune. How does that sound?"

"Fortunately", I said, "my fortune is very small indeed. It's a perfect match. I'll accept your kind offer. When can you start?"

"Tomorrow," said Supergardener. He scratched vigorously deep inside his grass-stained underpants. "Hedgehogs," he explained.

The next day Supergardener and Derek the Boy Wonder turned up bright and early, pitchforks at the ready,

flame throwers cocked. Slowly the jungle retreated under their onslaught. "Nasturtium," said Supergardener as he dragged a huge ragged bush up the garden path to the trailer attached to his ute. "You can put that in a salad. Good for you." He tore off a broad leaf and took a bite. He chewed thoughtfully for a time and then spat it out. "Perhaps not," he said and re-entered the fray. He rescued Derek from the clutches of an over-enthusiastic vine that was slowly strangling a power pole and which appeared to prefer the taste of the Boy Wonder to the taste of concrete lightly seasoned with possum collar. "I've warned you about that stuff before," he

said. "Don't you ever learn?" Derek looked suitably chastened.

Faster than I would have believed possible, the dynamic duo cleared up the weeds. Naked beds of dirt shivered in the breeze and hunched against the fence, protecting their vitals with rampant roses and begging for mercy and mulch.

Supergardener leaned nonchalantly on his pitchfork. "Just got to get rid of the stuff we pulled up and then mulch the dirt beds and we're done," he said. He turned his super gaze to the tottering tower of foliage piled up in the trailer. Heat rays shot out from his eyes and the foliage shrivelled and burned to a dull grey ash which blew

away in the wind.

"Very Aristotelian," I said.

"Yes," agreed Supergardener, "those post-Platonic Greeks really knew their stuff when it came to their theories of vision and their descriptions of how eyeballs work."

He sent the Boy Wonder off to get a load of mulch and when he returned they hastily spread it all over the whimpering soil. Sighs of relief could be heard quite clearly as the mulch covered the multitude of sins that the weeding had exposed. The garden lay naked, silent and still, basking in the sunshine.

Whoosh!

Supergardener and Derek the Boy

Wonder left to rescue another hapless garden. This fight was over now; it had been just another job. From their point of view it was just one more skirmish in their never ending battle to make the world a sanctuary for flowers; a place where vegetables could stand tall and proud without their rights and freedoms being compromised. Death to All Terrorists! Weeds will never flourish as long as Supergardener and Derek maintain their vigilance.

"Who was that masked man?" asked Robin as they rode off into the sunset.

Now that everything was safe and quiet again, the cats came out of hiding and began to explore the revitalised

garden that had been presented to them.

They were thrilled. So many new toilets, so little poo.

In Which Our Eyeballs Go Oblong

In 1953 the world was black, white and several shades of grey. It was the dawn of a new Elizabethan age and in London a grey young queen was about to ascend the throne. A man dressed in flowing grey robes would place a grey crown on her black hair and grimly grey lords and ladies would sing *Zadok The Priest* at her.

"What we need," declared my father in ringing tones, "is one of those new-fangled television things. It would

never do to miss the Coronation!"

And so a black box manufactured by Pye entered the corner of our lounge. There was a sloping, corrugated section on the front with two brown, knurled knobs on it. Above the knobs was a small (probably 10 inch) screen. One knob turned the television on and adjusted the volume, the other knob controlled the brightness. There were smaller knobs hidden away at the back of the box – these controlled frightening things called the vertical hold and the horizontal hold. Only my father was allowed to touch those. My mother, if she was very good, was allowed to turn the television on and off. I wasn't

allowed to touch it at all.

I don't think I ever actually saw the Coronation – or if I did, I retain no memory of it. But I do remember watching *Bill and Ben The Flowerpot Men*, and *Rag, Tag and Bobtail* and *Muffin The Mule* (contrary to later salacious speculations, this last was not a sexual offence).

Another favourite programme was *The Sooty Show*. Sooty was a glove puppet, a little bear manipulated by his master Harry Corbett. Every week Sooty would get the better of the man with the hand up his bottom, and cover Harry Corbett with flour, water, cream cakes, ink, paint, eggs and any other messy substance that could be found.

The poor chap would endure this torture with stoic calm.

"Bye, bye everyone. Bye bye," he would whine as the show came to an end and nameless substances ran down his face and dripped stickily on to his shirt. Sooty was hugely popular with everyone. My parents bought me a Sooty glove puppet for Christmas. I rejected it.

"It's *ginger*," I wailed inconsolably. "Sooty is *grey*!"

There was only one channel, of course – the venerable BBC. It wasn't until 1956 that competition (in the form of ITV) appeared on the scene. Our ancient Pye television couldn't receive ITV; it had no tuner, having

been built in the days when there was only one broadcast frequency, and it was inexorably bound to the BBC. My father steadfastly resisted the lure of ITV.

"We don't want that," he thundered. "It's got adverts on it."

I'd never seen an advert – they sounded fascinating and I was consumed with jealousy to think that my friends up the road could watch as many adverts as they liked on their more modern television set. I did eventually get to see ITV adverts and they were just as exciting as I'd hoped they would be. I'd go round to a friend's house and we'd watch ladies who extolled the virtues of washing powder

and toothpaste, and we'd laugh at the cartoon salesman who raved about Esso Blue paraffin oil and who referred to himself, in moments of stress, as the Esso Blee Dooler (boom, boom, boom, boom; Esso Blue – I can still sing the jingle). In between the adverts my friend and I watched *Popeye The Sailorman* cartoons. They made a huge impression on me.

"Mum," I insisted, "I want to eat *spinach!*"

My mother was bewildered, but obedient. I'd never previously been observed to voluntarily allow potentially poisonous things like vegetables into my mouth. Indeed, on the rare occasions that my mother

managed to force a pea or possibly a bean into me, I immediately threw it back up. So I wanted spinach did I? She shot off to the village shop where, to her mild surprise, they actually had some spinach for sale. She cooked it and served it and I rejected it immediately.

"That's not spinach," I insisted. "That's yucky green stuff. Spinach is *grey!*"

I have since come to realise that the only food that could possibly be shown accurately on the television of the day was porridge, the world's only grey food – if indeed it is a food at all; opinions on this differ. But as a child I lacked such sophisticated insight. The

fibrous green mass on my plate could not possibly be spinach. I practised projectile vomiting for a while in order to take my mind off it.

My father eventually succumbed to the lure of ITV. Seduced, I suspect, by the prospect of extra cricket, he had words with the man in the TV shop. An ugly black box was bolted on the side of the Pye television. This was supposed to allow us to re-tune it so that we could watch ITV, but it never worked very well. The picture was shimmery and it faded in and out. The sound was crackly. Eventually my father couldn't stand it any more and the Pye, that faithful workhorse, went to the great television studio in the sky

and other, more anonymous television sets replaced it.

In the early 1960s, the BBC fissioned, rather like an amoeba, and turned into BBC1 and BBC2. This last was supposedly a more intellectual channel and it was full of panel games where talking heads declaimed pompously about art, music and literature. On one such show, a poem was read to the panel:

She (We gave her most of
our lives)
is leaving (Sacrificed most of
our lives)
home (We gave her
everything money could buy)

She's leaving home after
living alone

For so many years. Bye, bye

"That's a Beatles song," I said.

"Rubbish," said my father, who

knew everything about everything.

"They wouldn't put pop music trash on
a show like this."

The panel had obviously never
heard the poem before and they were
very impressed with it. They discussed
the cleverness of the imagery and the
honesty of the emotions it portrayed.
They begged the host to reveal the
name of the talented poet who had
produced such a marvellous work. This
poet, they were sure, had a brilliant
future.

"Well actually it's a Beatles song," said the host.

"See?" I said to my father.

"Humph," he replied.

To a man, the panel then repudiated everything they had previously said. The imagery was a little clumsy, the rhythmical patterns were flawed, the emotions at best second hand. An obviously juvenile work, shallow and trite.

This kind of two-faced intellectual snobbery was rife throughout BBC2 and it wasn't long before popular pressure caused programmes such as this one to vanish from the airwaves. BBC2 then became pretty much indistinguishable from BBC1. I'm not

completely convinced that this was a good thing.

By now the television companies were starting to broadcast some of their programmes in colour. The programmes were also a lot more daring than they had been in the past and every so often, if you were very lucky, the leading lady in a bodice ripper would indeed have her bodice ripped. Attracted by the prospect of bare breasts in glorious flesh tones instead of gloomy grey, my father got a colour television.

Only about half the programmes were broadcast in colour. Every day my father would carefully check the details of that day's potential viewing in the

Radio Times (BBC) and the TV Times (ITV) and make a list.

"Dad, can we watch..."

"NO! It's in black and white!"

He seemed to regard it as almost heretical to watch black and white programmes on a colour TV. He also harboured the vague suspicion that if the colour TV showed too many black and white programmes, its colour tanks might dry out through lack of use and render the set inoperable. Only the constant watching of colour broadcasts would keep the tanks topped up and their contents properly moist.

Fortunately the number of programmes broadcast in colour increased daily, so the colour tanks on our television set

were constantly being replenished. This kept my father very happy.

As the years passed, I moved from house to house and from country to country. Televisions came and televisions went. None of them made much of an impression on me. However each of them (sometimes in combination with other gadgets) allowed the reception of more and more channels. Eventually Robin and I found ourselves with about 50 channels to watch, most of which broadcast utter rubbish 24 hours a day.

All of the televisions that we watched this rubbish on had one thing in common; they contained bulky cathode ray tubes which projected a

square picture. As time went on, we began to find this more and more frustrating since a significantly large proportion of the programmes we were watching were now being broadcast in high definition with an oblong aspect ratio. Watching these on square screens was, shall we say, a distinctly sub-optimal experience.

"We need a new television," said Robin. "One of those beautifully slim LCD ones that are specially set up for oblong pictures."

I had to agree with her. The world was imploding into a financial crisis and spiralling into a recession. I had just seen \$8,000 vanish from my life savings in less than a week. It was

obvious to the meanest intelligence that now was the absolutely ideal time to spend lots of money on a new TV.

"Let's round the loss on my superannuation to \$10,000," I said.

"That gives us \$2,000 spending money."

"Shopping!" exclaimed Robin and she went to get the car.

The new Sony Bravia in my life dominates the lounge. It has a gigantic 42 inch oblong screen. My father's original Pye would just about be able to accommodate the newsreader's nose, as long as the newsreader doesn't have a cold. Audio cables connect the television to my stereo system, and an S-Video cable connects it to the

Telstra-Clear decoder. 50 channels of appalling mediocrity are sharp, crisp, colourful and stereophonically loud. Bill and Ben make political statements on TVNZ one, Popeye eats authentically green spinach on the Cartoon Network, the ladies in the adverts extol the virtues of washing powder and toothpaste. Robin and I watch it all, enthralled.

But sometimes, as the old, familiar images from my childhood invade my lounge (albeit in colour), I suspect that not a lot has really changed since the 1950s.

The Customer Is Always Wrong

Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...

Once upon a time there was an insurance company called S and another one called A. They each had a client called I (that's me, in case you were wondering). I had a life insurance policy with A and a superannuation policy with S. Year in and year out, at monthly intervals, both S and A extracted vast amounts of money from my bank account using direct debit

authorities set up for exactly that purpose.

I was never very sure what A did with my money, apart from vaguely promising to pay it all back to me with enormous interest added on should I ever be unfortunate enough to die. However S were much more open about what they needed the money for. Every month they invested and reinvested my money in the stock market. S were very proud of the skill of the professional gamblers that they employed for this function. S dignified these dice-rollers with the job title of Financial Managers. Every year S would send me large, expensively glossy statements that extolled the

virtues and talents of the problem gamblers that were in charge of investing the slowly accumulating funds in my account. I always found these documents very puzzling – when I added up the amount of money that had vanished from my bank account over the years and compared it with the accumulated sum in my superannuation account, I failed to see any significant difference between the two totals. All the profits that the investments generated, if indeed there were any, appeared to have vanished into a line item called Fees. I was less than impressed with the final minuscule sum that was somehow supposed to pay for my retirement. It occurred to me

that the funds would probably grow much faster if I simply stuck the money in a term deposit account in a bank and forgot all about it for a decade. The slow, steady, conservative performance of a term deposit was consistently better than that of the less than inspiring guesswork produced by the random number generators used by the Financial Managers at S in their frantic attempts to foresee the performance of the stock market. But being lazy, and hating to mess with the status quo, I just let things drift.

And then one day I turned on the radio and heard an announcer say: "The world is falling into a recession. Stock markets are collapsing and insurance

and finance companies all over the planet are going bankrupt. The sky is falling! The old order is coming to an end. Woe! Woe! Sackcloth and ashes are now the garments of choice on casual Friday. Unclean! Unclean! The great bell tolls for us all and lamentations are heard from the palaces of the smug and prosperous."

"Hmmm!" I thought to myself. "I wonder how that will affect me?"

It wasn't long before I found out. Two days later a letter arrived from A (remember them?).

