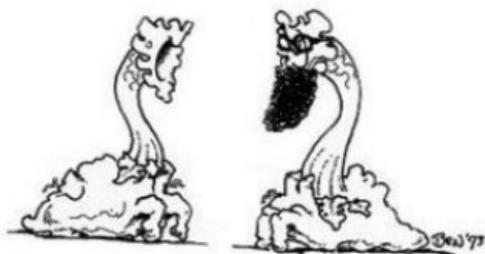


Triffid Tales Volume 5



Alan Robson

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by

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So Hotel

Recently, while in Christchurch, I stayed at the So Hotel in Cashel Street. Trust me, it really is **So** hotel. I had a thoroughly pleasant time and I'd be very happy indeed to stay there again. But it is an undeniably bizarre place...

I started to wonder about it when the taxi pulled up outside the hotel and dropped me off. Enormous signs indicated that rooms could be had from as little as \$69 per night. That is an absurdly cheap rate for a mid-city hotel. My heart sank as I walked through the doors into a blast of over amplified music that roared out of the

bar. I went up to the front desk and introduced myself to the man who was tapping away at the keyboard of an elegant looking, very modern and very sexy Apple computer.

"I'm sorry," he said, "you'll have to speak up. I can't hear you. The music is too loud."

I introduced myself again at a higher volume.

"Welcome to the So Hotel," he said as he confirmed my details and prepared the magnetic card that would allow me access to my room.

"Why are the room rates So Cheap?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

I repeated the question at the top of

my voice.

"Because we don't service the room while you are here," he said.

"What?" I boggled, "Not at all?"

"Not at all," he confirmed. "Once you enter your room, that's it for the week. No hotel staff will enter it as long as you are in residence. It won't be cleaned, it won't be serviced, the bed won't be made, the towels won't be picked up off the floor, and nobody will fold the next available sheet of paper on the toilet roll into a neat triangular point."

I began to worry. "Don't I even get clean towels when I've used up all the ones in the room?"

"No," he said. "Not unless you pay

a \$15 surcharge to have your room serviced."

I began to understand why the rooms were So Cheap. I took my magnetic card and headed towards the lift. Just past the lift was a table with six Apple computers on it that were providing free connectivity to hotel guests. It was So Internet. Six Chinese teenagers were superglued to the screens. Their mousing arms had bulging biceps, their non-mousing arms hung limp, atrophied and withered. They gazed unblinkingly at the screens in front of them, clicking furiously as they did mysterious internetty things involving hieroglyphs.

I took the lift to the fourth floor and

headed for room 417. The magnetic card allowed me entry to a room that was about the size of a jail cell. The bed was a steel frame securely bolted to the far wall. A deep mattress sat on the frame and a strange blue glow shone out from underneath it. A large flat screen television hung on the wall at the foot of the bed. A telephone and a control console of frightening complexity were built in to the headboard.

Just to the right of the door was a frosted glass cylinder that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. A sliding panel in the cylinder revealed a shower, washbasin and toilet.

To the left of the door a stainless

steel pole was bolted firmly to the floor and to the ceiling. A small horizontal bar joined the pole to the left hand wall. Three coat hangers swayed gently on the bar, forming a minimalist wardrobe. A small shelf was attached to the wall and a hard plastic chair was sitting underneath it.

I edged into the room and unpacked my case. I hung my jacket on one of the coat hangers and piled the rest of my clothes on the shelf. I slid my empty case under the bed into the sinister blue glow and I sat down on the bed; the plastic chair looked far too uncomfortable to sit on. There was a bed side table on which sat the remote control for the TV and a very large

loose leaf folder with 40 pages of small print that described how the room worked. I settled down to read...

The compendium began by explaining that the hotel was So Conscious of its environmental responsibilities. Everything in my room that wasn't screwed down was biodegradable and the toilet and shower were specifically designed to use as little water as possible. The hotel was So Proud of its contribution to the environment and the compendium suggested that I could contribute to this environmental effort by walking everywhere. They would So Appreciate the help.

Then the compendium began to

describe the control console in the headboard and things really got weird.

First the alarm clock. The compendium explained how to set a wake up time on the clock and then told me that the alarm would not ring, buzz, beep or vibrate, and neither was there the equivalent of a snooze button. Instead, a few minutes before the alarm was due to go off, a light above my bed would very gradually get brighter and brighter. This, the compendium informed me with a perfectly straight face, was to simulate a sunrise that would allow me to wake up naturally with the day. Once the simulated sun had fully risen, the television would turn itself on and show me inspiring

(yet soothing) pictures of stunningly beautiful New Zealand scenery to the accompaniment of of a soundtrack of New Age whales singing something scored by Wagner after a hard night out with the Valkyries over-indulging in chips and real ale.

Intrigued, I investigated the television. It had all the usual channels (though Prime and CTV were not working; there were channel slots available for both, but they were blank). None of the channels synchronised properly with the sound, and the lip movements of the people on the screen lagged seriously behind their words giving the distinct impression that everything, even the news, was a

badly dubbed foreign film. I kept expecting to see bands of starving peasants, bronzed farm workers singling patriotic songs, close ups of wrinkled faces and monochrome supernatural entities playing symbolic games of chess.

As I explored the TV options available to me, I discovered a whole sequence of serene channels for meditating by. The first of these was the New Zealand scenery that the alarm clock had promised me, but there were several others as well. There was a waterfall, waves splashing gently on to a sandy beach, a fire burning cheerfully in a grate (with the appropriate crackling sound effects) and several

meditative channels that simply consisted of the message "NO DISC" in white letters on a swirly blue background.

I turned the TV off and returned to the compendium which was now ready to explain the delights of the mood button to me.

The mood button was a special switch on the headboard console with six different settings. Each setting caused a different coloured light to glow eerily behind the frosted glass of the shower unit which then diffused the light dimly over the room. In deeply serious tones, the compendium explained that falling asleep bathed in the rich radiative glow of these pastel

shades would ensure that I enjoyed a satisfyingly natural sleep which would cause me to awake refreshed and eager for the new day. Several pages of the compendium expounded at length on the different mental and physical benefits to be gained from each colour.

This section of the compendium also explained the blue glow that shone from under the bed. It was a night light for those of a nervous disposition who found the mood lighting too intrusive but who were nevertheless worried about sleeping in the pitch dark of a lightless room. It had a switch all of its own and when turned on, it would continue to shine even when nobody was in the room. Presumably this

constant unattended glow would discourage monsters from sneaking in and hiding under the bed from where they could grab your unprepared ankles when you arose refreshed in the morning.

The next section in the compendium told me that the So Hotel had a bar and restaurant in the foyer called What Bar. So What, as it were. The compendium didn't quite nudge me in the ribs and say, "Geddit? Geddit?" at the top of its voice, but I'm sure the next release of the book will fix this obvious bug in the humour module.

Pages 28 and 29 were missing from my compendium and therefore I will never know what delights the rest of

the control panel may have contained. Pages 30 to 40 explained how to use the telephone and listed the international dial codes for every country in the world, including Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria and Lyonesse.

I decided to visit What and drink a beer. As I went to open the door of my room I discovered signs I could hang on the outside. One, printed with the words "So Sleepy" meant that I would not be disturbed. The other, printed with the words "So Untidy" requested that my room be serviced and noted in positively minuscule print that there would be a surcharge of \$15 for doing this. I made sure to leave both of the signs inside my room and I took the lift

to the foyer where the Chinese teenagers were still monopolising the free internet connection.

"They've been using those computers non-stop for a week," said a disgruntled man who was obviously suffering from severe pornography withdrawal symptoms.

"They do look a little dusty," I said. "Presumably Chinese teenagers don't get serviced on the same schedule that the residential rooms don't get serviced."

I wondered whether I should hang a sign on them. So Untidy.

"They shouldn't be allowed to use the machines for all that time," complained the man. "They should be

circumscribed."

"Well, there's no drawback in that," I said.

"What?" He looked a bit shocked.

"Yes, that's So Where I'm going."

So What had no beers on tap and charged me \$8 for a 330ml bottle of New Zealand beer. Even by central city standards this was exorbitantly expensive. No wonder the hotel was So Profitable. I determined not to drink there again and went out in search of cheaper watering holes.

Right next door to the So Hotel was a bar called the Stock Exchange. A sign in the window claimed that it offered a range of tap beers and therefore I went in to explore. It was a themed bar and

the walls were decorated with financial memorabilia such as old Stock Exchange chalk boards and the like. As a concession to modernity, they also had some computer screens displaying ever changing graphs of fluctuations in this, that and the other stock and share option. It soon became abundantly clear to me that the price fluctuations displayed on the screens were directly linked to the till behind the bar. Every time I bought a beer, it rang up a different price; reflecting, as it were, the current situation described by the bouncing graphs. Obviously the owners of the Stock Exchange were as eccentric as the owners of the So Hotel (perhaps they were the same people?),

but at least the beer was cheaper at the Stock Exchange than it was at the So Hotel and it was served in larger quantities as well; always a bonus.

I had not brought my spectacles with me and consequently I was unable to make much sense of the rather blurry displays on the Stock Exchange screens. Invariably I utterly failed to correlate the situation the graphs described with the current beer price. As a result of this, many of my beer buying decisions proved to be sub-optimal. But never mind. *Bibo ergo sum*, as it were.

Over the next few days I explored the possibilities of the mood lighting in my room. Green and yellow did little

for me other than to wake me up at random intervals during the night convinced that the walls were covered with phosphorescent Ganymedeian slime-moulds which were intent on digesting me and spitting out the bones. Red gave the room the glow and ambiance of an Amsterdam brothel and my dreams were visited by nubile Indonesian princesses who sat on the hard plastic chair and knitted elaborately patterned batik jumpers. Sometimes the girls giggled at me.

Purple was the very best colour of all and I used it the most. As long as I didn't turn on the proper shower light (which tended to drown out the colours) I could shower in purple rain

and sing at the top of my voice, pretending to be the artist formerly known as Prince. Then I could carefully clean the soap scum from my body as I indulged in my world famous impression of the artist formerly known as Rinse. And later, having dressed, I would go to So What for breakfast and eat toast and Marmalade (*ob la dee, ob la da*; by the artists formerly known as Quince). Perhaps I could have meatloaf as well; the artist formerly known as Mince.

After a week of New Age colour therapy and simulated sunrises, I was unbelievably soothed. My karma was calm, my chi was chipper, my consciousness was well raised and

spiritually I was at peace with the oneness of the all (or was that the allness of the one? I often get them confused). I felt So Cosmic. However I had no soap left, and I was down to my very last sheet of toilet paper which I'd folded into a sharp triangular point – after all, I do have standards which I endeavour to keep up. My towels were So Damp that I'd been unable to dry myself for two days. I'd tried standing in front of the open fire on the television set after every shower, but it didn't work very well.

"I've had a wonderful time," I said as I checked out. "But I'd So Like to pay the bill and go home."

"No problem. Here's the smallest

hotel bill you've ever been presented with."

I waved goodbye to the Chinese teenagers as I left but they were concentrating So Hard on clicking that they didn't notice.

Three Cat Tails

Tail The First – Porgy

This tail was inspired by (and is dedicated to) Leiber, a very Porgy-like cat who owns my friend Paul Riddell.

There are four ways a cat can sleep with you on the bed, and Porgy has thoroughly explored all of them, trying hard to find his favourite.

The first, and simplest, requires him to stretch himself out over my lower legs, thus effectively pinning me down and preventing me from moving

at all during the night. This also has the amusing side effect of blocking the circulation of blood to my feet so that I wake in the morning, cramped, paralysed and grumpy. Porgy jumps off the bed, refreshed and rejuvenated by his night of comfy slumber. As his weight leaves me, the sudden rush of blood to my toes causes me to scream in exquisite agony, and a violent outbreak of pins and needles threatens to sever my feet from my ankles.

"That's a funny noise," says Porgy. "I hope it won't get in the way of breakfast."

"No, no," I mutter through clenched teeth. "I'll be with you as soon as I regain the power of movement. Just

give me an hour or so."

Sometimes, for variety, Porgy moves to the other end of the bed and stretches out across the top of my head as he performs his world famous impression of a coonskin cap. I lie there like Davy Crockett in a coma while the top of my head keeps Porgy's tummy warm. He likes this a lot, and he purrs loudly.

Human beings radiate a huge amount of heat from the top of their heads. I have discovered by experiment that when Porgy prevents me from disposing of my excess heat in this manner, the temperature soon builds up inside my skull and eventually my brains begin to boil and leak out of my

ears causing strange, nameless stains to appear on the pillow.

"Oh look," cries Porgy with glee, "a midnight snack!" He gobbles up the unexpected windfall.

I'm sure this is the reason why I have found it harder and harder to focus my thoughts in recent years. Porgy has feasted on all my spare brain cells. Now I have exactly enough left to allow me to eat and talk (as long as I don't show off by trying to do them simultaneously), but I no longer have any to spare for more intellectual pursuits.

By far the best way of sleeping with a cat requires the cat to stretch out by your side and place his head close to

yours. This is cosy and snug and cuddly and it generates warm and emotional feelings for both animals involved when the cat purrs.

However Porgy has invented his own variation of this pleasant position. It involves him turning through 180 degrees and placing his bottom in close proximity to my face. This is a much less pleasurable experience, particularly since Porgy is prone to farting in the night. My dreams have taken on a distinctly brown tinge of late, and perfume features in them a lot.

"Get your bottom out of my face!"

"You're supposed to lick it clean," says Porgy, affronted. "That's what a

good parent would do."

"Obviously I'm not a good parent."

"Oh well," Porgy heaves a long suffering sigh. "I suppose I'll just have to do it myself." He proceeds to do exactly that. I watch with mild disgust. I don't want to be reincarnated as a cat. They have to spend far too much time licking their bottoms. It's a rule.

Tail The Second – Bess

The lizard had lost two legs and a tail and seemed unlikely to be able to regenerate them in the near future. It lay bleeding on the kitchen floor. Bess licked her lips and burped reflectively.

"Does it taste like chicken?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It tastes like

lizard."

"Well, go on then," I told her.

"Finish it!"

"I'm not sure I want to," she said and coughed a bit.

"What's wrong? Doesn't it taste very nice?"

Bess coughed again. "I've got a frog in my throat," she said and threw up copiously on to the lino.

"Ribbit!" said the frog as it hopped out of the pool of vomit and hid behind the fridge.

Tail The Third – Harpo

From a distance, Harpo can easily be mistaken for a tree hugging hippy. He's long haired and laid back and he smokes only the highest grade catnip.

Closer investigation soon dispels the illusion.

"Don't let the long hair fool you. I'm not a hippy. I *like* violence!"

I'm very glad that the fashion for wearing dress shorts at work has largely vanished from contemporary New Zealand. My left leg is mostly scabs and scars and I am ashamed to bare it in public. Harpo carries a full complement of concealed weapons and he is an expert in their use.

Superficially they look like claws and teeth, but that's just a cunning disguise. Really they are stealth swords that can rip you to shreds without warning from right across the room.

Sometimes, after a particularly

soothing roll-up of the mellow weed, Harpo will relax enough to allow Robin to stroke him. If I come any where near him, he invariably threatens to terminate me with extreme prejudice, but Robin is allowed to stroke him until she isn't allowed to stroke him any more. Removal of permission to stroke usually involves the spilling of blood One day she called me over in mid-pat.

"Harpo's got dags," she announced. "Have a feel."

I was dubious – I'm fond of my fingers and poking Harpo's matted fur seemed like a good way to have them ripped out by the roots. Nevertheless I ventured a tentative poke. The coat on

one side of his body was an almost solid mass of tangled fur.

"We could try brushing it out," I said dubiously.

"You come anywhere near me with a brush and you'll regret it," announce Harpo. His demon eyes glowed red with fury.

"Time for plan B," said Robin.

"You put him in the travelling cage and I'll phone the vet."

Robin headed for the phone while I dressed myself in an ex-police kevlar stab-proof vest, a riot helmet with a specially strengthened perspex visor, heavy leather leggings and welding gloves. Thus protected, I manoeuvred Harpo into his cage, losing less than a

pint of blood in the process. I'm getting rather good at putting Harpo in his cage.

He howled all the way to the vets.

"Help! I'm being catnapped. Call the police. Help! Help!"

But when we got to the vet, he was an absolute pussycat, bumping heads with the nurse and purring like a train. The nurse was smitten.