"Don't worry," said the letter in soothing tones. "The fact that our parent company in America has just gone spectacularly bankrupt is of no

importance whatsoever. It really doesn't matter that all the directors are on trial for fraud, and nobody except the directors themselves cares that they will probably go to jail for a thousand years each. Trust us, none of this is of any significance whatsoever and we are committed to continuing to provide you with an absolutely first class service on your life insurance policy. Honest!"

"Really?" I asked. "Pull the other one, it plays *Hey, Big Spender!*"

"That's right," continued the letter from A. "None of it matters a fig. We won't go bankrupt like head office did. And anyway, we don't have any connection at all to the insurance

company in America that has the same name as us. We're not really a branch of them. No, no, not at all, not at all. Oh, by the way, we're increasing your premium payments."

"No you aren't," I said, and I rang my financial advisor.

"No problem," said my financial advisor. "I'll cancel the life insurance policy with A and set up a new one with S. And I'll send you a form to fill in instructing S to close the superannuation account and transfer the money to you so that you can put it in a term deposit."

"Sounds good," I said..

"And you'd better cancel the direct debit authorities," continued my

financial advisor. "You don't want A and S to take any more money now that you have decided to cancel their policies."

That sounded like good advice to me. What's the point of having a financial advisor if you don't listen to the advice you get? So I filled in all the forms and cancelled all the direct debit authorities. And that's when my problems *really* started...

The first hint that something might be going wrong was an extremely rude letter from A.

"The direct debit request for this month's premium payment was refused by the bank," said A. "Fix this immediately or face the awful

consequences."

"You shouldn't even be trying to take any money from me," I said. "I cancelled the policy."

"What difference does that make?" asked A. "We've got a direct debit authority. That means we can take as much money as we want from you whenever we like and you can't stop us."

"Yes I can," I said. "All I have to do is cancel the direct debit, and that's exactly what I've done because I no longer have an insurance policy with you."

"That's all very well," said A, "but we are an insurance company and therefore we never get anything wrong."

The policy isn't cancelled until we say it is cancelled. So you need to stop prevaricating and pay us the money immediately."

"No," I said.

"Humph." A departed in an angry silence and a week later I received another letter informing me that they noted that the policy had been cancelled and therefore I should feel free to cancel their direct debit authority since they would no longer need to take money from it. Being grateful for a happy ending, I left it at that. But more troubles were soon on the way.

"Now then," said S, "you've sent instructions to cancel the

superannuation policy and transfer the funds to you. That sounds like a very bad idea to us. Do you realise that since you sent us those instructions the value of your account has decreased by \$8,000? We strongly advise you not to cancel the account. Leave the money in there and wait for it to recover."

"But what if the value goes down even further?" I asked.

S made spluttering noises. "Oh, in my opinion that's extremely unlikely."

"Other people's opinions differ from yours," I pointed out. "I just want to cut my losses before things get even worse. I've filled in the form and signed it in triplicate in all the right places. Why can't you just follow

instructions and send me what little money remains?"

"Because you are a customer," said S, "and customers are always wrong."

"I'm not changing my mind," I said.

"Oh all right," said S with bad grace. "I'll send you a cheque sometime this week."

"Please hurry up," I said. "I'd hate to lose even more money while I'm waiting."

"All right, all right," grumbled S. "Now about this new life insurance policy you've taken out with us."

"What about it?"

"We need you to fill in a direct debit authority form immediately," said S. "I'll post one to you today."

"No," I said, "you don't *need* me to fill one in. You'd *like* me to fill one in."

"That's what I said." S sounded puzzled.

The direct debit authority form arrived the next morning and I filled it in and returned it immediately. The cheque for the superannuation money arrived four days later. Amusingly, another \$1,000 had vanished from the account in the interim.

The date of the first premium payment on the life insurance policy came and went, closely followed by a very rude letter from S.

"The bank refused the direct debit request," said S. "I don't know what you think you're playing at, but get it

fixed immediately. Meanwhile, send us a cheque for the premium you missed. Now!"

I posted a cheque to S and then visited the bank. "What's all this about refusing a direct debit request?" I asked.

A charming young lady rummaged through files and tapped keys on her keyboard. She looked flummoxed. "I really can't explain it," she said. "There's no record of us refusing the request. Indeed, we would have had no legitimate reason to refuse it. Your account was well in credit when the payment was due, and even if it hadn't been, you've got a huge overdraft facility on the account, so we'd still

have honoured the payment."

I passed this information on to S.

"Oh," said S. "Probably we requested payment from the bank before we actually posted the direct debit form to them. That's handled by people in two different departments and they don't synchronise their procedures very well because their desks are on opposite sides of the room. And they don't communicate at all because they had a huge row about who ate the last chocolate biscuit at morning tea. They haven't spoken a word to each other for six months. Your cheque hasn't arrived yet. Are you *sure* you posted it? Get your finger out."

I reassured S that the cheque was in the mail; a phrase which I always enjoy immensely every time I use it, but which I get to use less and less frequently in this modern era of electronic banking. Computers have a lot to answer for. In my opinion they have destroyed far too many of life's little pleasures. S grumbled away back into whatever hole it had crawled out of, and I settled down to take advantage of a small period of perfect peace. Then one more letter arrived from S and the final, ludicrously surreal chapter of this comedy of errors unfolded itself.

"We've had a communication from the bank," said S. "Our direct debit

authority has been cancelled on your instructions. What on earth do you think you are playing at? To reinstate it, we have to start again from scratch. There's a new direct debit authority form included with this letter. We need you to fill it in and return it to us immediately."

I underlined the word *need* and put a question mark beside it. Then I contacted the bank. "I don't remember cancelling the direct debit," I said. "Did I do it in my sleep? Was I drunk perchance, or under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs? Perhaps I have an identical twin brother from whom I was separated at birth and who has been blighting my life in secret ever

since?"

"No, you didn't do it at all," said the same charming lady with whom I had spoken last time. "The instructions to cancel the direct debit came directly from S, not from you."

"Thank you," I said, and I passed the information on to S.

"Nonsense," said S. "You did it."

"Didn't!"

"Did!"

"Didn't"

"Did!"

"Didn't, didn't, didn't!"

"Did, did, did! A thousand times did!! Nyah! Nyah! Nyah! We're an insurance company and we don't make mistakes. You are only a customer. By

definition everything is your fault. Fill in the new direct debit form immediately so that the next premium payment can go through without any fuss."

I heaved a huge sigh, but S dodged it skilfully and it did no harm. The next day, S contacted me again.

"That direct debit authority?" said S.

"Yes?"

"It seems we did cancel it after all. Well, what we *actually* did was cancel the direct debit payment on the superannuation policy that you closed down. However since you had already cancelled that authority, the only remaining direct debit on your account

was the new one that we'd just set up for the life insurance policy.

Consequently our instructions to the bank had the unfortunate side effect of cancelling the new authority instead of the old one. So it really was your fault after all. If you hadn't cancelled the superannuation direct debit, none of this would ever have happened."

"But I closed the superannuation policy down three months ago," I said. "If I hadn't cancelled that direct debit authority, it would have stayed active and you'd have taken three premiums to which you were not entitled."

"Of course we were entitled to them," said S. "A direct debit authority allows us to take as much money from

you as we want, whenever we wish. That's what insurance companies do with direct debits. Surely that's been explained to you before. Don't you know *anything*? Now, get your finger out and send us the form again. Don't forget to sign it in blood. Preferably your own."

I posted the direct debit authority form last week. So far I've heard nothing back from S. Mind you, it is Christmas and consequently there is nobody in their office to process the form. That's probably my fault.

In Which Bits Of A House Are Painted

In the suburb where I live, the sunshine is quite significantly different from the sunshine in other parts of the world. Here the sunbeams are very sharp, with bevelled edges just like chisels, and they slide along the house peeling the paint off in great flaking strips. Naturally all the flaking paint is at the top of the house because that's the closest to the sun and therefore the sharp sunbeams hit that part first. By the time the sunbeams reach the

bottom of the house they are much blunter and so the paint is able to resist them.

Eventually such a lot of paint was flaking off my house that I decided I needed to do something about it. I had sandpaper, polyfilla (the woodworker's friend), paint, a paintbrush and a ladder. The only thing preventing me from setting to work was the extreme vertigo from which I suffer whenever I find myself at the top of a ladder. Obviously I needed a cunning plan. Fortunately I swiftly came up with one.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

That'll be the phone.

"Hello," I said.

Ring, ring.

Eventually I realized that phone conversations work a lot better if you pick the phone up before you talk at it. So I did.

"Hello."

"Hello," said a voice. "This is John. I'm building a tree house and I wondered if you had a ladder I could borrow?"

"Of course I have," I said. "My ladder is your ladder. Feel free to borrow it for as long as you need it. Why are you building a tree house?"

"Because Dylan needs one," said John. Dylan is John's five year old son. They have a wonderful relationship. John uses Dylan as the excuse for playing with all the toys that he really

wants to play with. Once he took Dylan to a motor show (they are both extreme petrol heads). A mutual friend spotted them there, watched them for a while, and then rang Lynelle, John's wife.

"Your small child and your other small child are having the time of their lives!"

Lynelle wasn't at all surprised at the news. So, knowing this, I was sure that Dylan would have an absolutely wonderful time playing with his new tree house. But John would have a better time because he'd been waiting for his tree house for thirty years longer than Dylan had.

"Dylan will love that," I said.
"Come and get the ladder straight

away."

Within minutes, John and Dylan turned up and took the ladder away. I was very pleased. Now I had a perfect reason for not painting the top of my house. There was nothing I could do until the ladder came back. Time passed...

Wavy lines, wavy lines, wavy lines.

A year later, many months after the completion of the tree house, I decided I couldn't put off painting my house any longer.

"Can I have my ladder back?"

"Of course," said John.

I prepared myself for the ordeal. I assembled my tools and then approached the ladder with fear and

trembling. My ladder is an origami ladder. It can be folded into a multitude of configurations, thus allowing any conceivable climbing task to be conquered. So I folded the ladder this way and that, and it turned into a frog.

Hmmm. That didn't seem quite right. How could I climb to the top of the house on a frog? Perhaps I was supposed to cling to its back while it jumped high in the air. I tried again, and this time I got a fireman's greasy pole. great for coming down from the top of the house, but not a lot of use for climbing up there in the first place. Three times is a charm. I folded the ladder once more and this time I got pitons, a mountaineering harness and

an ice axe. I was tempted by this, but I was worried at the thought of the damage I might do by banging the pitons into the walls of my house, so I tried another set of folds instead. Success! This time I got an actual ladder. I propped it against the house and inched my way gingerly up it, sandpaper, polyfilla and spatula clutched in my hand.

I found it hard to breathe in the rarefied air at the top of the ladder. Wind whistled past my ears, pushing and shoving, trying desperately to make me fall off. Wisps of cloud made it hard to see what I was doing. Low flying aeroplanes made strafing runs which broke my concentration.

I reached out tentatively to peel off the flaking paint, sand down the borders and fill the gaps with polyfilla. With my right hand I scraped and sanded. With my left hand I held whichever tool I didn't need at the moment. And with my middle hand I held on to the ladder with a vice-like grip to stop myself falling off. Since my middle hand is purely imaginary, life at the top of the ladder was more than a bit scary. And it didn't help that I kept stretching and straining to get at things that were just out of reach. This is not a sensible thing to do on a ladder – but it takes such a long time to climb down, move the ladder a foot to the left and climb up it again that I simply

couldn't help myself. Several times my centre of gravity swayed almost to the tipping point.

But eventually the preparation work was finished and I hadn't fallen off the ladder and died. All that remained to be done now was to paint the newly prepared wood.

The next day I opened up a can of paint, stirred it vigorously and then folded the origami ladder into a spiral staircase. I climbed up and, holding the can in my left hand, the paintbrush in my right hand and with my middle hand clutching the ladder, I began to paint. First I painted my trousers, then I painted my shirt and then, having nothing else to paint, I painted the

wood. A curious fly landed and explored the newly painted wood. It got stuck and buzzed plaintively. Aha! The perfect opportunity...

When I was a little boy I used to sneak up on the flies that crawled on the window panes and squash them between my thumb and forefinger. My mother found this habit quite gross and would tell me off whenever she caught me doing it. She particularly hated it when I put the flattened corpses in my pocket for safe keeping. She was always complaining about the dessicated bodies and putrefying fly guts that floated out and stuck to her fingers when she hand washed my trousers.

I became quite skilful at squashing flies. Rare indeed was the fly that escaped my grasping fingers. However some *did* escape and therefore the natural processes of Darwinian evolution meant that very soon the fly population of the world started selecting for the gene that gave them the speed and manoeuvrability to easily avoid me. The number of corpses in my pockets dwindled to zero as they evolved, and it has been many years since I was last able to squash a crawling fly. But now I had a fly trapped in front of me in the paint. No way was this one going to escape. I reached out and squished my first fly for forty five years.

Ecstasy! Nunc dimittis! Time to
fall off the ladder.