"Awwwww! Diddums gorgeous den?"

"You'll pay for this," whispered Harpo in my ear. "Just wait until I get you home." His claws hissed from their sheaths and then withdrew.

Clippers were produced. They buzzed and whirred and great solid

lumps of fur fell from Harpo's side leaving him exposed and curiously piebald.

"Brrr!" he shivered. "It's suddenly got cold in here."

The nurse held a mirror up so that he could approve the short back and sides that had been inflicted on him. Harpo examined his reflection carefully. On one side he was his normal long-haired hippy self. On the other side he was a skinhead with anti-social tattoos and bovver boots.

"You utter, utter bastard!" cried Harpo. "Now I'm going to have to beat myself up!"

Tidings Of Comfort And Joy

Christmas comes but once a year.

Aren't you glad you're not a Christmas?

Well, actually...

Christmas is supposed to be a family event. But when I was a child in 1950s England, the only family members within a hundred miles were my grandparents who lived about fifteen minutes walk away on the other side of the village. So each household took it in turns to host Christmas – one year they'd come to us, the next year we'd go to them.

My grandmother had a huge and

ancient fireplace with a built in oven off to one side. The fire itself was used to heat the hot water cylinder and it also kept the oven nicely warm. This gigantic oven was the only thing in the entire village large enough to contain a full sized turkey and so, once every two years, it would be ritually cleaned and scrubbed and serviced. This generally involved at least one, and possibly two, visits from a chimney sweep. He always came well equipped with oddly flexible brushes with which to poke and prod the oven's mysteriously convoluted pipes and grilles.

When all was deemed ready, the coal fire would be carefully lit and fed regularly with the best of all possible

coal. The turkey would go into the oven early on Christmas eve and cook slowly for at least eighteen hours. Occasionally it would be prodded, and the juices and giblets would be examined with all the care and attention to detail of a haruspex on the threshold of an important divination. Eventually the monster bird was deemed to be cooked to perfection. Time to overeat...

Despite all the careful servicing of the oven, when the bird was eventually brought forth it would reach the table dusted with a light sprinkling of soot. The really lucky diner would also get the occasional crunchy cinder to chew on.

When it was time to go back home, my grandmother would insist that we took the turkey carcass away with us. We always obliged, and then we lived on turkey for most of January. Eventually even the dog refused to eat any more of it, at which point the semi-stinking carcass would finally get thrown away.

When my grandparents came to us the following Christmas, they were always mildly disappointed to find that my mother was serving chicken. My mother claimed that her oven was far too small to accommodate the average turkey. My grandmother was not convinced by this story, and she always seemed mildly miffed that tradition

was being so blatantly violated.

The chickens of fifty years ago were very different birds from the anaemic mass produced assembly line chickens of today. The breast meat was white and succulent and juicy and the flesh on the thighs and drumsticks was very dark, almost black, with a much smoother taste than the breast.

Sophisticated carvers would always enquire:

"White meat or dark?"

Less sophisticated carvers would ask:

"Breast or thigh?"

Extremely unsophisticated carvers would demand:

"You a tit man or a leg man?"

When did the chickens of yesterday metamorphose into the bland, uniformly coloured, plastic tasting birds that we know and love today, and what caused that transformation?

After my grandmother died, the Christmas ritual changed. Now my grandfather came to us every year. He would arrive at lunchtime.

"Hello, Billy," he would say to his son William, my father. "Hello Mu," he would greet Muriel, my mother. "Hello Jumbo," he would say to me.

I don't think my grandfather ever called me by my proper name from the day I was born to the day that he died. He was very upset that I was the first male child in the family for untold

generations who had not been called either Thomas or William. When I was christened Alan, my great-great-grandfather, who was called both Thomas *and* William and who was consequently an extremely important person in the Robson clan, began to spin like a top in his grave. This greatly upset my grandfather and therefore he refused ever to use my real name. I was always Jumbo. I do not know the derivation of the name.

One year, my grandfather arrived at our house clutching a bottle of wine. It was his first ever contribution to the festivities. We were utterly amazed. But he explained that he had found an absolute bargain which he simply

couldn't resist.

"It only cost 2/6d," he told us proudly. "I bought it at the chemist's shop in the village."

Even in the late 1950s, half a crown was an amazingly cheap price for a bottle of wine. Normally you'd probably pay at least 10 shillings. What a bargain!

Of course, it tasted exactly as you would expect a 2/6d bottle of wine bought from the local chemist to taste. It had obviously been manufactured in the back of the shop from drugs that were past their sell by date and it had been cleared and polished by filtering it through damaged condoms. But none of that mattered; it was a bargain!

Once my grandfather had arrived and settled in, lunch would be served. He would chomp his way solemnly through his chicken and then retire to the lounge where he would fall asleep in the most comfortable chair and snore loudly all afternoon. He would wake up at 6.00pm whereupon he would declare, "Well, I have to go now," and then he would leave.

We were never sure why he felt he had to leave just before tea time. The full secret was not revealed until many years later, after he died and his will was read. That was when we discovered that the randy old goat was having an affair with a lady in the village. He left her most of his estate; my father got

almost nothing. Not surprisingly, this annoyed my father no end and I'll swear that if the old bastard hadn't already been dead, my father would have killed him.

And so, every year, when my grandfather left us at tea time on Christmas day, he would trot off to visit his fancy woman where he'd have yet another Christmas meal, and a quick game of hide the cracker to round off his day.

While my grandfather was busy getting the last turkey in the shop nicely warmed up, the rest of us would take the opportunity to indulge in another Christmas tradition. We'd huddle round the television set and

listen to the Queen's Speech. Queenie herself was always nicely dressed, sometimes formally and sometimes in a cosy twinset and pearls. Her hair was freshly permed. There was always a Christmas tree in the background of the picture and Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. She spoke to us with the precisely enunciated glass-etching vowel sounds of the English aristocracy.

"My husband and I..."

I feared for the integrity of our cathode ray tube, but it always survived unscathed. Once Queenie was safely out of the way, the BBC would broadcast a movie. Throughout the 1950s this was always an impossibly

young looking John Wayne in *Stagecoach*, a movie I detested because there was far too much dialogue and no shooting until the very end. As a child, I liked my cowboy movies to have shooting all the way through.

Nowadays it is strange to think that there was once a time when Christmas television did not involve *The Sound Of Music* or *Mary Poppins* because the films hadn't even been made yet. *The Wizard Of Oz* had been made – it was released in 1939, the year the second world war broke out; the two events may not have been unconnected.

However in 1950s England *The Wizard Of Oz* was still doing a roaring trade in the cinema (which is where I first saw

it, *circa* 1958) and it would be many, many years before it eventually appeared on television.

As soon as they decently could, my parents would send me off to bed and my Christmas day would come to an end. Because I'd been up since 4.00am tearing paper off my presents, I was usually ready to go. December 25th was always a very long day for all of us. Every year, my parents made me promise not to wake them up early after Father Christmas had been, and every year I broke that promise. I was always so excited on Christmas eve that I was sure I'd never get to sleep. Periodically my parents would check up on me.

"Has Father Christmas been yet?" I would enquire anxiously.

"No," my father would say severely. "And he won't come while you are still awake."

My parents would force themselves to stay up until about 3.00am to make sure that I was really sound asleep and then they'd put a huge pillow case full of excitingly wrapped presents just inside the door of my bedroom before they went off to bed themselves. In retrospect, I can't help thinking that they brought the full horror of what came next on themselves...

An hour or so after my parents went to bed, I'd wake up, spot the pillow case that Father Christmas had left for

me, completely forget my solemn promise of the night before, and start investigating all the parcels.

Often there would be drums to bang, racing cars to *vroom, vroom* around the bedroom and science kits (batteries included) with which the adventurous boy could make door bells, air raid warning sirens and atomic bombs. One year I got an electric kit which contained an induction coil with two bare metal handles. I connected the batteries, turned the circuit on and grabbed hold of the handles. A massive electric shock threw me out of bed on to the floor, and I screamed.

"Go back to sleep," my father

would yell every year. He was a very naive man, with no understanding of the ways of children. My mother would put on her red flannelette dressing gown and come into my bedroom. Between jaw breaking yawns she would examine my presents with me and agree that, one and all, they were the best presents ever.

Once my father was finally persuaded that further sleep was simply not going to happen, we'd go downstairs for breakfast. Often it was still dark outside and if I was very lucky there might be swirls of snow, with the promise of a snowball fight later in the day. Perhaps I'd get a chance to throw a snowball at my

grandfather.

"I didn't do it, grandpa. It was a boy called Alan."

There would be Christmas Carols on the radio. I'd listen while I ate my toast. What carol do they sing outside German lunatic asylums?

"God rest you jerry mentlemen let nothing you dismay..."

A Storm In A Teacup

Now, a whole decade after the shocking events of 2010, I can finally look back on that frightening year with perfect 2020 hindsight.

I was standing in a park with my friend Flickr when it all began. "I've just finished my first year at university," he said. "I've got millions of great photos. Would you like to see them?"

"No thanks," I said. "It'll probably involve eating too many cookies. How are you liking university?"

"Oh it's great," Flickr said enthusiastically. "There's so much to

do. So many concerts to see, so many clubs to join. The social life is superb."

"But what about your studies?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not doing very well there. My tutor, a man called William Archibald Spooner, insists that I'm not working hard enough. He told me I'd completely tasted three worms, and he's probably right."

Just then a saucer flew in low over the trees and landed, quietly and without any fuss, in a small clearing. I had scarcely recovered from the shock, when a teacup swooped across the trees and landed on top of the saucer. There was a definite *clink* to be heard as it touched down. A small spiral of steam

quivered over the top of the teacup. The handle of a silver spoon could be seen jutting up from the rim.

As Flickr and I stared in astonishment, a door opened in the side of the teacup. An ornate staircase slid down from the doorway and thumped into the ground. Three aliens emerged from the teacup and walked down the stairs. One was a large, silver robot who said, "Klaatu barada nicotine," as he puffed on a huge cigar.

Just behind the robot was a gorgeously proportioned lady who looked exactly like Nigella Lawson.

"Cor," said Flickr, "she's built like a chic brithouse."

"You're doing your Spooner

impression again, aren't you?" I asked.

"Neigh," said my friend Flickr.

"What's that?" He pointed at the third alien that was now scuttling down the staircase.

"It's a weta," I said. "Have you never seen a weta before? It's an insect-like special effect that eats money and excretes movies."

"Oh, I see," he said, looking hard at the aliens as they walked over to us.

Once they got close enough, the Nigella glared at us with her exquisite strabismus and said, "I need butter, cream, and a dozen eggs."

"What for?" I asked.

"Cholesterol inna bun," she said.

"Never mind that," said the robot.

"I need a garage with a good workshop. I'm having problems with the tachyon drive in the teacup."

"I'm not sure I can help you with that," I said. "I don't think we know anything about tachyon drives in this part of the world."

"But tachyon drives are simple," said the robot, sounding quite astonished at my ignorance. "Let me explain it to you. Why did the tachyon cross the road?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Why did the tachyon cross the road?"

"Because it was already on the other side," said the robot. "There, now you know how tachyon drives work. I told you it was simple."

The weta scraped its mandibles together and I got the distinct feeling that it was applauding. It excreted a blue meanie with a ring on a gold chain around its neck.

"Wot? Wot?" asked the blue meanie. Then it put the ring on its willy, dissolved into the air and vanished from sight.

"Can't the Nigella or the weta help with the tachyon drive?" I asked.

"Oh no," said the robot. "The weta only forges pictures, it can't forge metal. And the Nigella was expelled from school before she reached that part of the curriculum."

"Why were you expelled?" I asked the Nigella.

"I was caught cheating in a biology exam," she explained. "The invigilator noticed me counting my breasts."

"Oh, I am sorry," I said sympathetically.

"I don't suppose it really matters," said the Nigella. "I'd never have passed the exam. I ran out of fingers."

I raised a quizzical eyebrow at the robot who shrugged and said, "Well, we are aliens after all!"

"Wow!" said my friend Flickr. "Can I take a photograph of you?" He took an impressively complex looking digital camera out of his pocket and began to focus carefully on the Nigella. "Look at the dead birdie!"

The Nigella looked up and

anxiously scanned the sky. "Where is it?" she asked.

"Don't be so literal," Flickr said. "Take off your clothes."

"Certainly not!" said the Nigella. "I'm not that sort of alien."

"That's all right," said my friend Flickr. "I'm not that sort of photographer!"

"I'm not taking these clothes off," said the Nigella firmly, "and that's final. I'm far too fond of them. They were an absolute bargain, as indeed they would have to be because I bought them at the Warehouse."

While we had been talking, a host of grey clouds had gathered and once they reached critical mass, it began to

rain. The weta frantically clicked its mandibles as the rain hosed down.

"He's not happy," said the robot. "He's rapidly turning into a wetter weta and he doesn't like it. Perhaps you'd better all come and shelter in the teacup."

I held my face up to the rain and let it splash caressingly all over me. "He really doesn't have anything to worry about," I said. "We have very soft water here. It's quite harmless."

"Soft water?" asked the Nigella.

"Yes," I said. "As opposed to hard water. You know – ice?"

"I'm not sure if that's the real meaning of soft and hard water," said the robot dryly.

We all climbed back up the stairs and went into the teacup. We passed through an archway. Embedded in the pillars was a full body scanner that photographed us, fingerprinted us and projected inside and outside pictures of our naked bodies on to a TV screen for all the world to see. As the weta passed through the archway, I got a glorious view of his inner structure.

"Lovely bones!" I said admiringly.

My friend Flickr took frantic photographs of everything he saw. Unfortunately there wasn't much to see. Grey walls sloped up to a high ceiling and small blue lights glowed at random intervals. There was a teapot on a table, and a dark brown brew was steeping in

it.

"Would you care for tea?" asked the robot.

"Yes, please," I said. "Milk and no sugar." Flickr took a photograph of the teapot and nodded his head. The weta tickled one of the glowing blue lights with a mandible and a cupboard opened in the wall. The weta removed some mugs and put them on the table.

"I'll be mother," said the Nigella as she grabbed hold of the pot. But no matter how she struggled and strained, she couldn't pick it up. "You idiot!" she said to the robot. "You brewed the tea with heavy water again!"

"Sorry," said the robot. "Perhaps we'll skip the tea and go straight to the

anal probe. Bend over!" he instructed me and my friend Flickr.

Flickr and I looked at each other. "On the count of three," said Flickr, "run for the stair of the headcase."

"OK." I agreed.

"Three!" said Flickr, and we ran, with the robot, the Nigella and the weta in hot pursuit. As I ran, I noticed a darkness in the wall where a blue light was no longer glowing. I thumped it hard, and it started to glow again. The robot screeched to a halt.

"The tachyon drive!" he said.

"You've fixed it. How can I ever repay you?"

"You could let us go home," I suggested. "And then you could fly

away and never bother us again."

"Of course," said the robot, and the Nigella and the weta concurred.

My friend Flickr and I stood in the park and watched the teacup take off and fly away. Soon afterwards, the saucer set off after it in hot pursuit.

"As my tutor would say," remarked my friend Flickr thoughtfully, "this story needs to end with a good lunch pine."

"Just like that," I agreed.

Looking Back In Anger

When you read this I will be a year older than I was when I wrote it. And the birthday I'll be celebrating is a very important one. I'll be twice as old as the minimum age of people you can trust.

When I was a youth, we had a saying: you should never trust anyone over thirty. We all knew that the old people, the generations that preceded us, had screwed things up. They didn't care about the state of the world; they were too inward looking, too self-obsessed and too selfish. They'd never

had it so good – the Prime Minister told them that in 1957, so they knew it was true. And the sad thing was that once upon a time they'd been just like us, only somehow, as the years passed, they seemed to have forgotten what it used to be like.

Eerie music and wavy lines...

In England in the 1930s, all right thinking students were thinking left. As Europe descended into fascism, the political left wing seemed like the only remaining hope for the freedom of the world. At its core was an idealism that promoted the greatest good of the greatest number. It's very hard to resist a seductive mantra like "From each according to his abilities, to each

according to his needs." People who had never worked in their lives made speeches in support of the working class.

There was a very romantic war going on just across the channel and a significantly large number of intellectual Englishmen put their principles in their pockets and, thus armed, went over to Spain to fight the good fight against Franco. Some of them survived; an even smaller number survived with their ideals intact.