Alan And Robin Go South

Robin and I and Phyllis and Tim (Robin's mum and dad) were about to set off on our holidays, in the South Island of New Zealand. Our journey would begin in the North Island, so a trip on a ferry was called for since the inter-island road was waterlogged because of the high summer tides. The Bluebridge ferry sat quietly at the Wellington wharf, puffing smoke. Next to her was moored her sister ship, the *Santa Regina Monte Stello* which had

been broken for a fortnight and which therefore puffed no smoke at all. Both ships (or are they boats?) were painted blue on the bottom as is only right and proper, given the name of the company. They each had a white superstructure and blue funnels.

We checked in and surrendered our bags.

"Hello," said the check in man, giving me a public relations smile and four wooden sticks which were painted dirty yellow.

"What are these for?" I asked.

"These are your boarding passes," said the man.

"Why aren't they blue?" I asked.

"Everything else is blue."

"Don't lose them," the man told me, ignoring my question, "or you won't be able to get on the ship."

"Is it a ship, then?" I asked. "I thought it might be a boat."

His smile got grimly fixed and I retreated in confusion, the questions still unsettled in my mind. Ship or boat? Boat or ship? Why couldn't I have blue sticks? I put the yellow sticks in my pocket where they bulged ominously. I walked lopsidedly because of the unevenly distributed weight.

Eventually a boarding call was made and we all filed through a door and out on to the wharf. Along the way, we passed a woman with a big white

plastic box.

"Boarding passes, please," she said.

I retrieved my yellow sticks and dropped them into her box with a satisfying clatter, though I was still vaguely perturbed. Shouldn't the box have been blue as well? Oh well, at least I could walk upright again.

We boarded the boat (or possibly the ship) by walking through the vehicle deck, entering a narrow doorway and clambering up some slippery, badly painted metal stairs. Everything reeked of cat pee.

Presumably the last cargo carried by the *Santa Regina* was a batch of hugely incontinent tigers.

Soon we reached the passenger

decks. We passed small alcoves containing comfortable leather couches and no portholes whatsoever. Since there was no prospect of being able to see out, we avoided these areas. Other people, more experienced than us in the etiquette of travel, took advantage of our error of judgement, and the alcoves soon filled up behind us. It wouldn't be long before we discovered our mistake...

The main lounge area had sets of aeroplane-like seats arranged in rows in front of a large, flat screen television set. As we entered, nothing was showing on the TV. Around the edges of the lounge were some more comfortable leather couches, each with

easy access to a porthole. We settled ourselves down on a couch, congratulating ourselves on our good seating judgement. Little did we know...

"These aren't really portholes," said Tim. "They are square. Portholes are supposed to be round."

"Quite true," I said. Now I had another nomenclature niggle to worry about. Would it never end? "If they aren't portholes, what are they then?"

"How about starboardholes?" suggested Tim.

The nomenclature niggle died away. I liked starboardholes.

Amazingly, the boat (or perhaps it was a ship) pulled away from the wharf

five minutes before the scheduled departure time. We all took this as a good omen. The ship (or boat -- I'll tell you what, let's compromise and call it a vessel) glided smoothly out into the harbour. The sea was so still and calm that hordes of gulls were strutting up and down on top of the water, pecking at the occasional passing fish.

Someone turned the television on and it quickly became clear why the alcoves were so popular, even though they had no starboardholes. Some terrible American movie was being broadcast at eardrum shattering volume. Astronauts in orbit in the International Space Station sent letters of complaint about the noise level.

Zombie passengers sat transfixed in their aeroplane seats, eyeballs glued to the screen.

I went in search of food and drink. On the second level of the vessel (yes, that's a much better word) I found a cafe that served anything you cared to ask for as long as it was deep fried. I had deep fried soup with a deep fried bread roll and deep fried salad. The deep fried coffee tasted strange, so I had deep fried Lemon and Paeroa instead. Much better.

As we pulled out of the harbour and into the open sea, mobile phone reception started to disappear. All over the *Santa Regina* teenagers went rigid with shock as sensory deprivation set

in. Thumbs twitched impotently as the inability to send text messages became frighteningly clear to them.

Withdrawal symptoms drained all energy from them and they became quite catatonic. Euthanasia seemed the kindest solution.

After a while we looked through the starboardholes and we could see the South Island peeking coyly through a cloud layer on the horizon. It crept closer and we entered the Sounds through a narrow channel. Rugged coastlines slid by on each side of the vessel. Every so often we could see a smug looking house squatting in isolated surprise on the beachfront.

"How do people get to their

houses?" asked Phyllis. "There aren't any roads."

"Dolphins," I told her with a straight face. "The more adventurous people harness and saddle the dolphins and ride them around the bays. Those of a more sedentary nature take water taxis, which are carriages hitched to teams of specially trained dolphins."

Phyllis gave me the look that mothers-in-law reserve especially for use on irreverent sons-in-law who they suspect of taking the Michael. Suitably withered, I changed the subject.

Picton Harbour came into view and the vessel swung round in a semi-circle, presented her statuesque rear end to the pier and gently reversed into

her mooring. We disembarked and waited for the coach to take us to the baggage reclamation area. From there we headed to the Interislander Ferry Terminal where we were due to catch a bus to Nelson.

The bus check in kiosk was closed but the timetable was prominently displayed. It informed me that the bus we were due to catch ran only on Mondays. Today being Friday, I began to panic and I rang the bus company for advice.

A cheerful lady utterly failed to understand the problem.

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

"But the timetable says it only runs

on Mondays."

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

"Tonight?" I asked desperately.

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed.

It was now 5.45pm. A coach pulled up and stopped. On the front was a sign that said Nelson in large friendly letters.

"Ah," I said. "the coach is here. The problem is solved."

"You are booked on the 6.00pm coach to Nelson," she confirmed, and rang off.

Nelson advertises itself as the sunshine capital of New Zealand. Therefore, on our first day, it rained.

The rain was very pretty, but nonetheless, it was rain. Clutching umbrellas, we visited the Nelson Market which was full of stalls selling organic fruit and veg and tourist-trap greenstone carvings. We approached a stall, intent on purchasing organic apples.

"I have scales over here," said the stall holder. "Come with me to the other side of the stall and I will weigh you out some good ones, special organic apples chosen by me just for you."

My mother in law trotted off with him. Twenty minutes later, just as we were beginning to consider sending out search parties, they returned. Phyllis

was clutching a plastic bag full of apples. The plastic bag made me suspicious – surely a true organic stall holder would use something recyclable.

"Here we are," the stallholder said gaily. "Sorry about the long wait. I didn't sell her. I got a lot of good offers for her though!"

We took the apples back to our motel where we discovered that organic means that the flesh of the apple turns brown the instant you cut into it and expose it to the air. Organic also means that the fruit has been extensively bored into by real live wriggling bugs which are still in residence and having a good chomp. They were properly organic bugs,

though...

The next day dawned clear and sunny. Nelson's reputation was restored. We arranged a trip with Cactus Tours, which is owned and operated by a young man who answers only to the name CJ. He picked us up at our motel and showed us everything there is to see in Nelson.

CJ showed us a statue of Abel Tasman staring in bewilderment at a beautiful bay that he never actually saw in real life.

Then CJ showed us a Japanese garden. Stones sat elegantly in beautifully raked sand in which local teenagers had scrawled cryptic messages and left fashionable Nike

footprints.

"Soon the tidal gardeners will come on their regular morning rounds," explained CJ, "and they will rake the sand clean again. The temporary messages will vanish just like sand castles vanish from the beach."

Then CJ took us on a little walk through a park which contained a plaque marking the exact centre of New Zealand. Standing there, you have precisely as much land north of you as there is to the south. I stood, feeling in balance with the land. Harmony and good vibes, man.

CJ pulled a leaf from a tree.

"This is a kawakawa tree," he told us. "It's a close relative of the kava root

that grows in the Pacific islands. If you chew it, it has a nice pepperminty flavour and it makes your mouth numb." He took a big bite and chewed thoughtfully. "Yummy!" he said in distorted tones.

"Try some," he encouraged us. "Choose the leaves with holes in -- the bugs always know which are the best ones."

We took his advice. It was good advice. The leaves were indeed richly minty and the narcotic effect was quite pronounced. Being firmly of the opinion that anything worth doing is worth overdoing, I munched several handfuls of leaves. Soon I could no longer feel my arms and I was

beginning to wonder whether or not I still had feet.

CJ is just starting out in the tour guide business. If he makes a success of it, as I am sure he will, it won't be very long before the streets of Nelson are littered with paralysed tourists and the kawakawa trees are denuded of leaves.

On the way back to town, we passed Abel Tasman's statue again. A seagull perched on the statue's head and expressed his opinion. Tasman tried to clean up the mess but was unable to move his arms. Presumably he had eaten too many kawakawa leaves.

CJ took us out of town and dropped us at our next destination. He had

another customer to meet and we wouldn't see him again. We thanked him for his tour and watched him leave with a real sense of regret. If you are ever in Nelson, get in touch with Cactus Tours. You won't regret it.

Our final destination was the WOW centre, a huge complex which housed a Classic Car museum (boring) and costumes from the World Of Wearable art (not boring). The costumes were breathtaking, some for their elegance, some for their cleverness and some for their humour. One costume was made of more than a thousand hand sewn silk butterflies and was stunningly beautiful. Another, a training bra, consisted of a model railway circling a

large pair of tightly cantilevered breasts.

That evening, our last in Nelson, we ate at a Chinese restaurant. Gesturing extravagantly, I spilled a whole glass full of beer all over my hat. This was a terrible waste of beer; almost sacrilegious, and it sent me into a deep depression. However my hat didn't seem to mind. My hat is an Akubra and it is designed to have beer and other, more unmentionable, fluids spilled over it. It shrugs these things off without a second thought. However throughout the rest of the holiday casual passers by inhaled the fumes arising from my hat and went immediately in search of a pub. I began

to consider sending the brewery an invoice for services rendered...

The next day, at an obscenely early hour, we boarded an InterCity coach to Greymouth. The road from Nelson to Greymouth twists and winds like the devil's corkscrew. It is well known that New Zealand Road engineers are paid by the corner. The ones who built this road must have retired as multi-millionaires.

Our coach driver flung his vehicle around the bends with gay abandon to the accompaniment of much vomiting on the part of passengers with sensitive tummies and turbulent inner ears.

"Sit closer to the front," the driver told them. "Oh, yes!"

We hurtled through the Buller Gorge at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. Steep sided cliffs covered in a thousand shades of green towered ominously above us. Feathers of ferns peeked coyly through the bush. The coach ran upside down over a switchback spiral. Road signs warned of the danger of rock falls. One somewhat mysterious and vividly orange sign simply proclaimed:

Slump!

The exclamation mark is in the original.

Sitting closer to the front of the coach made no difference to the terminally travel sick, and we arrived

in Greymouth with the coach awash in stomach contents. Coffee, curry, corn flakes and diced carrots predominated. We splashed our moist and lumpy way out of the coach and rang the motel where we had reservations. They sent a courtesy shuttle to pick us up, and when we arrived at the motel we were introduced to the seven cats and one Jack Russell terrier who really ran the place. The cats ignored us and the dog presented us with a ball to throw. We proved to be less than talented at this, and he took his ball away again in disgust. We had failed the initiation rites. We would not be allowed breakfast.

Directly across the road from the

motel was a supermarket. Phyllis had finished the organic apples she bought in Nelson and was now suffering from fruit deprivation. We mounted an expedition to the supermarket which proved itself to be singularly inaccessible. It was surrounded by a chain link fence. The only holes in the fence were those made by vandals. Wriggling through a hole placed us at the top of a sheer cliff side which made non-negotiable gravitational demands.

Time to implement Plan B.

Plan B involved walking downhill away from the supermarket. When it was just a dot on the horizon, a sharp turn to the right brought us to the huge expanse of the supermarket car park,

which, interestingly, contained no cars. We hiked across the tarmac. Sheer cliffs topped by the chain link fence that we observed from the motel towered above us on our right. Another chain link fence on our left separated us from the Greymouth Railway station and prevented us from damaging the trains, should one happen to run into us when weren't looking. Eventually, just as terminal exhaustion set in, we arrived at the supermarket. It was closed.

The next day dawned. There was a thin mist covering the town and we could barely see the supermarket. A very chill wind was blowing. Robin and I implemented Plan B again and headed

for the supermarket where we bought breakfast cereal and fruit.

"It's freezing cold," said Robin, shivering.

"Yes," said the checkout lady. "We call the wind '*The Barber*' because it cuts through you like a barber's straight edged razor."

"That's a good name," said Robin. "Very descriptive."

"It takes a unique set of geographical characteristics to produce the barber," explained the check out lady cheerfully. "It's caused by cold air moving down a steep slope and being funnelled through a gap that the river has worn in the limestone hills.

Technically it is known as a katabatic

wind. There's only two places in the whole world with a proper barber. Greymouth and Norway." She sounded quite proud.

"Brrrr!" Robin shivered.

"Don't worry," said the lady. "The sun will soon burn off the mist and the wind will die down. It will be beautiful and warm in an hour or so." She gave us our change. "Have a lovely holiday," she said.