Universities are supposed to be hotbeds of intellectual discussion. It's one of their main reasons for existing. In the 1930s, the sense of commitment to idealism that arose in the student

body stopped being just an intellectual exercise. It trickled over into reality and it became a lifestyle choice. Given the *zeitgeist*, it's not hard to understand why the KGB found it so easy to recruit Burgess, Maclean, Philby and Blunt. But it's much less easy to understand why those people's commitment to the Soviets lasted a lifetime. Experience suggests that all too often youthful idealism degenerates into worldly cynicism. Somebody (good guesses are Chesterton, Churchill or Shaw but nobody is really sure) once said: "If a man is not a socialist when he is 20 he has no heart. If he is still a socialist when he is 40, he has no head."

But all too many people of that

generation proved that cynical observation to be wrong. Sometimes idealism can survive and even flourish. It's a hopeful sign.

At the same time, across the pond, America was also experimenting with radicalism at both the left and right ends of the political spectrum – though unlike England, the impetus for it was not coming from the universities. The depression hit America much harder than any other country. It affected everyone in every class of society and it was a great wake up call. There was a general acceptance on all sides that Something Needed To Be Done! Furthermore, the potential revolutionaries had two brand new

tools with which to promulgate their propaganda: radio and the mimeograph, tools which opened the door to almost every household in the country. By the mid 1930s a considerable number of ordinary Americans were at least nominally communist and the left wing was stronger than it had ever been before.

The journalist John Reed had actually witnessed the 1917 Russian Revolution and he came home fired with enthusiasm for the promise of Soviet style socialism. Reed and his colleagues preached their message so successfully that it even began to seem as though America too might have a revolution of its own.

Reed died of typhus in Moscow in 1920 and the Soviets gave him a hero's funeral. He was buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis where he was later joined by Stalin, and similar luminaries. Even in death, he remained an influential figurehead in radical American politics. In 1981, Warren Beatty played the part of John Reed in a Hollywood biopic.

Meanwhile, at the other extreme, big business was pushing hard towards the right and by 1935, the fascist influence was making huge progress thanks largely to the efforts of Henry Ford and other business magnates who thought that what Hitler was doing with Germany was just absolutely the cat's

pyjamas.

Indeed, by the beginning of World War II, the Ford Motor Company was actually manufacturing tanks for the German Army in the same Detroit factories that it was using for making civilian vehicles for sale to Americans. At one point, Ford even threatened to shut down his company's contributions to the war effort if he wasn't allowed to continue to help his best friend Adolf as well.

There were good reasons why Woodie Guthrie used his guitar to kill fascists. A lot of them needed killing.

The furore died down in England in the 1940s and 1950s. The young people

of those decades seemed to shun intellectual discussion. There was a hardness in them and anyway, their world lacked any deep causes with which to get involved (except for a small number of duffle coats who pursued a campaign for nuclear disarmament). By and large, students just went back to just being students again, doing the normal student things. They got drunk and stole policemen's helmets. They lived what were often shallow and superficial lives under the twin stimuli of post-war austerity, and the grim sword of Damocles of National Service that hung over everyone's head. Have fun while you still can was the message of the day.

The time you have left to you is all too short. Screw you Jack, I'm alright. Time to party! They were grim, grey years, intensely conservative, and everyone was very determined to preserve a status quo that almost nobody felt able to argue against.

In 1950s America, a weak and incompetent president handed control of the country over to the twin tyrannies of Hoover and McCarthy. Even the slightest trace of non-conformity was labelled communist and un-American and it was ruthlessly suppressed. Lives were, quite literally, ruined and lost. The radical left essentially vanished as the country dived back into its hole and pulled the

hole in after itself. Like the British, the Americans had an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo again. They knew they were living in the best of all possible worlds.

Eerie music and wavy lines...

But by the late 1960s, the cracks were starting to show. My generation of students was re-opening the debate about social and political values and the status quo was starting to look flimsy. This time the driving force of the movement was centred in America. There was pressure from above sparked by the perceived corruption of the people in charge of the government and there was pressure from below as the disenfranchised grew more and more

dissatisfied with their lot. Something had to give.

Like the students of the 1930s, we had a foreign war to measure ourselves against, but there was nothing romantic about Vietnam and the daily images on our television screens were sickening. It began to seem to us as if the political left wing was the only one that cared at all about the people who were suffering in South East Asia. We questioned the motives of the movers and the shakers of the world. Their specious self-justifications were patently absurd. Indeed, we later learned that the event which more than anything else persuaded America to escalate the war (the so-called Gulf Of Tonkin incident)

never even took place! Why did so many people have to die so cruelly for something that had never happened, in pursuit of dubious political aims? Did nobody care about all those lives? It seemed not.

Kennedy and Johnson and (later) Nixon were cynical men with selfish agendas that had to be paid for in blood. They seemed to take a perverse joy in the perceived necessity of their actions. There was something corrupt in Camelot and the stink of it was foul in our nostrils.

The revolution began in Berkeley as so many things did in those days, but it quickly spread throughout the country and throughout the Western

world. And while the protest against the Vietnam war was always a rallying cry for the movement, it also took to other causes, not least the vicious racial apartheid that split American society in two.

And so Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin wrote angry books and they led protest marches to keep their philosophy in the public mind. The Weathermen, extremely articulate and charismatic radicals with a surprising and very refreshing sense of humour, amused themselves by blowing up government buildings and banks in celebration of inexcusable political and humanitarian screw ups such as the invasion of Laos and the bombing of

Hanoi. Meanwhile the Black Panthers threatened armed revolution and they hung around on street corners looking menacing in their dark glasses and berets.

America was teetering on the edge of anarchy.

We had no direct involvement in any of this in England. There were no British troops in Vietnam (that's not quite true, but it's close enough to the truth not to matter) and, compared to America, we had no racial problems at all and no tradition of discrimination – at least not enshrined in legislation. America had racially divisive laws, racially segregated schools, restaurants, buses, trains and toilets.

We had no such laws. But nevertheless it was clear to me and to the majority of my contemporaries that the anti-war movement and the agitation for social equality without racism were ideals greatly to be desired.

And so we marched and we picketed and we sat down in support of our left pondian colleagues. We stole Abbie Hoffman's book, just like he told us to. Did we actually make any difference? I don't know, but I like to think that we did.

And then, for a short while, it seemed that we had won. The war ended, civil rights legislation was passed. The movement died. Jerry Rubin became a stockbroker and one of

the Weathermen bought a bar in New York and won a pile of money on a television quiz show. They all became part of the establishment; they all became the kind of people they'd spent their lives telling us not to trust.

Humph!

But worse than that – students stopped thinking again. The left wing vanished from the intellectual world again; criticism and the questioning of the people in charge simply stopped happening. A black curtain descended over the radical freaks on both sides of the pond, and they disappeared from view.

Eerie lines and wavy music...

There has been a very visible

change in the attitude of students on campus. Their motivations for coming to university in the first place are very different from the motivations that I had. Students today generally study subjects that they hope will help to get them a career. Often they have very little interest in the ideas that are presented to them. Study is regarded as only a means to a very practical and rather short sighted end: employment.

I find this attitude impossible to understand – I went to university so that I could postpone the evil day of having to get a job for a few more years, and the only reason I studied the subject I was majoring in was because I found it interesting, not because I felt it

would help in the employment rat race. Indeed, as it happened, I ended up making a career in an area that had no connection whatsoever with my degree speciality. I simply cannot imagine the soul searing boredom that must accompany the in-depth study of things that are intrinsically dull to the student, but nevertheless today that seems to be the norm.

And because the central goal is (ultimately) to score a career based on good grades, the students tend to pursue those grades not through intellectual appreciation of the subject (they don't care enough about it for that) but by being spoon fed "right answers" (whatever that means) from

their tutors. A friend of mine who lectures at university is almost in despair at the impossibility of getting any original ideas out of his students. Again and again and again they ask him what he wants them to say in their assignments. They want him to tell them the answers so that they can write them down in the papers they present, and no matter how many times he tells them that he wants them to express their own opinions (and justify them, of course) they simply refuse to do so – mainly, I suspect, because they don't have any opinions; the subjects are too dull to excite their brains.

Assuming that they actually have any brains, of course.