"How did she know we were tourists?" Robin asked me as we left.

"Because we were shivering as the barber cut us up," I explained.

The predictions of the check out lady were accurate and by the time the coach arrived to take us to Shantytown,

the day was warm and sunny.

Shantytown is a reconstruction of a gold mining town with lots of authentic buildings full of authentic relics.

There's a gold buying office, a bank, a hotel, a gaol, a printing shop, stores, stables and a long drop dunny. The dunny is a two seater. I took a photograph of Phyllis sitting in it and then a passer by took a photograph of Phyllis and me sitting companionably side by side sharing a conversation.

We took a short ride on a steam train past a sawmill to the gold diggings and back again. The engine was called Katie and she chuffed and puffed as she pulled the carriages just like the little engine who could. Her

brass work gleamed and her freshly blackened smokestack belched clouds of smoke into our faces.

We saw a demonstration of gold panning and then we had a go at it ourselves. A man dressed in authentic gold mining clothes handed each of us a pan of gravel.

"There's gold in every pan," the man assured us. "All you have to do is find it."

We stood by a line of sinks full of water and washed our gravel. The swirling water took the gravel away, hopefully leaving the gold behind. The gold, being much heavier than the gravel, tends to accumulate at the bottom of the pan as you swirl the

water round; at least that's the theory. However too vigorous a swirling can remix the gold with the gravel and then the gold washes away of course. As always, happy mediums have to be struck.

The first sight of little gleaming things in my gravel was indescribably thrilling. I washed and swirled, washed and swirled and there it was, indisputable gold. The man in charge gave my pan a final swirl and decanted the gold into a small tube for me to take away as a souvenir. I was quite proud of my few grains of shiny stuff.

Robin proved to be a particularly talented gold panner and she did even better than I did. All I had was a few

tiny particles. Robin's gold had definite lumps in it and she had a lot more than I did. Presumably I'd swirled a bit too hard and washed some of my gold away into the sink.

Unfortunately, even when we combined our gold, we didn't have enough to pay for holiday. What a shame.

As we left, I could see the man who had done the demonstration for us panning the tailings we'd left in the sinks. Presumably the staff supplemented their wages with the gold the tourists left behind.

In the afternoon we visited the pancake rocks at Punakaiki. These are limestone rocks layered down in

distinctly stratified stacks and they really do look like pancakes piled higgledy piggledy one top of the other. When the sea is in a bad mood it rushes and roars up into the rocks and propels itself out through huge blowholes high into the air, throwing up enormous columns of dazzling spray to the accompaniment of deep booming noises. Unfortunately, on the day that we visited the rocks, the sea was in a good mood, calm and serene as it sailed to the shore and there was no blowhole activity at all. However even without the blowholes being active, the raggedly sculptured pancake layers are still a thrillingly surreal sight.

The next day was the 4th of March

2009 and it marked the completion of my 59th orbit around the sun. I celebrated by taking a train trip across the mountains on the Trans-Alpine train from Greymouth to Christchurch. Very few people have spent their birthday on top of an Alp. I felt privileged to have done so.

There was no snow on the peaks. I suppose the summer weather had chased it all away. But the mountains were still breathtakingly dramatic with their sheer sides and fiercely sculptured crags. As we went through Arthur's Pass, I caught a glimpse of a sword stuck in the top of the highest peak.

The train was running about an

hour and a half late. Apparently it always runs behind schedule because of speed restrictions on the rather poorly maintained tracks. However nobody has bothered reprinting the timetable to make it match reality, and so the carriages are always full of tourists muttering urgently into mobile phones as they frantically try to rearrange the onward connections that they had pre-booked based on the erroneous assumption that the timetable was accurate.

Every so often the train ran parallel to the road which stretched empty from horizon to horizon. Roads in the South Island are always relatively traffic-free and driving is an absolute

pleasure. Sometimes you can drive all day and seldom, if ever, see another vehicle. That's what driving is *supposed* to be like.

Tim stared through the carriage window at the empty road. "I think I understand now," he said thoughtfully. "Southern roads are things that New Zealanders build just in case a car comes along."

"That's right," I said, because it was.

As the train approached Christchurch, we passed through six tunnels in the course of a mile. This section of the track is called "The Mile Of Six". What else would you expect in a country which has an island in the

north called the North island and an island in the south called the South Island. New Zealand nomenclature is often prosaically literal.

"Perhaps The Mile Of Six is the train equivalent of the Mile High Club," I suggested suggestively.

"No!" said Robin, fiercely rejecting the suggestive suggestion. "My mother is sitting beside me."

"Pardon?" asked Phyllis who had been concentrating on the view and paying no attention to the conversation. I let Robin explain it.

We stayed overnight in Christchurch and ate at a magnificent restaurant called "Two Fat Indians" which we chose simply because we

liked its name. Then, the next day, we hired a car and drove to Hanmer Springs. This small village is named after Thomas Hanmer, one of the first European settlers. He was a man with a most unfortunate name. Many people find 'Hanmer' quite hard to pronounce and there is a common tendency to transpose the middle consonants, turning the word into 'Hamner'. Early documents and maps of the area are rife with this misspelling and I was amused to find that Robin consistently mispronounced it as well.

"Han," she said and then paused for a second or so, girding her vocal chords. "Mer Springs," she said proudly.

"Well done," I congratulated her. "Now say it without the pause in the middle."

"Hamner Springs," she said.

Oh, well.

We were staying at the Alpine Springs Motel; words that Robin had no problem with whatsoever. The motel was owned by three Golden Retrievers. The eldest, called Sophie, had a blue ball of which she was inordinately fond. She carried it around with her everywhere she went. The ball was not only blue, it whistled loudly when squeezed. Since Sophie refused ever to relinquish the ball, except possibly when eating, her morning greeting to all and sundry tended to be:

"Woof - whistle - woof - whistle.

BA - whistle - RK!"

The only reason to visit Hanmer Springs is to take the waters. The area's principal claim to fame is its thermal pools. A large complex offers soaking facilities in rock rimmed ponds of varying temperature and chemical composition. The water is quite salty; it contains large quantities of sodium chloride together with sodium carbonate, sodium borate and various lithium salts. Some of the hotter springs contain sulphur compounds and there is a distinctive whiff of rotten eggs drifting over the area. Many of the pools simply present the water *au naturelle* but, for the fainter of heart,

there are also pools where the water has been filtered and chlorinated for your comfort and safety.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the springs became increasingly popular. However mixed soaking was strongly discouraged. A flagpole by the springs flew a pair of trousers when it was the men's turn to bathe, and a skirt when it was the women's turn. But now, in these enlightened modern times, this segregation has been dispensed with and the flagpole is long gone.

We soaked ourselves for three glorious days, becoming somewhat wrinkly and prune-like (but *extremely* relaxed) in the process. We also

discovered that soaking, while undeniably therapeutic, is also extraordinarily tiring and we collapsed early to bed every night, much to Sophie's disgust.

"Woof - whistle - woof - whistle. BA - whistle - RK!" she told us in no uncertain terms.

At last, relaxed and cheerful, we drove back to Christchurch for the final few days of our holiday.

Our first stop in Christchurch was the Willowbank Wildlife Reserve. It offers two main attractions, a wildlife park with a nocturnal kiwi house and something called *Ko Tane*, the Maori experience. Since Tim and Phyllis had never experienced either of these, we

decided to indulge in both of them.

"Do you want to feed the animals?" asked the lady we bought tickets from.

"Yes, please."

And so, for a small extra fee, we were given a paper bag of pellets with the letter 'B' written on it for feeding the birds, a paper bag of different pellets with the letter 'F' written on it for feeding the farm animals, and a small plastic container of pink stuff together with a long spoon for feeding the eels.

The eels were crowding around a small platform full of people who were dipping their spoons into the pink goo and spoon feeding the eels. The eels were obviously very accustomed to

being spoon fed and knew just how to slurp the goo gently off the spoon, though one rather enthusiastic eel grabbed hold of Robin's spoon and pulled it out of her hands, refusing to let go.

They were very impatient eels. If there was the slightest pause in the spoon feeding, they raised themselves out of the water, mouths agape, and attempted to climb up on to the platform in search of more goo. This was more than a little frightening. The goo was obviously very nourishing – one and all, the eels were about the size and shape of Arnold Schwarzenegger's left thigh. Being pursued by ravenous, disembodied Terminator legs is the

stuff of which nightmares are made.

Eventually we ran out of goo and went to throw pellets at the birds instead. These consisted mainly of ducks who followed us round, threatening us with a severe quacking if we didn't feed them fast enough.

The final paper bag, marked 'F' if you recall, was eventually shared between some kunekune pigs and a rather grand clydesdale who were all duly appreciative and very polite, unlike the eels and ducks. That's the difference between wild and domesticated animals, I suppose.

And then it was time for the kiwi. I've been to a lot of kiwi houses up and down New Zealand. The one at

Willowbank is the best I've ever seen. In most kiwi houses there is a big glass wall between you and the birds and you strain your eyes in the nocturnal gloom trying hard to ignore the reflections in the glass that are interfering with your view of whatever kiwis may be on show behind it. But not at Willowbank. There is no glass at all in the kiwi house at Willowbank. The birds are on open view. There's just a waist high fence to protect the people from the kiwis should they happen to run amok.

We leaned over the fence watching a busy little kiwi running around and poking at the leaf mould with his enormously long beak. He knew we were there, but he wasn't very

interested in us. He just wanted to scurry and scritch, and that's exactly what he did.

Never before have I been so close to a kiwi with nothing between us at all. I could lean over the fence and get up close and personal. I could have reached out and touched him, though I was careful not to. I felt extremely privileged.

Then, together with about a dozen other people, we assembled for *Ko Tane*, the Maori Experience.

A young Maori lady called Tina who was dressed in traditional costume and who had the proper facial *moku* tattoo introduced herself to us and welcomed us.

"You," she explained, "are visitors to our land. But before you can be properly welcomed, we must know who your chief is. Which one of you is the chief?"

Every eyeball in the audience clicked into place and stared at me.

"Are you the chief?" asked Tina.

"Yes," I said, "I suppose I am."

"And is the beautiful woman beside you your queen?"

"Indeed she is."

And so I became a chief for a day and Robin became a queen.

Tina led us off into the forest, explaining points of interest to us along the way. Suddenly an enormous tattooed Maori warrior jumped out of

the bush and confronted us. Eyes popping, tongue sticking out, he waved his spear and roared a challenge. He placed a small, leafed branch on the ground and retreated. I picked it up and held it, thus indicating that I was coming in peace.

This was my first ever powhiri – a Maori challenge and welcome. I was astonished at the overwhelming emotion of the moment, the sense of taking part in a truly foreign and yet at the same time oddly familiar ritual. There was a feeling of spiritual rightness about the moment. I felt very strongly the deep cultural heritage with which I was now involved. It was all extremely moving, and I confess I was

close to tears.

We were led to a marae. There were special seats for me and my queen, and then the warriors and ladies of the village put on a show for us.

Afterwards the ladies in our group were taught to use *poi* and the men were taught the haka *Kamate*. This was great fun – it's always good to have a legitimate excuse to stamp your feet, stick out your tongue and roll your eyeballs around.

As we left, I planted the small leafed branch that I had been presented with in the soil. It seemed wrong to take the branch away with me. It belonged here in the forest. But I couldn't bring myself to simply discard

it either. Probably it won't take root, but nevertheless planting it seemed like the right sort of gesture to make.

The other big attraction of Christchurch is the Antarctic Centre. It is housed in a huge building close to the airport. In the entrance foyer was a board displaying the various delights available to us, together with their costs. We could experience an antarctic storm and see the blue penguins being fed. For an extra \$20 we could go behind the scenes of the blue penguin enclosure. It seemed very reasonable.

"Let's do it ALL!"

And so we did.

The antarctic storm takes place every half hour (they have very

accurate weather forecasts in Antarctica). Before we could go into the room where it was taking place, we were outfitted with warm, furry, hooded anoraks so that we wouldn't freeze, and overshoes so that we wouldn't get the snow dirty when we walked on it. I pulled up my hood and Robin took a photograph of me.

"You look very intrepid," she said.

The temperature was -8°C . The wind chill factor brought this down to about -28°C . Robin, Phyllis and Tim are from Perth in Western Australia and are used to spending most of their days at about $+42^{\circ}\text{C}$. As soon as they were exposed to the storm, their extremities froze solid, went brittle and

dropped off. I gathered up all the fingers and toes from the ice and put them in my pocket. When we got back outside into the warmth I stuck them back on again in the appropriate places. But I'm not sure everyone got the right bits back. I think I might have mixed them up by mistake. Ever since we visited the Antarctic Centre, the finger that Robin uses to poke me in the ribs when I do something wrong has started to look a little bit masculine. That probably means that Tim got some of Robin's fingers. I hope it improves his golf game...

The blue penguins have an enclosure all of their own. They aren't an antarctic bird – they are too small to

survive the extreme weather conditions down there. They are, in fact, a native New Zealand penguin. All the penguins at the centre have been injured by boats, or cars or (sickeningly) by human thugs. Although many have recovered to a certain extent, they are all too weak or too injured to survive in the wild and so they live out their days safely in the Antarctic Centre. These poor, injured birds are (the notices reminded us) the lucky ones. Many others die alone, in pain.

The penguins swam around the pool. It was dinner time and they knew it.

"Fish!" they yelled. "Where's my fish? I want fish now!"

Fish was not long in coming. Some of the birds were lame, some blind, one had an artificial beak. But all seemed happy and frolicsome. The fish was eagerly gobbled up.

Later we were given a guided tour through the penguin enclosure and we learned that despite their sometimes horrible injuries, the penguins do, on occasion, hatch and rear chicks. It is obvious that the Antarctic Centre is doing a wonderful job with these extraordinarily cute birds.

And with that our holiday was over. The next day we took the Trans Coastal train to Picton where we joined the ferry for our trip back to Wellington. The Bluebridge ferry *Monte Stello* was

still broken and so, rather than transfer to the (very) late sailing of her sister ship the *Santa Regina* we booked ourselves on to the Interislander ferry *Kaitaki* instead.

As the train travelled North up the coast, I saw a light dusting of snow on the majestic Kaikora mountains. To an extent, that made up for the lack of snow on the alps and I was quietly content as we boarded the ferry.

Kaitaki pulled away from the dock and somebody with no training in public speaking made an announcement over the loudspeaker system. He was trying to be very formal and correct, but he didn't quite do it properly...

"Passengers are reminded that alcohol purchased on board may be consumed."

Well that sounded like a good idea to me, so I went upstairs to the bar and consumed some. When I came back, Tim said:

"I looked for you for *hours!*"

"I was there all the time," I said.

"Well so was I," said Tim. "But the there where I was obviously wasn't the there where you were."

Robin started to giggle. "You sound just like Pooh and Piglet discussing deep and meaningful things," she said.

We docked in Wellington and all the people with cars on board hurried down to the car deck. As they went, the

man who couldn't do public service announcements said:

"Passengers are reminded not to start their engines until asked to do so by the chief screw."

We disembarked and collected our luggage and then went looking for a taxi to take us home.

"We'll never get four people and all this luggage into one taxi," said Robin. "Let's get two taxis."

"OK."

"I'll go in the girl's taxi with mum," Robin said to me. "You and dad can go in the boy's taxi."

And so it was done. Robin and Phyll stowed their luggage in the boot of the first taxi and then got in to the

car. As it pulled away, Tim and I climbed into the second taxi.

"Follow that cab!" I said.

The Fone Of Bafut

I was away from home, on business in Auckland, and the battery on my mobile phone was getting rather low on power. But that wasn't a problem – I've had a university education, which means that I understand about half of the instructions in the manual that came with the phone. I consulted the instructions, then I turned the phone off and plugged one end of the charger into a power point and the other end of the charger into the phone. To my surprise, the phone turned itself on again. Then it said, "Unable To Charge."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Unable To Charge," said the phone smugly.

"Yes, yes. I heard you the first time," I said. "Why are you Unable To Charge?"

"I don't know," said the phone. "I'm only a phone, not an electrical engineer. Unable To Charge."

I turned the phone off again and took it to the Vodafone Shop that was just up the street from the office. The person behind the counter looked to be about twelve years old. He was deeply immersed in something on his laptop computer, but eventually, after indulging myself in much throat clearing, screaming and a significant

amount of violent banging on the counter, I managed to attract his attention.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his eyeballs still superglued to the screen of his computer.

I explained that my phone was Unable To Charge.

"How old is the phone?" he asked, finally glancing away from the laptop.

I took the phone out of my pocket and showed it to him.

"Gosh," he said, greatly impressed with its clunkiness. "That is really ancient. It must be at least four years old!"

"Possibly even five," I said. "I imagine that you had only just

completed Stage 2 Potty Training when this phone rolled off the assembly lines."

"It's well out of warranty," said the child. "There's nothing we can do."

"Nothing?" I asked.

"If you leave it with us," he explained, "we'll charge you a small fortune just to look at it in order to decide whether or not it can be repaired. And if it turns out that it can be repaired, we'll charge you another, significantly larger, fortune to repair it."

"I see," I said. "There really isn't anything at all you can do, is there?"

"Well I could always sell you another phone," he said.

I looked around the shop. There were many phones on display. Prices ranged from mildly expensive to \$OH-MY-GOODNESS. I pointed to the cheapest one. The leaflet attached to it informed me that it had a built-in still camera, a video camera, a music player, bluetooth compatibility, a coffee percolator and a device for taking stones out of a horses hoof. Oh, and it also allowed you to make phone calls.

"I'll have one of those, please," I said.

"We haven't got any of those in stock," said the urchin. "How about one of these instead? It has the same functionality and it only costs \$100

more."

"No thank you," I said, and left the shop. The child went back to his computer and I went back to my hotel. I plugged the phone back into the charger and it turned itself on again.

"Unable To Charge," it said.

"I know," I said. "You don't have to keep repeating yourself."

I noticed that the little symbol that showed me how much power was left in the battery had vanished from view.

"Where's the battery power icon?" I asked.

"Don't need it," said the phone. "I can use the power from the mains to drive all my functions. As long as the charger is plugged in, I can bypass the

battery completely."

"Why can't you just pass the power along to the battery instead?" I asked.

"Oh, that would never do," said the phone. "Unable To Charge."

I rang Robin and explained the situation.

"Fortunately it seems I can still use the phone as long as it is plugged in to the mains via the charger."

"Aha!" said Robin. "So your mobile phone has now become a stationary phone."

"That's right."

"Hmmm," said Robin. "When you ring me, the caller-id gadget at this end says *Alan Mobile*. Shall I change it so that it says *Alan Motionless* instead?"

"No, don't bother," I said. "You'll only have to change it back again when I get a new phone."

All went well for a couple of days. Being tethered to a power socket was mildly inconvenient, but I was willing to put up with it in the short term. Then, one day, I plugged the charger in, the phone turned itself on as usual, and then it said, "Registering With The Network."

An hour glass appeared and twirled around and around. Tiny pixels of sand fell through the hole in the middle.

"Get a move on," I said impatiently. "You aren't boiling an egg."

"I'm doing my best," said the phone, sounding quite disgruntled.

"Registering With The Network."

Finally the hourglass vanished. "No Signal!" said the phone triumphantly.

"Pardon?"

"Unable to Charge."

I turned the phone off, unplugged the charger, and moved to a different place. Sometimes the signal strength can vary quite markedly depending where you are in the room, though I'd never before had any problems when standing in my previous location. I plugged the charger into a different power socket.

"No Signal! Unable To Charge. No Signal!"

"Can't you do *anything* any more?"
I asked.

"No I can't," said the phone, and it switched itself off. Nothing I did would persuade it to turn on again. It was utterly dead.

I threw the corpse down in disgust and I went back to the office where I phoned Robin on the land line.

"My phone is pining for the fjords," I told her.

"I didn't know you spoke Norwegian," said Robin, greatly impressed. "Us English speakers always call them fiords."

"Either way, my phone is now moribund. I'll have to go shopping for a new one when I get home."

"Oooh, how exciting! Can I come with you?"

"Of course you can," I said.

"Someone has to make the aesthetic decisions, and I'm no good at that."

"Gosh, I can't wait for Saturday," said Robin. "It'll be good to have you home."

And so it was that Robin and I went shopping in Lower Hutt. We chose Lower Hutt because Robin knows it well and there are several electrical gadget shops within easy walking distance of each other.

"That's a nice phone," said Robin, pointing at an incredibly slim "beam me up Scotty" phone. It had a metallic grey finish and the keyboard was covered with a membrane that shielded all the individual keys from the

elements, thus preventing moisture from damaging the delicate circuits should it chance to be raining while you were making a call. It was the cheapest phone on display, as well as the most elegant. I liked it immediately. There was only one fly in the ointment. A sign beside the phone said that it required a SIM2 card, which could be obtained for only an extra \$40.

"I wonder what a SIM2 card is?" I pondered thoughtfully. "And how does it differ from an ordinary SIM (or possibly SIM1) card?"

"Perhaps we should ask a man," suggested Robin.

However there were no men to be

had. The approach of a real live customer appeared to have frightened all the sales people away. I whistled casually, and picked up various expensively shiny things; then I put them down again in different places. I waved my arms and jumped up and down. I unveiled an enormous placard which said I WANT TO GIVE YOU LOTS OF MONEY in eye-searing fluorescent Day-Glo orange letters. Nothing worked.

"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin, and so we did.

The next shop had exactly the same phone on display with exactly the same notice about a SIM2 card. I polished the phone carefully with a soft cloth,

and it emitted blue smoke which coalesced into a salesman. I felt encouraged.

"What's a SIM2 card?" I asked, pointing to the notice.

He stared at the notice as if he'd never seen it in his life before. His lips moved as he read the words to himself. "I don't know," he said. "I'll go and ask someone."

He went away, never to return.

"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin, and so we did.

Again, exactly the same phone was on display.

"Can I help you?" asked a sales droid.

"I'm interested in this phone," I

said. "What's a SIM2 card?"

"That's a very old fashioned phone," said the sales weasel. "Flip tops are terribly passé. Wouldn't you much prefer this model with the slide-out keyboard and a built-in vegetable garden? It's only an extra \$85 plus \$40 for a SIM2 card."

"No I wouldn't," I said. "What's a SIM2 card."

"It's the next generation card after a SIM1," said the sales thing.

"What does it do, and will the phone work with an older SIM card?"

The sales monkey shrugged its shoulders.

"Let's go to the next shop," said Robin.

"There isn't a next shop," I said.

"We've run out."

We drove home. Gloomy clouds hovered and rain threatened. Perhaps I was destined to remain forever incommunicado.

"Sod it," I said. "Let's go down the road to the local Dirk Smooth. I never did trust the shops in exotic, foreign locales like Lower Hutt. Local shops are always the best."

Again the same phone was on display. It was still the cheapest phone in the shop and, to my eyes, still the prettiest.

"Nice phone, that," said the salesman. "I particularly like the slim styling. Small is beautiful. And it's a

very cheap phone as well – it gives you a lot of bang for your buck."

"What's a SIM2 card?" I asked.

"It's just got a bit more software on board," said the salesman. "It's a mechanism for plugging more functionality into the phone."

"Will the older SIM cards still work in it?" I asked.

He nodded firmly. "Absolutely," he said. "A SIM card is a SIM card. The phone doesn't care."

"OK, I'll take it," I said.

"I'll go and get one out of stock," said the salesman and he trotted off to the back of the store. A few minutes later he was back, clutching a bright red box. "It comes with a one year

warranty," he said. "We also offer an extended three year warranty for \$40, but frankly it's not worth it. The phone's so cheap that if it dies after a year, you might as well just buy a new one."

"Fair enough," I said. "Can I sit down for a minute? I feel quite faint. I've never met such an honest and knowledgeable salesman before."

"I get that a lot," he said, smiling. He also got the sale.

In Which Alan And Robin Widen Their Intertubes

In the old days connecting to the internet in our house was a laborious process. You had to put a shovel full of coal into the modem and turn up the heat on the boiler. After a while, when the steam pressure was sufficient to push the electrons down the pipes at just the right speed, you set the semaphore flags to the proper number, listened for the sound of frying bacon

as the modem at the other end built up a head of steam, and then (lo and behold!) a connection was made and the world was available to you at 1200 bps. Oh the fun we had!

Over the years, great progress was made in modem technology. The pipes got a bit wider and the steam pressure increased. Ominous rumblings could be heard from the boiler and there were occasional sparks as the electrons found themselves in two places simultaneously. I upgraded to 9600 bps and then 14,400 bps and finally to the almost unheard of rapidity of 56,000 bps.

By now we were using coal at an alarming rate. The sound of steam

hissing from the safety valve was a constant background noise.

Furthermore, limitations endemic to the technology meant that only one of our many computers could connect to the intertubes at any one time. That in itself wasn't much of a problem since Robin and I tended to be on line at different times. However we both agreed that our connections were now running noticeably more slowly than once they had. Subtle giggling revealed that more and more people all over the world were producing more and more information at an exponentially increasing rate, and so the intertubes were getting very clogged up with junk data. The relevant bits that we were

interested in were finding it harder and harder to struggle through the mess that was blocking the pipes. Faced with this, even our super-fast dial up connection found itself unable to cope. It seemed to take forever for me to get my daily lolcat fix, and Robin's genealogical documents could barely squeeze themselves down the gunged up pipes at all.

"We need broadband," declared Robin.

I rang TelstraClear.

"We'll send a technician around to install the modem immediately," said the nice lady. "There's a spare slot at 11.00am a week next Tuesday. Will that do?"

"Haven't you anything earlier than that?"

"No, sorry."

"Then that will do fine."

A week later, two sun tanned TelstraClear technicians arrived. They stared at the hideous mess of cables that dangled and twisted around the room and muttered to each other in Afrikaans.