These people are supposed to be the intellectual elite (how else can you get into university, for goodness sake). Nevertheless the stultification engendered by the lack of involvement in their chosen subjects seems to extend into all other fields of endeavour as well. Their brains just turn off no matter what the subject in front of them. They seem to have a basic lack of curiosity about the world and a total inability to comprehend the things that make it tick. When all your depth is in shallow places, you lose track of the complexity of real life; you lose the ability to follow (sometimes convoluted) arguments about its workings and so you cannot draw

conclusions of your own. You look for the right answers from an authority figure instead and if you get them, all you then have to do is regurgitate them when challenged.

Thinking hurts. So let someone else do it for you. That way you avoid the pain. Eventually you simply stop thinking altogether and, because you are no longer using the skill, it atrophies, withers and dies.

I would be willing to bet that a significantly large number of the students at university today are (for example) quite unable to understand the political arguments put forward in newspaper editorials – indeed they probably don't even know what an

editorial is, because they never read newspapers anyway! And not only can they not understand such things, they don't really care about them either.

Too hard!

TL;DR!

For those of you who aren't up to date with these things, the initials TL;DR stand for "Too Long; Didn't Read" and it's a standard comment posted by internauts who exhibit all the attention span of a wood louse whenever they are faced with any piece of prose longer than a couple of sentences. None of them would even attempt to read this essay that you are reading now, for example. And that intellectual laziness is typically

symptomatic of the things I am discussing here.

The students drift, blown hither and yon by winds of circumstance. They don't feel deeply about anything substantial; the war in Iraq, global warming, the appalling human rights violations committed every day by both the American and British governments – these things just pass them by. They probably don't even know that the events are taking place, and they certainly don't care. This general dumbing down of their universe of discourse means that, quite routinely, they ignore things that would have made my generation riot in the streets.

And so the movers and the shakers of the world now find themselves in a position where they can just walk all over everybody without recrimination, no matter how egregiously they sin. They feed the people shit and sugar, and the people lie back and eat it; they don't seem to know any better.

They make me despair.

Today I am one of the old farts.

When my generation were young we asked to be given the world so that we could fix all the broken bits. Well – time passed and they gave us the world, but we didn't fix it. Instead we screwed it up just as badly as the generation that we once condemned for that very sin. So why aren't the youth of today

condemning us for it? Why aren't they actively trying to get rid of us as they have every right to do?

Because they are too dumb to realise just how badly we screwed them over and just what a mess they will inherit when their own time comes.

Call me a cynic if you like, but today I'd change just one word in the mantra that guided my generation. Today, in my opinion, you should never trust anyone under thirty.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank James Finley, a work colleague with whom I had several very interesting and stimulating conversations which sparked the train of thought that led to this essay.

Thanks also to Paul Riddell who showed me that American Radical Politics was not the oxymoron I'd always thought it to be.

This is one of the hardest things I've ever written and I've been struggling with it for several months. I shudder to think how many drafts it has gone through. Both James and Paul contributed a lot to the final structure, but of course I take full responsibility for any errors of fact that may remain and the (sometimes outrageous) opinions expressed here are purely my own.

Alan And The Bureaucrats

It was time to re-register my car and so, being a creature of habit, I did what I do every year and I wandered down to the closest office of the Automobile Association.

I pushed open the door. There seemed to be a lot of resistance, which I found puzzling, but once I got through the door I quickly found the reason. The office was absolutely seething with people. I've never seen such a crowd concentrated in one small office before. Worried looking people dressed in AA uniforms scurried hither

and you behind the counter. There was a constant buzz of conversation, punctuated by the clack of keyboards, the clicking of mice and the occasional very rude word.

Three positions at the counter proclaimed that you could renew your drivers license at them, should you be so inclined. The crush of people around these was the thickest in the room. Another position claimed to deal with AA Membership Enquiries. The queue here was the shortest, for very long values of short of course. The final position at the counter had a sign which declared that it dealt with Vehicle Registration. Just what I needed. Unfortunately it also boasted a large,

emphatic notice which said: Closed!

I joined the queue for AA Membership Enquiries, on the grounds that it only had eighty people in it and, after about an aeon and a half, I reached the counter and obtained the attention of the lady sitting behind it.

"Can I do this here?" I asked, flourishing my car re-registration documents.

"Of course you can," she said. "But you'll have to wait a few minutes. My shift has come to an end and I need to log off from the computer. When I've done that, my colleague will log on and then she'll be happy to deal with you."

"Righto," I said, having little choice in the matter. And then I watched in

fascination as she logged off from her computer. I've never seen any process quite so complicated in my life before. Her eyes flicked around her screen, top to bottom, left to right, corner to corner. She typed furiously on her keyboard, pausing every so often to click on things with her mouse. I couldn't see the screen; I have no idea what prompts she was responding to, but it required huge concentration from her (the tip of her tongue was poking out of the side of her mouth; always a sure sign of deep thought). Eventually, after about five minutes of non-stop typing, she heaved a huge sigh of relief, sat back in her chair and smiled at me.

"My colleague will be with you soon," she said and left, hopefully to drink a reviving cup of coffee. I'm sure she needed it.

Her colleague sat down in the recently vacated chair. "I'll deal with you in a moment," she said, somewhat ominously. And then the whole process went in reverse as she logged on. Eventually, after typing in her entire autobiography from age 3 until 10.00am this morning, the system grudgingly decided that she really was who she claimed to be, and it allowed her access. She picked up my form, keyed in a few details and then asked, "How are you paying for this?"

I proffered an eftpos card.

"Thank you," she said. "Please swipe your card."

I swiped my card. Nothing happened.

"Other way round," she said.

I turned the card round and swiped again. Nothing happened.

"No," said the lady. "The *other* other way round."

I tried again. Nothing.

"You do it," I said, handing her the card. "All these machines swipe in different ways. I can never get them right."

She rotated my card through the fourth dimension, turned it sideways and swiped it.

"PIN Number?" demanded the

tautologous machine. I supplied the number.

"Accepted," said the machine smugly, and I was several hundred dollars poorer, just like that.

"I'll just print out the docket for displaying on your windshield," said the lady, giving a delicate click with her mouse. A printer at the other end of the office graunched into life and the lady left to get my docket. She came back with a long face and an even longer docket.

"Something's gone wrong," she said gloomily, proffering the docket.

The printer was obviously horribly misaligned – the docket had printed across the perforations that separated

two stationery items, thereby ruining them both. Furthermore, about half an inch of the left hand side of the docket was missing, the print heads having failed to make any contact with the form at all.

"Two for the price of one?" asked the lady hopefully.

"I don't think so," I said.

"I'll try again."

She went and opened the printer, poked something a bit half-heartedly, wiggled a wiggly bit and then came back and clicked the mouse. The printer sprang into life again, but the result was, if possible, even worse than before. Again it had used up two forms and most of the left hand side was still

absent without leave. But this time the large black letters and numbers were missing several vital aspects and were almost illegible. They were also very smeary as if phantom fingers had brushed across the ink before it was dry.

"I think we'll have to put in a support call to IT," said the lady. "Can we phone you when it's fixed?"

"Well, not really," I said. "Isn't there any other alternative?"

"You could go to the Post Office," she said doubtfully. "Show them the receipt and explain what happened. I'm sure they'll print one out for you."

I heaved a sigh, but she dodged and it missed her and fell on to the floor,

waiting for someone unwary to trip over it. I took my receipt and forced my way out through the struggling hordes (the number of people in the office seemed to have doubled since I'd arrived nearly two hours before).

The Post Office was about five minutes walk away. It was utterly deserted. Obviously today the AA office was the trendy place to be. The ladies behind the counter were knitting and gossiping to each other. I approached one of them, showed my receipt and explained what had happened. She started to laugh.

"Hey Alice," she said to the lady next to her, "the AA vehicle registration printer has broken down

again."

"Again?" said Alice incredulously. "That's the third time this week. What do they do over there? Kick it every time they walk past?"

"I don't know," said my lady, "but I think we'd better brace ourselves for a mad rush as they send everybody over here. Gird your knitting, girls. We might be busy soon."

She glanced cursorily at my receipt. "I'll just log on," she said. "We've been very quiet today and I haven't logged on yet."

Logging on took less than ten seconds. Obviously the Post Office system had a much less rigorous authentication mechanism than the

corresponding AA system. Then the lady keyed in a code from my receipt, wandered over to the printer in the corner and came back with a perfectly printed docket. The whole exercise took less than a minute from woe to go.