"Have you been in New Zealand very long?" I asked.

"About 6 months," said the younger of the two. "The electron wells in South Africa were starting to run dry. So we came out here to make a new start." The second one said nothing at all. He only spoke Afrikaans, and he had no

idea what I'd said to him.

They went outside and climbed up the telephone pole where they checked the connections and measured voltages. Then they climbed down and dug a huge trench across the lawn. They pulled out all the old, narrow, plastic dial up pipes and replaced them with enormously wide and shiny stainless steel broadband pipes.

"Soon have your data flowing rapidly down those, squire," said the one who spoke English, in tones of deepest satisfaction. Then they went inside and joined the hugely wide pipe to the computer with a modem.

"Where do I put the coal?" I asked. The technician muttered some

Afrikaans to his colleague and they both gave me a pitying glance. "You don't need coal for broadband," said the English speaking one. "They've done away with boilers and steam power. Up to date communication devices like broadband modems use nuclear powered robot hamsters to push the electrons really, really fast down the pipes."

"Gosh," I said, impressed. "That's good news. I wasn't looking forward to shovelling huge amounts of coal. The dust gets everywhere. It makes the cats all gritty. How does this new technology work?"

"There's a cobalt-60 radiation source deep inside the modem," said

the technician. "It's housed in the tummy of a robot hamster and it makes the hamster run really, really fast in a treadmill which is joined to an electron pump. The pump shoots the electrons down the broadband pipes at twice the speed of light. If you look out of the window when you are uploading data, you'll see the hideous blue glow of Cerenkov radiation flashing over the grass above those hugely wide pipes we buried in the lawn.

"Don't look too closely though," he continued thoughtfully, "The blue radiation might turn you into a Star Trek special effect. And don't go poking around inside the modem hamster either. The cobalt-60 is likely

to give you a severe case of Klingon Forehead."

"What sort of upload and download speeds will I get?" I asked.

"Infinitely fast!" declared the technician. "And if that proves to be too slow, just give us a call and we'll upgrade you to a gerbil. They give you infinity plus one!".

The technicians packed their tools away and left, pleased with a job well done. I tested out the new broadband connection. Bloodyhellitwasfast!

A potentially tricky problem soon became clear to me. The broadband modem was directly connected to one and only one computer. None of the rest of the computers in the house had

any idea it was there at all. This was not a satisfactory situation. Robin and I needed to be able to sit in separate rooms with separate computers connected simultaneously to the intertubes so that we could have video conferences with each other. Surely that's the major reason for having broadband in the house? I consulted the yellow pages and rang Geeks On Wheels.

"Hello, Geeks On Wheels. You are speaking with Tina. How can I help you?"

"I think I need a geek," I said. I explained the situation.

"Aha!" said Tina. "We get this situation quite a lot. What you need is a

wireless router." She began to sing a song: "The modem bone connects to the wireless bone. The wireless bone connects to the computer bone. Now hear the word of the lord!"

"Sounds good," I said. "You ought to give serious consideration to becoming a professional singer."

"I am a professional singer," said Tina. "I only do this job to earn money."

"Can't you make money as a singer?" I asked.

"No," she said. "The intertube pirates have stolen every penny."

"Damn those fifteen men and their dead man's chest," I sympathised. "Have a bottle of rum. The world will

look better."

"I'll get a Geek onto his Wheel and send him round," promised Tina. And she was as good as her word. Not long afterwards, a unicycle wobbled up to my front door and a geek got off and rang the bell.

"Why have you only got one wheel?" I asked him.

"I've just started working with the company," he explained. "I'm their newest geek. I won't get a second wheel until after I install my hundredth wireless router. But I did ninety nine last week and so you are my lucky customer. I'm eager to get started."

He plugged the router in, then he sacrificed a goat and sprinkled the

blood on to the antenna. The cats ate the rest of the goat – except for the horns and hoofs of course.

"Abracadabra!" intoned the geek. Then he turned to me with a big smile. "There you are," he said. "It should work perfectly now. Let's get a couple of computers and try it out."

My laptops connected wirelessly with no problems at all and were soon sending data up and down the new ultra-wide pipes with gay abandon. I was thrilled.

"What about the computers downstairs?" I asked the geek. "They don't have wireless cards. How can I attach them to the broadband pipes upstairs?"

"Well, you could drill a hole in the floor and run a cable through it," said the geek.

"Robin suggested that as well," I said. "But I am peculiarly reluctant to do that."

The geek nodded his head sagely. "It's an inelegant solution," he agreed. "And the sawdust is an enormous nuisance. It gets everywhere. It will probably make the robot hamster in your modem sneeze a lot. You wouldn't believe the data corruption that would cause."

"Is there anything else we could do?" I asked.

"Indeed there is," said the geek. "What you need is ethernet over

power!"

"Ethernet over power?"

"Ethernet over power," confirmed the geek.

"What's that?"

"It's a device that sends network traffic up and down the power lines. You don't need real network cables at all when you've got ethernet over power."

"Let's do it!" I said.

The geek went out to his unicycle and returned with two small white boxes. He plugged one end of one box into the wireless router and the other end of the box into a power socket. Then we went downstairs and connected the second white box to the

hub that joins all my downstairs computers together.

"I'm glad the boxes are white," I said. "I was afraid that they might be black."

"Indeed," agreed the geek. "White is the new black. Black itself is so infra dig."

He turned the white boxes on. Each box had a glowing blue light that flashed morse code messages as data travelled up and down the power lines between the upstairs and downstairs computers.

"What are the flashing blue lights for?" I asked. "Are they perchance holes in the boxes which let out the Cerenkov radiation caused by super-

speed electrons zipping infinitely fast between the computers?"

"No," said the geek. "They are just flashing blue lights. They are really more of a fashion statement than a technological one. Although anyone who was a boy scout in their youth and who still remembers their leet morse code skills will be able to read the information that is being sent up and down the wires as the blue lights flash. I suggest that you keep the curtains drawn when you are using the connection. Spies equipped with binoculars may steal your data if you don't."

"Of course," I said, impressed all over again.

The geek began to pack away the boxes that all his gadgets had come in. He handed me a registration card.

"We've got a special offer on this month," he said. "If you register with us we'll send you a free tinfoil hat. That way your data is guaranteed to be safe no matter what the circumstances."

"Sounds good", I said and I filled it in.

In Which Alan Geeks

"It's black," I said to Robin, "and it's *very* shiny."

"Yes," she said, "but just what are you going to use it for?"

"It's *shiny!*" I explained.

She gave me a long suffering sigh which I put carefully away in the pool room with the rest of my treasures for later gloating over. "I suppose you'd better buy it then," she said.

And so a new computer entered my life. For the technically inclined among you, it's an Asus Eee 1000HE Netbook. In practical terms, that means that it's

black and shiny, and about half the size of a laptop, but with just as much oomph. Perhaps it should be called a kneetop, or possibly a toetop. Small is beautiful.

There was a time when machines like these came pre-installed with Linux. Unfortunately that doesn't seem to happen any more. The ones I found for sale only came with Windows XP. I suspect it's a marketing thing. Linux is scary; and so it's easier to sell Windows to the punters because it's more familiar to them. Everybody hates change.

Since Windows was already installed, and since it was equipped with special drivers to make sure that

all the oddball hardware packed inside the tiny case worked properly, I decided to keep it. You never know, I might need the built-in webcam one day and my experience suggests that Linux is seldom very good with webcams. However I was not going to be utterly deprived of my Linux experience (to use a particularly vomitous marketing term) just because Windows was already firmly ensconced *in situ*. This machine, I decided, was going to dual boot both Windows and Linux. And, just because I knew how to do it, I would make Linux the default. Yah, boo, sucks!

But first, since I had decided to keep Windows, I had to tell Windows

all about myself. It's a notoriously nosy operating system, and the first time you boot it up, it asks a lot of obnoxious questions.

"What's your name?" asked Windows.

Aha! The difficult questions first!

I told Windows that my name was Pascal Python, middle name Monty, spelled 'Perl' but pronounced Monty; English names are like that, don't blame me. My parents' careful choice of names obviously meant that they had my future computer career planned out for me from the minute I was born, despite the fact that when I was born, that career didn't actually exist in the world, and neither did the

programming languages I was named after. Prescient people, my mum and dad. However an unfortunate side effect of being called Pascal Python was that at school I got nicknamed Ada. Johnny Cash sang about the trials and tribulations of a boy named Sue. Trust me, they pale into insignificance compared to those lavished upon a boy called Ada. Still, it could have been worse. Ada's American cousin Linda didn't start making her famous dirty movies until long after I left school...

"Age?"

I lied, and said I was 42.

"Height in kilograms?"

Yet more proof, if proof were needed, that Americans don't

understand the metric system.

And so it continued. As soon as I answered one question, another popped up in its place. They formed a seemingly interminable list requiring ever more embarrassing information from me as the interrogation continued with extreme prejudice.

I dutifully typed in my fictitious autobiography in excruciating detail. Presumably the racier bits all got sent to Redmond and filed away in Microsoft's customer database where they would doubtless form the basis of the company's next marketing campaign. I wondered if Microsoft would notice that my answers to some of their questions were, shall we say,

inventive. Then I decided they probably wouldn't, since Microsoft marketing people are notoriously lacking in a sense of humour.

Once, in conversation with a Microsoftie, I said: "It's a well known fact that when you go to work for Microsoft, the first thing that happens is they make an appointment for you at the hospital where you undergo the operation to implant the chip in your brain that turns you into a robot slave. However the Microsoft surgeons who perform the operation are very cost conscious, and in order to prevent you having to come back for another operation later on in your career, they always take the opportunity to remove

your sense of humour gland at the same time."

The Microsoftie gave me a withering look which I put straight in the pool room. It was the best withering I'd ever experienced, and believe me, I've been withered by experts. "That's nonsense," he said firmly. "They don't send us for an operation! Who told you that?"

"See!" I said.

Meanwhile, back at the Netbook, Windows asked me a question that I couldn't answer.

"What is the name of this computer?" it demanded, smugly.

My mind went utterly blank and I appealed to Robin for help.

"Oh that's easy," said Robin. She's good at this kind of thing. "You've got to call it Gimli, because, being a Netbook, it is small, stocky and powerful."

"Perfect!" I said. "Gimli it is." I stored the name deep in the pool room, in the place reserved for extra special things; this name was so right, so proper, that it was a definite treasure.

Now that Windows was satisfied with me, it was time to put Linux on the machine. The most popular Linux distribution is Ubuntu, the brainchild of South African millionaire Mark Shuttleworth. Ubuntu is a Swahili word which means "this is the Linux distribution for people who find Red

Hat Linux too hard to understand". Swahili is a very compact language with a small, but extremely powerful, vocabulary.

I installed Ubuntu and it had a look around.

"Hello there!" said Ubuntu, in a strong Seth Efrican accent. "I see you have a wireless network card."

"That's right," I said. "Why don't you use it to connect to the internet?"

"OK," said Ubuntu. "I'll give it a go."

There was a brief silence and then Ubuntu said, "Hey! I've found this really, really powerful access point in the next room. Wow! Just look at that signal strength. Never seen one as

powerful as that before, squire."

"That's right," I told Ubuntu.

"That's the one I want you to use."

"OK," said Ubuntu. "What's the password?"

I told Ubuntu the password and there was a long silence.

"Well," said Ubuntu at last, "actually it doesn't seem to be quite OK. I gave the password to the access point, but nothing happened. It's completely ignoring me. So I can't connect to the internet. Sorry."

"Never mind," I said. "How about you play some music for me while I think about it."

"Oh yes!" said Ubuntu, anxious to redeem itself, "I can do that. Where's

the music?"

"Over there," I said.

"Got it," said Ubuntu and a media player appeared on the screen.

Coloured histograms bounced up and down in time to the music. Utter silence emerged from the speakers. I turned the volume up to its maximum value. The speakers hissed a bit, but not a note of music emerged.

"Have you noticed how quiet the music is?" I asked Ubuntu.

"Sorry about that, squire," Ubuntu replied, "I've never seen a sound card like yours before. I don't know how to get it to make a noise. But you must admit the histograms are pretty."

"Very pretty," I said, "but they don't

compensate for the lack of sound."

Since Ubuntu was utterly unable to make the two most important bits of Gimli work properly, I uninstalled it, trying hard to ignore the agonising screams as its files got slowly deleted, one by one.

What to do? What to do? I decided that I wouldn't be able to solve this problem alone. I needed advice from an expert. I went to consult with Porgy, the cat who knows everything.

"I have a problem," I said to Porgy.

"Miaow?" asked Porgy impatiently. He'd just woken up from a preprandial nap and was on his way to dinner, after which he was planning an elaborate postprandial nap, perhaps the most

important nap of the day because when he woke up from it, it would be breakfast time. He hates having his plans interrupted.

"Linux doesn't seem happy with the hardware on my new computer," I explained.

"Miaow," said Porgy, deeply sympathetic and momentarily intrigued by the problem.

"So I need some advice about how to proceed."

"Woof!" said Porgy. He thought the answer was obvious and he couldn't understand why I hadn't thought of it.

"Of course!" I said. "Puppy Linux will do it. Thank you Porgy. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

"Miaow," said Porgy, deeply satisfied, and he gave his bottom a thorough licking as a reward to himself. Then he resumed his stroll in the direction of dinner.

Puppy Linux is a distribution put together by an Australian called Barry Kauler. It is named in honour of his Chihuahua, a fearless animal who didn't appear to know that he was small and vulnerable. In his own mind he was a giant among dogs. He used to chase kangaroos. And sometimes he caught them...

Puppy Linux does lots of extraordinarily clever technical things that I won't bore you with, but one of its many strengths is that it reaches

hardware places that other Linuxes cannot reach. Its default administration password is woofwoof and the login name of the default user is spot. Those jokes (for small values of humour, anyway) definitely belong in the pool room.

"G'day," said Puppy, after I booted it up. It pushed its Akubra to the back of its head and wiped the sweat from its forehead. "Got a password for the wireless access point? I've done everything else, but I can't do that without a password."

I provided the password.

"What kind of password is that?" sneered Puppy, doing the Australian Wave to keep the bugs at bay. "Do you

want me to save it so that I can automatically connect to the internet next time? After all, you don't want to have to type that rubbish in every day, do you?"

"OK," I said. "Now, how about playing some music for me?"

"You want me to choose something from those files over there, cobber?" asked Puppy.

"Yes please."

"No problems, mate."

Music poured out of the speakers. I smelled the faint odour of steak sizzling on the barbecue and I heard the distant sound of a can of Fosters having its tab torn off.

"Can you turn the volume down a

bit, please?"

"Sure, mate."

It's ever so nice when things just work.

"Walkies!!"

Varsity Vignettes

The University of Nottingham, in the Midlands of England, is just outside the city proper. It is set in a huge park with a boating lake at one end. Weeping willows dangle romantically over the water and when you take your girlfriend out on the lake and row your boat beneath them, sticky black stuff falls onto your head, suitably destroying the moment. The lake is inhabited by the most enormous carp I've ever seen. Nobody ever fishes there, and the carp are very tame. They greatly enjoy ham sandwiches and

students are often to be found throwing their lunch into the water.

An old university tradition that I've just made up requires that students who fail their end of term exams must be chopped up and fed to the carp. Over the years, an awful lot of students have failed their exams. The size of the fish can't be explained by ham sandwiches alone.

Along with the rest of the first year students, I arrived at the University a week before the term officially started. It was probably the first time most of us had been away from home by ourselves and the University authorities were keen to minimise the trauma. Hence this initial, very special

week, known as freshers week. It was specifically designed to make us feel wanted and to acclimatise us to the university environment; curing our homesickness by keeping us busy in a mad social whirl. And so we wandered in a daze, attending dances and concerts and spending money to join societies whose meetings we would never attend. Fleecing the freshers in this manner is an old university tradition that I haven't just made up. It's the only way most of the societies managed to stay solvent.

Because the Nottingham University campus is so large and so self contained, most students lived in halls of residence. I lived in the oldest and

smallest of the halls. It was called Wortley Hall. Some students in Wortley were in double rooms, but I was lucky enough to have been allocated a single room. Not all students were fortunate in their random choice of room mate. Brian was sharing a room with an archetypal Welsh rugby player whose personal habits were so revolting that Brian, a sensitive soul, took to sleeping in the bath rather than in his bed. Fortunately we had two baths in the block.

Unfortunately I soon commandeered the second bath because I wanted to grow the world's largest chemical garden in it. One shower now had to serve the whole block. Somehow we

managed – and everyone, including Brian, was very keen to see the final results of my experiment.

My chemical garden was only a marginal success. But I remain quite proud of it. It was probably the last chemical garden ever grown in the Western world. I don't think you can get the secret ingredient any more. It requires large amounts of water glass – a concentrated solution of sodium metasilicate, once commonly used for preserving eggs but now quite obsolete in this refrigerated age. You mix it half and half (ish) with water and then drop chemicals into it. The chemicals precipitate their silicate salts which tend to be rather voluminous and which

grow into spindly, wavy and very attractive multi-coloured shapes.

I'll swear I visited every chemist and crumbling back street grocery shop in Nottingham.

"Water glass, me duck?" was the generally astonished reaction. "Water glass? I haven't been asked for that for years. I might have an old can somewhere in the back of the storeroom. Wait here."

After much searching, the proprietor would emerge in triumph, blowing the cobwebs off an old, rusty can of water glass. The faded label generally had a picture of a woman dressed in quaintly old fashioned pre-war clothes, grimly dropping eggs into

a bowl. Usually the shopkeeper was so glad to get rid of the rubbishy thing that I was given it for free. I'm certain I tracked down every remaining can of water glass in Nottingham. Nobody will ever be able to make a chemical garden in Nottingham again.

When growing a chemical garden, it is important to let the silicate solution settle down. There should be no convection currents remaining from the initial swirling as you dilute the solution and stir it into the container. The silicate salts that form the garden are very delicate and tend to shatter under the force of the currents. I let the water glass settle in the bath for five weeks before I started growing the

garden. In retrospect, it wasn't nearly long enough. I did get some nice growths, but too many of them succumbed to the hidden turbulence of the currents and collapsed into sludge at the bottom of the bath. Actually, I quickly came to suspect that this would have happened no matter how long I left the solution alone. It seems likely that the solution never really settled down properly because of the vibrations induced in it by the clomping feet of dirty students heading past it on the way to the shower.

Nevertheless everyone agreed that the experiment had been well worth while and can we have our bath back now, please? Reluctantly I washed the

sludge down the drain and normality returned.

Geoff bought a dartboard and hung it on the wall of his room. We played darts every day. Unfortunately we were utterly shite at it and every game turned into a race for double one. Loser had to make the tea. We got very good at subtraction and complicated factorisation. We knew exactly what double and triple numbers to aim for, we just couldn't hit them. Well, except for double one of course. We drank a lot of tea as well.

Eventually we got fed up with darts and took up Monopoly instead. During the summer term we would go out on the roof where there was a flat sunny

nook well sheltered from the wind. We played Monopoly all day long. Geoff was a born and bred Londoner. He claimed that gave him an advantage; he knew the Monopoly board better than the rest of us ever would, having tramped all over it in his youth. I suspect there was some truth in his claim. He won the game far more frequently than anybody else did. Of course, maybe we were just shite at Monopoly as well.

John was a motor cycle freak and his room was largely occupied by an enormous motor bike chassis and the engine from a Morris Minor, with very little room left over for John himself. He was trying to combine the one with

the other, convinced that if ever he succeeded, he'd have a super powerful bike. John's subject of study at university was mechanical engineering, so it was clear that success was imminent.

John's only subject of conversation was motor bikes. At meal times, he would regale us with motor bike reminiscences. He was particularly fond of telling us every detail of all the various accidents he'd had on his bikes. He'd had a lot over the years, and he hadn't emerged from any of them unscathed.

"There I was, flying through the air after I hit the kerb and shot off the front of the bike," he said one breakfast

time as he used a couple of slices of toast to scoop up watery fried tomato and rubbery scrambled egg. "I put out my arms to try and cushion the fall. That was a big mistake. When I landed I broke both arms. Snap. Just like that. I was in plaster for six weeks." He shook his head sadly. "But that wasn't the worst of it," he said.

Someone always took the bait.

"What was the worst of it?"

"I was in plaster from my wrist to my shoulder on both arms," John continued. "I couldn't bend my elbows or reach behind myself. I had to call my dad to wipe my bottom every time I went to the toilet." He speared a sausage with his fork and chewed in

meditative silence for a time. "I used to pray for constipation."

John never succeeded in marrying his bike chassis with his Morris Minor engine. He also failed his exams. The carp fed well that term.

Greg was studying mining engineering, though if you asked him why he'd chosen that particular subject he became very vague. He seldom went to lectures. He slept all day because he worked most nights as a bouncer at a Nottingham night club. He knew many dubious people and bought very dubious drugs from them. Once I went to his room to get some coffee (I'd run out) and I found Greg sitting bolt upright on his bed, completely

catatonic from whatever it was he'd been ingesting. His eyes were wide open and they tracked me all around the room, but there was nobody home inside his head.

"Can I borrow some coffee?"

Silence.

I took the coffee and left him to it.

One day Greg got a letter from his tutor, a man who Greg rarely visited and who appeared determined to extract the maximum possible amusement value from his recalcitrant student. He arranged a perfect summer vacation job for Greg; working as a labourer in a coal mine in Northumberland. Greg was horrified – the last thing he wanted to do was go

down a mine. He sent a letter back to his tutor by return of post.

"Thanks for the generous offer," said the letter, "but I won't be able to take you up on it. I'm spending the summer vacation in hospital having my haemorrhoids repaired."

We acquired a magic ball from a toy shop. When you dropped it, it seemed to bounce back higher than the original level from which it was let go. This was intriguing. The ball apparently violated all the conservation laws that underpinned everything we were taught in lectures and that we used every day in our laboratories. The fundamental laws of physics were in peril. The very structure of the universe

itself was under threat from this bouncing ball!

Careful measurement proved that it was all just an optical illusion; the ball was indeed bouncing very high, much higher than a normal ball would bounce, but it wasn't bouncing higher than the original point it was released from; it just looked as though it was because of the unexpectedly high return. If left alone, like any other ball it would eventually run out of energy and stop bouncing. But whatever strange material it was made of did seem to be highly efficient at converting potential energy to kinetic energy and back again with very little loss; hence the enormously high

rebound. The conservation laws still applied (thank goodness); they just applied a lot more slowly than we were generally used to. The laws of physics were safe. The universe would survive for at least another day. Entropy could go on rising. On balance that seemed like a good idea.

"If it bounces so high when you just drop it from waist height," mused Greg one day, "what would happen if you dropped it off the roof? Would it bounce right up to the top of the building again? That would be an amazing thing to see!"

Now that the thought had occurred to us, it was irresistible. We hurried to the highest roof we could find and

dropped the ball eighteen storeys. It hit the concrete pavement and, stressed beyond its storage capacity, it shattered into millions of minuscule fragments. Obviously there was a finite limit to the amount of energy the magic material could absorb before disintegrating under the load. What a shame.

Dave played double bass in a trad jazz band. They called themselves *The Campus City Jazz Men*. They eventually made an album (**Jazz On A Boot Lace**). I still have a copy, and it's not at all bad. But at the beginning of their career, they knew only one tune: *Ain't She Sweet*. For a Rag Week stunt, they decided to go busking. Since they

only knew the one tune, that was the only tune that they played. None stop. For 18 hours. They were trying for 24 hours but their stamina ran out. Their audience ran out after about 2 hours. *Ain't She Sweet* is not one of the tracks on their album. They never played it again after that first mammoth endeavour. They detested every hemi-semi-demi-quaver of it.

The band had a semi-regular gig at a pub called *The Bell*. One of the tracks on their album is called *Dorothy* and it was written by the band themselves as their tribute to the landlady of the pub, the eponymous Dorothy herself, a fierce lady who stood no nonsense from anyone. Everybody was terrified

of her.

One steamy summer day some friends and I were drinking in *The Bell*. The pub was crowded and the atmosphere was very hot and muggy and so we took our pints out on to the pavement in a vain attempt to cool down. We'd only been outside for a few minutes when Dorothy herself appeared in a towering rage.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded rhetorically. "Are you deliberately trying to get my license confiscated?"

"What's wrong, Dorothy?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I don't have a liquor license for the pavement," she yelled. "I'm only

allowed to sell drinks inside the pub. Get back in. Now!"

She hustled us back through the door. Meekly, we went.

Many people have been thrown out of a pub. But I am one of the very few people in the world who has been thrown in to a pub!

You couldn't be a student in those days without being involved in the politics of the era. The killing machine that was the Vietnam war ground inexorably away with no end in sight, and civil rights were a burning issue (sometimes literally). Only the political left seemed to have any solutions to these problems. Sometimes it seemed like the left wing

was the only viewpoint that recognised that the problems even existed at all! We weren't the first generation to believe this but, as it turned out, we were pretty much the last generation to believe it. I still think that's a shame. As a direct result of that shift in fashionable thinking the world is a poorer place now than it was then.

Like all universities, Nottingham had its radical student fringe. We had a sit in once, protesting against the war. There was a huge turnout because the organisers had the brilliant idea of showing pornographic movies to while away the long hours of boredom. There's a limit to how many times you can chant "Give peace a chance."

Derek was a socialist (as were all right-thinking people. Joke! Insert emoticon of choice). He played lugubrious tunes on his violin and claimed inspiration from the **Thoughts Of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung**. That famous little red book was on every student's bookshelf at the time, though I suspect that few of them read it, for it was rather dull and self-contradictory. Together with his friend Michael, Derek organised a socialist soccer team. Every time they scored a goal, they would wave their little red books triumphantly in the air. Another success for Maoism. *Imperialism And All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers* (pp 72-81. I still have my copy

of Quotations From Chairman Mao Tsetung. Have you still got yours?).