"There you are, dear," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "Next year I think I'll cut out the middle man and come straight here."

"We'll see you then," said the lady and she went back to her knitting.

* * * * *

I needed a new passport so I went to the Department Of Internal Affairs which is on the third floor of a building with a lift that takes nearly twenty

minutes to arrive when summoned.
Perhaps it was having a tea break.

A dark brown man wearing a dark brown suit sat behind a dark brown desk with a dark brown notice on it that said: Enquiries.

"Can I help you sir?" he Enquired in a dark brown voice.

"I need to renew my passport," I explained.

"Here." He handed me a dark brown form. "Fill this in and bring it back with two photographs. Remember not to smile when you have the picture taken."

I followed his instructions to the letter and returned a few days later with my completed form. I was told to

wait for my name to be called. I sat down and watched various people being interrogated by bureaucrats. This involved much enthusiastic checking of forms and the pounding of the forms to death with rubber stamps. Eventually the customers slunk away, much subdued. Finally my name was called and I took my form up to the window. The nice lady smiled.

"Hello," she said. "How can I help you?"

I presented my form and photographs and she scrutinised them with a dark brown scroot. She checked a couple of answers with me and then picked up the largest stamp I've ever seen, inked it carefully and thumped it

fiercely on the front of the form. When she removed the stamp, I could see the large friendly letters "Routine" all across my paperwork and I felt a great sense of relief. There are two things that guarantee severe problems in your immediate future. One is to hear your doctor say, "Hmm. I've never seen one of *those* before." and the other is to have a civil servant catch you out in any non-routine exercise...

While the lady had been checking my form, I couldn't help overhearing some of the conversation that was happening one window down from mine.

"I accidentally ticked the wrong box on the form," said a man. "And

now he has three surnames and no first names. Can we fix that please? He's being teased about it at school."

"Oh dear," said the clerk. "Well, you could change his name by deed poll. It takes a long time and it costs a lot of money."

"But it was an accident. I ticked the wrong box by mistake. Can't we just rearrange the information in your records?" The man was almost crying with frustration.

"Oh, it's not as simple as that," said the clerk. And then she uttered the dreaded words, "It's not routine."

"He's got three surnames," wailed the man. "Nobody has three surnames. Can't you tell it was just an honest

mistake?"

I left him to his dilemma and went home to await my new passport.

Several days later it arrived. It's a deep sexy black document with half a fern outlined down one side. When you open it up, you find a very thick page stuffed full of biometric magic.

Written on this page in stern dark brown letters is a dire warning to Customs and Immigration officials not to stamp visas on it. Presumably dreadful penalties will be imposed on them should they happen to chip the chip embedded in this page's folds.

According to the book of words that came with the passport, there is a radio frequency ID (RFID) chip lurking in

there. Consequently, whenever I decide to travel to Australia, as soon as I walk into the airport, all the machines will immediately say, "Hello, Alan – we've been waiting for you. Come in, come in." and I will be ushered past glaring officials who are powerless to interfere. Protected by the subtle power of biometrics, I will stroll off again at the other end with nobody to say me nay.

I really can't wait to try it out.

In order to grant me this magical travel ability, the New Zealand Government has doubled the price of the passport and halved its lifetime. I will have to fill in another dark brown form in only five short years.

Humph!

The Garden City - So Called

I've been in Christchurch, staying at the So Hotel again. You will be pleased to know that it has lost none of its eccentricity. Indeed, it has gained some. Being clean and green and proud of its image, the hotel now offers free charging for electric cars, and it has an electric car proudly on display in the foyer in order to demonstrate solidarity with the cause. The car itself is painted a delightful shade of pink (perhaps pink is the new green). Some days the car is parked by the lifts and some days it is parked in the entranceway. And

doubtless it is always fully charged.

The rooms themselves are still an utter delight. Each evening as I went to bed I was soothed to sleep under the gentle glow of a coloured night light; red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. What a choice to be presented with! I experimented with them all, and all were equally beneficial.

The in-room compendium has been severely edited since last I stayed in the hotel. What used to be nearly 50 pages of new age waffle interspersed with technical instructions about how to use the console beside the bed has now been reduced to a mere 20 pages of new age waffle with very few technical instructions in it at all. Truly,

it has become So Brief. As a consequence, the hi-tech control unit beside the bed is now an enormous mystery to each and every guest. It has four buttons engraved with kabbalistic runes, three switches, two rotating control knobs a digital display, a telephone handset, three more buttons that I've only just noticed, a partridge, a pear tree and a Sew Ing Machine. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that given the right combination of twists, pulls and pushes, the console would manufacture an electric car for me which I could then charge for free if only I could work out how to drive it down four flights of stairs to the reception desk. Like daleks, electric

cars don't do stairs very well. So Sad.

The compendium also assured me that simulating the passing of an entire day by putting the light over the bed into sun mode would be an enormously therapeutic experience. Unfortunately the only remotely applicable instruction told me simply to press the up arrow key on the console. Since there was no up arrow key on the console, I was left helpless. I never did work out how to put my room into sun mode which is a shame – I'm sure that at the end of a tiring day I would have greatly benefited from a little blast of high energy gamma rays while I bathed in the jets of plasma emitted by the miniature nuclear fusion plant

concealed in the bed head light fitting.

One page of the compendium was written in the enigmatic and So Secret alphabet of the planet Rot13. Upon reading this page I discovered that the area outside the hotel was colloquially known as Soho. People were encouraged to walk up and down by themselves so that they could claim they were walking Solo. In a small garden just by the hotel, guests could Sow Seeds. Fb Gurer!

Every day as I walked from the So Hotel to the office, I passed a shop called NOOD. The acronym stands for New Objects Of Desire. There's no doubt at all that the things the shop sells are objects, and I'm perfectly

willing to believe that they are new. However they evoked no feelings of desire in my breast; quite the reverse in fact. I found them to be only So So.

NOOD, being trendy, obviously uses its position at the cutting edge of fashion and taste as an excuse to sell tat at exorbitant prices. On display in the window is a chair with a stainless steel frame and two red cushions that form the back and the seat. It is a bargain for only \$699. A similar stainless steel chair frame has no cushions on it at all, just an animal pattern fabric stretched tightly over the frame. It looks extremely uncomfortable, and it could be yours for a mere \$1199.

You could probably buy them both as kits from Ikea or the Warehouse for at least \$50 without feeling too ripped off...

During the whole week that I stayed in Christchurch, NOOD remained entirely bereft of customers – or noodists as it So Coyly called its clientele in the advertising leaflets available from a small pouch stuck on the shop window. I found the daily emptiness of NOOD So Unsurprising.

Christchurch is a city of constant surprises. As I walked across the square on Sunday evening I was overtaken by a large striding man with his hair gathered into a pony tail that hung down below his waist. Perched on

his shoulder was a cockatiel (*Nymphicus Hollandicus*) who was admiring the world and being admired in his turn by all the Japanese tourists who were thronging the square. There was much pointing, much camera clicking, much giggling, and a lot of oohing and ahing. The cockatiel raised his crest and bowed to his subjects, accepting their praise as his just due. The man paid no attention to any of this and strode silently across the square. When he reached the other side he vanished from view down a small and narrow alley. I waved – So Long.

I had a clear view of the square from the window of my office, and on

Wednesday the most perfect rainbow I've ever seen arched across the city. The colours were strong and well defined; it looked like all of the night lights in my hotel room had turned themselves on at once and smeared themselves over the sky. Distinct though the colours were, I still couldn't separate indigo from violet – I've never been able to do that; perhaps it's a myth that they both exist, or perhaps Isaac Newton just had funny eyes. Being hit on the head by an apple can do that to you, particularly if it's an iPad with sharp corners. So Juicy.

The rainbow was So Strong and So Perfect that I was absolutely certain I could see the pot of gold at the end of

it. I went looking for the gold later, but it wasn't there any more. Obviously somebody else got there before me.

I love Christchurch; it's the oddest city I've ever seen. So To Speak.

In Which We Discover A New Way Of Reading

Book.

Ah yes! I know what one of those is. I remember reading a book once, long ago. It was fun. Book – the word trips nicely off the tongue. It's almost as neat a word as the object itself. No other word quite works.