Michael was a close friend of Tariq Ali, the organiser of many of the more effective political demonstrations of the time. Though he was based in London, Tariq Ali was often to be found at Nottingham. Strangely, however, he had almost no involvement in any activism on the campus. I suspect he came there to relax and perhaps to play a game of socialist soccer. That was a joke he would have greatly enjoyed. He was passionate about his politics, but he was also a wonderful conversationalist with a wicked sense of humour. I liked him a lot.

One day Tariq Ali arrived at Nottingham with a taciturn and very hairy man who appeared to live only on beer and cigarettes. This was Mick Farren, another political radical and journalist. He wrote much of *International Times*, an underground magazine that was required reading in those days, though its habit of printing articles in light green ink on a slightly darker green background sometimes made its message difficult to decipher. It was usually on sale in the University Bookshop (distribution was erratic; it didn't always turn up). I always made sure to buy every issue I could find. I didn't keep them though, and now I rather regret that. I suspect they'd be

worth a lot of money if I still had them.

Today Tariq Ali is a respected member of the establishment though he is still politically active. He writes erudite novels and political tracts which few people read. He retains his impish sense of humour. His book **Pirates Of The Caribbean: A New Hope** is a thorough analysis of the political philosophy of Hugo Chavez, the President of Venezuela and leader of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Mick Farren went on to make several forgettable rock albums which all had wonderful titles and execrable songs. **Mona – The Carnivorous Circus** and **Vampires Stole My Lunch Money** are two examples that spring to

mind. These days he makes a comfortable living by writing cynically decadent fantasy novels.

I have no idea what Derek and Michael are doing now – but I do know that the carp never got anywhere near them. They both ended up with very good degrees, as indeed did most of the rest of us.

Isn't that what it's all about?

Snot

It started, as so many of these things do, with Robin sneezing and saying, "I've got a cold."

"Bless you," I said, absent mindedly.

"My nose is dripping like a tap."

I examined her carefully. There really was a chromium plated tap sticking out of her left nostril, and its twin protruded shinily from her right nostril. One tap was engraved with the word *Hot*, the other with the word *Cold*. Intrigued, I twiddled them, adjusting them carefully for both flow

rate and heat. Body temperature mucous streamed freely from her nose and the house began to fill with slime...

The cats perched themselves on the top of the furniture and regarded the swelling sea of snot with horror. "How am I going to get to my food bowl?" asked Porgy plaintively.

"Swim," advised Bess.

"But I can only do the doggy paddle," whined Porgy, "and I'm scared of dogs."

"You're not getting me in there," said Harpo. "I've got beautiful fluffy fur – there's no way I'm going to slime that up." He watched in admiration as Robin swam past on her way to the

bathroom. "That's a stylish Australian Crawl you've got there, Robin."

"Thanks," said Robin. "That's because I'm Australian."

"Are you?" asked Harpo, surprised. "I didn't know that. Prove it to me. Tell me what to do with a wombat."

Robin thought for a moment. "Play a game of wom?" she suggested.

"That's right," said Harpo. "Gosh, you really are Australian."

"Dingbat," muttered Robin in disgusted tones.

"Is that what you use to play a game of ding?" asked Harpo.

"No," said Robin. "It's a precision instrument used for tuning bells."

"Hey," said Porgy. "I've got one."

I've got one. What's a numbat?"

"It's a nocturnal, flying mammal that feels no pain," said Harpo.

"Oh, you've heard it before," said Porgy, deeply disappointed, and he pushed Harpo into the seething slime.

Harpo struggled out of the snot pool and began to comb his long, shaggy fur with his claws. "Hey," he said, "look how well my fur holds its shape now. This stuff is even better than brylcreem. Hairdressers would pay a fortune for product like this!" He began to curl, tease and slime his fur into place.

Robin laughed so hard at the sight of Harpo carefully styling his fur that she forgot to control her breathing. She

inhaled at precisely the wrong moment, choked on a bogie, coughed and sank beneath the surface. She struggled to the kitchen and supported herself on the sink while she regained her breath. I've always wanted to include the kitchen sink in a story, and now I've managed it!

"Turn it off," begged Robin. "Please turn it off."

I swam over to her, using a rather clumsy breast stroke. I've always enjoyed stroking breasts, I've just never been very good at it. I turned the taps firmly in the direction of off, but to my horror they came away in my hands.

"Oh no!" I cried. "They've broken off and now there's a gaping hole in

your pipes."

"Aaagghh!" sneezed Robin as more torrents of high pressure snot threatened to fill the house and drown us all. I opened all the doors and windows, but Robin was producing fluid faster than I could get rid of it. A bowl full of cat biscuits floated past with Bess in hot pursuit. Being the clever animal that she is, she was swimming with an elegant catty paddle.

"See?" I said to Porgy. "Pay attention to your sister. You can learn a lot from her."

"Woof," said Porgy, miserably.

By the next day, Robin was feeling a lot better. The slime had dried out

and the house was now full of huge grey, grimy lumps. Robin hit one with her silver hammer (the one she borrowed from Maxwell) and it disintegrated into a fine, powdery dust.

"Hey! This is fun."

She raced through the house, hitting the dessicated piles of snot. One by one they vanished into a haze of fine ash. All our furniture, the TV, the stereo system and the computers were covered with a thin grey film. Harpo strode in to the room, proudly displaying his new beehive furstyle.

"That looks good," I said.

"Thanks," said Harpo. "You can stroke me if you like."

It was like stroking a concrete path.

Harpo wiped his bushy tail over the coffee table, producing clouds of fine grit. Then he sneezed.

"Bless you," I said, and he bit me to show his appreciation.

"That gives me an idea," said Robin. She went into her room and started rummaging about in the drawers and digging around in boxes. "I know I've got them somewhere," she muttered.

"Are you looking for something?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, as she examined and rejected a shoe, a ship, a stick of sealing wax, a cabbage and a King. Then: "AHA! I knew they were here." She was clutching a bag that was

packed full of small gaily painted boxes.

"What are you going to do with those?"

"I'm going to fill each one to the brim with my snot dust and then sell them for a vast profit on TradeMe."

"Who's going to pay money for a small box full of dried slime?" I asked.

"Everybody will want one," said Robin. "I'll market it as genuine, high class, luxury, fully tested, pre-sniffed snuff."

"Snuff?"

"Snuff," she confirmed. "Straight out of my nostrils and into yours. Satisfaction guaranteed. An authentic sneeze in every particle. It can't fail."

And now you know why Robin has as much money as she does.

When It Changed Forever

1963 was the year when everything changed. On November 22nd, John F. Kennedy was assassinated and the new Beatles album **With The Beatles** was released. The lights went out in Camelot, but they were turned up very brightly in Liverpool. And the hindsight of history suggests that the release of the album was perhaps the more significant of the two big events of that day.

The album had a monochrome

cover with the half-shadowed and very grainy faces of John, Paul, George and Ringo glaring at the world. It was their second LP that year – they were always a prolific band – and I'd practically played the grooves off **Please, Please Me**, their first album. Now I had some new songs to listen to. I approached it with a sense of enormous anticipation.

Initially I wasn't impressed – the quality control on the new album was terrible, it was obviously a rush job aimed at the Christmas market. The sound balance and the mix was appallingly bad; and on my cheap Dansette record player there were tracks where Ringo's cymbals all but drowned out the voices and guitars of

the other three. And the only way I could get it to play at all was to put a sixpence on top of the stylus to weigh it down and force it to follow the grooves. Without the sixpence it jumped and skipped and made nonsense of the song.**Roll Over Beethoven**

Nevertheless, this was a Beatles Album, the *new* Beatles album. In 1963 that overshadowed everything else.

There had been music before the Beatles, of course. I had an LP by the Shadows and singles by Marty Wilde and Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard. I even had some singles by American singers; Eddie Cochrane, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly. And who could

forget the gloriously named B. Bumble and the Stingers with their rock and jazz inspired parodies of classical themes? But that music was just there, not quite in the background, but definitely not part of the foreground either. If it came on the radio I listened to it with enjoyment, but I made no great effort to seek it out and often I didn't turn my record player on for weeks at a time.

But in 1963 the Beatles were number one in both the singles charts and the album charts and absolutely nothing else had any significance to me at all. I was living in a whole new world, a whole new time, a whole new sensory experience. Black and white

turned into colour overnight. Away with drabness and post-war austerity! Begone dull care! We'd never had it so good. Suddenly music mattered in a way that it had never mattered before. It was a revolution into style, to paraphrase George Melly who wrote a whole book about it. Popular culture had turned into art, and the Beatles were in the vanguard of the revolution.

In that same magical year of 1963, Dora Bryan sang **All I Want For Christmas Is A Beatle.**

My friend Chris' cat had four kittens. They were called John, Paul, George and Ringo, and who cared that they were all girl cats? Everybody wanted a

Beatle for their very own. Newspapers conducted surveys to find out which Beatle was the most popular Beatle. It turned out that they all were.

The carefully coiffured duck's arse haircut with its outrageously elaborate quiff that my generation had borrowed from the teddy boys of the 1950s, and which we cemented securely into place on our head with brylcreem, was now a thing of the past. Brylcreem vanished from the shop shelves. We washed our hair (some of us for the first time in years) and we combed it forwards and we grew it long, inducing apoplexy in retired colonels from Tunbridge Wells. I remember having hair inspections at

school. Grim faced masters with rulers measured the length of our locks and issued firm instructions to visit the barber. (Today, now that shaved heads are a fashion statement, I imagine that the teachers issue firm instructions to stop visiting the barber. So it goes.)

It couldn't last, and it didn't last. By 1970 the Beatles had split up and gone their separate ways. We only had them for seven years and thirteen albums. Such a short time to change the world; but that's what they did.

And now those classic albums have been remastered and re-released in an attractive CD box set and as I played them all this weekend I realised that, quite literally, I knew every word and

every note of every song on every album. The Beatles had worn deep, familiar grooves in my mind. But familiarity has not bred contempt. Far from it. True magic can never grow stale.

The Beatles defined and sometimes redefined the meaning of music. Even in the early songs, when they were just another rock and roll group, they still managed to demonstrate musical and lyrical subtleties that were head and shoulders above anything their contemporaries were producing. ("Twanging guitars!" yelled my father in annoyance. "I'm fed up of hearing twanging guitars!").

Everybody who was anybody (and

quite a lot who weren't anybody at all; do you remember Marmalade?) wanted to record a Beatles song, and most of them did, to their great, albeit temporary, fortune.

William Mann, a music critic with *The Times* analysed their music and praised the aeolian cadences of John Lennon's voice as he sang **Not A Second Time**. When Lennon read the article he was heard to mutter, "What the hell is an aeolian cadence? Sounds like an exotic bird!"

Perhaps the Beatles really didn't know what they were doing in a strictly technical sense. Certainly there's absolutely no doubt at all that behind the scenes the svengali-like presence of

George Martin, their record producer, contributed enormously to their success. But talent is its own reward. When you pay no attention to the rules (because you don't know what the rules are) the results are almost always dire unless you are genius enough to invent a whole new set of rules to put in their place. Out of ignorance, the Beatles told George Martin what they wanted to do. He showed them how to do it. It worked. Oh! How it worked.

I suppose everybody has a favourite Beatles song. Mine is **Strawberry Fields Forever**. What's yours?

Strawberry Fields Forever was released in 1967 as a single (backed

with **Penny Lane** which is also my favourite Beatles song). I'd pretty much given up buying singles by then because they were too expensive. But I bought that one and played both sides of it to death. My father hated it.

"Living is easy with eyes closed," sang John Lennon on **Strawberry Fields Forever**.

"That's stupid," said my dad. "You can't live with your eyes closed. You'd keep bumping into things and hurting yourself. It isn't easy at all, it's very hard."

My father, a very literal man, simply couldn't cope with metaphors. As Robin and I listened to the

Beatles over the course of a music filled weekend, Robin said something very profound:

"The only drawback of being a Beatle is that you never got to listen to the music the same way that other people did. Isn't that a shame?"

Sleeves

One day Robin came home from work bubbling over with excitement.

"I've been asked to knit some jumpers for the dogs," she announced.

"?"

"The Animal Control people at the city council want jumpers for their dogs so that the poor things don't get cold in winter. We're all doing it. Look – here are the patterns." She showed me a leaflet with a picture of a goofy dog on the front cover. It was wearing a red jumper and it looked mildly embarrassed. Its tongue was blushing.

"Isn't it cute?" asked Robin. "This is going to be great. Knitting dog jumpers is my favourite kind of knitting."

"Why?"

"Because dog jumpers have four sleeves."

Robin is good at knitting sleeves. Eventually, when she has enough of them stockpiled, she will grudgingly knit backs and fronts, tops and bottoms, necks and crotches. But she rather resents having to do that. Sleeves are her pride and joy. Once she knitted me a jumper.

"It's got three sleeves," I said.

"No it hasn't," said Robin. "It's got two sleeves and a willy warmer."

The End