Koob.

Not quite right, let's try again. How about ookb? No – too Pratchettian as well as being hard to say. Those two terminal consonants just don't go

together. You'll get a tooth rupture trying to pronounce them properly.

Obok.

No. That sounds too much like an Irish-Chinese vegetable. Obok choy and monosodium glutamate for tea tonight.

Kobo.

That's it!

Whitcoulls sell books. And they also sell Kobos. I bought one.

A Kobo is a rather simple-minded gadget for reading electronic books or ebooks as they are popularly known. An ebook is a computer file in a special format – there are various different ebook formats but one of the more popular ones is the epub format, and

that's the one the Kobo uses.

The Kobo itself is about the size of a paperback book, though it is much slimmer, less than a quarter of an inch thick. It's very light and easy to hold and the screen is easy to read; there's no glare to irritate the eyes. It's a design quite elegant in its simplicity.

However as a geeky gadget it does have some distinct drawbacks, not least among which is the fact that almost everything the manufacturer tells you about the thing in the instruction booklet and on the Kobo web site is completely incorrect. Oh there are some nuggets of truth in the dross of the documentation. But mostly the documentation is a misleading,

steaming pile of very unhelpful nonsense, which makes it rather difficult to come properly to grips with the device.

For example, the Kobo comes loaded with 100 "classic books" which appear to have been chosen by the simple process of waving a random number generator over the Project Gutenberg database. The documentation on the Kobo web site insists that these pre-loaded books cannot be deleted and assures anyone who cares that the Kobo engineers are working really, really hard, day and night, on the problem, and there might be a software update in a few months which will implement this feature.

It took me less than an hour of poking around in the guts of the Kobo to work out how to delete the pre-loaded books. Does that mean I'm significantly smarter than the entire team of Kobo engineers? I doubt that. It is much more likely to mean that, for mysterious reasons of their own, the Kobo engineers don't *want* anyone to delete the pre-loaded books and so they insist that it simply can't be done. This arrogant attitude doesn't fill me with confidence – any organisation that begins life by treating its customers like mushrooms (keep them in the dark and feed them lots of bullshit) probably isn't going to be around in the world for very long. So I strongly suspect that we

will never see an upgraded, new model Kobo. The company simply won't survive long enough to address the shortcomings in its product unless it changes its "mummy-knows-best" stance on customer relations.

Anyway – let's begin my Kobo adventure at the beginning when I unpacked my shiny new ebook reader and read the accompanying quick start instruction leaflet. This leaflet is the only printed documentation supplied with the gadget. It told me to plug my new Kobo into my PC and strongly implied that when I did this for the first time a registration program would start to run. So I plugged the Kobo in and waited for the program to appear.

Nothing happened. However the Kobo did show up on my computer as an extra disk drive and when I browsed around the files on it I eventually found the registration program lurking in a dark corner. So I loaded the program and ran it.

The program took me straight to the Whitcoulls web site and asked me to create an account so that I could spend lots of money on ebooks (something I have no intention of doing). The program also recorded information about me on the Kobo itself and, presumably, on a database at Whitcoulls. This information is used to generate the key that allows me to read Digital Rights Management (DRM)

protected books on my device. DRM protected books are encrypted files which can only be decrypted and read by people who possess the proper key. If I purchase such a book, it is encrypted with my key and only I can read it. If I were to give a copy of the file to someone else, they would not be able to read it because their key is different from mine. At least that's the theory. In practice there are ways around this limitation, but frankly it's all too much of a hassle, and I can't be bothered with it. And quite apart from the practicalities involved, I have philosophical objections to DRM protected material anyway. Consequently I will not be reading any

DRM protected books on my Kobo.

The only file formats the Kobo lets you read are epub and PDF. There is no support at all for common formats such as plain text or RTF files which, I gather, other ebook readers like the Kindle do support. This is mildly irritating. It is quite easy to convert text files and RTF files into epub format if you know what you are doing; but it's an annoying extra step which just adds to the irritation engendered by the device. Again, the Kobo engineers are reportedly working day and night to solve this "problem" so that they can start to support plain text and RTF files on the device. I'm getting more and more sceptical about the

technical skills of the Kobo engineers. These kinds of files have a *much* simpler structure than the already supported PDF and epub files. I would have expected the Kobo engineers to have tackled them first, before they began to consider how to work with the more complicated formats on the grounds that you shouldn't try and run before you learn how to walk. But obviously I know nothing about how such things are developed. Nowadays they do things quite differently from the way they were done when I made my living as a developer. I don't think I could ever get a job as a Kobo engineer...

The first time I started to read

something on the Kobo, I quickly came to realize that the reading software itself is extraordinarily primitive – there are only two ways to move around in an epub format book. You can go through it page by page, or you can jump straight to a chapter chosen from the table of contents and then start paging again. It would be nice to be able to jump to a given page number, but you can't. It would be nice to be able to search for words and phrases in the book, but you can't. And if you happen to have an ebook that doesn't have a table of contents (yes, they do exist) you are completely screwed because all that is left is the painfully slow paging method.

Reading a book serially like this is, of course, the way fiction is generally read. However non-fiction books, particularly reference books and text books, are best read non-serially with constant jumps to and from given pages (or even, in some cases, paragraphs within a page). Since this simply cannot be done in any way, shape or form on the Kobo, the device is utterly useless for carrying reference material around on. I consider this to be a huge drawback. Doubtless the Kobo engineers are working tirelessly day and night to solve the problem...

Not only is the reading software extremely crude and primitive, it is also rather bug-ridden. On more than

one occasion it has locked up solid on me leaving me no option but to reset the device and start again.

Furthermore, you are supposed to be able to adjust the font size of epub books on the fly, and mostly (to be fair) you can. However there are some epub format files on which the Kobo simply refuses to resize the fonts at all, for no readily apparent reason. Again, the Kobo engineers have acknowledged that the bug exists and are working day and night to solve it even as we speak...

If you are willing to jump through a lot of processing hoops, it is possible to manipulate such a fixed font document on your PC in such a way that the Kobo will be able to resize the font after you

load the book back onto it. But the method will not work on DRM protected material. Another reason, perhaps, for not buying DRM protected material in the first place. Doubtless the Kobo engineers have this problem well in hand as a high priority on their twenty four hour day development schedule.

Support for PDF files is even more primitive and is utterly pathetic. You can't adjust the font size other than by choosing to magnify the whole document and when you do that, it no longer fits on the screen properly. So if you happen to have a PDF document with an unreadably small font, you are completely screwed again. Furthermore

you cannot jump around a PDF document at all. The software ignores the PDF document index and the only available navigation method is to go page by slow page through the whole book from start to finish. Software does exist to convert PDF files into epub files, but the results are variable and are generally unsatisfactory. So if you want to read a PDF file on your Kobo, mostly you are just screwed again.

Books that you are currently reading are put into the Kobo's "I'm Reading" list. This list quickly fills up (and so becomes very slow to navigate) as you glance through some book or other just to see if you are in the mood

to read it. And once a book appears on the reading list there is absolutely no way to remove it again (according to the Kobo engineers) without reading the whole thing all the way through. Or, more accurately, you have to go to the last chapter and then slowly and painfully page through it to the end. This is an enormous nuisance, particularly for books which have 100 pages in the last chapter!

The User Guide says that you can cull the reading list by using the desktop software that you originally registered the device with, but that's a bare faced lie; you can't. If the book is one you loaded onto the Kobo yourself (as opposed to one that you bought

from the web site), you can remove it from the list by deleting the book completely from the reader, but that strikes me as being more than a little bit draconian, and decidedly inelegant to boot. But I'm absolutely certain that the Kobo engineers are working night and day to fix the problem.

As it happens, after a lot more poking around inside the beast, I have beaten the Kobo engineers at their own game and I have figured out how to remove items from the list properly. Unfortunately the procedure involves connecting the Kobo to a computer and doing deep magic on its internal database. This is so tedious, laborious and error prone (if you have clumsy

fingers that make unnoticed typos), that it probably isn't worth while. There might be a way to automate it; but if there is, I haven't found it yet. I will work on it day and night, just like a real Kobo engineer.

I spent the first few days after I got the Kobo learning everything I could about the epub format. Then I converted the two volumes of **Trimmings From The Triffid's Beard** into epub books and loaded them on to the Kobo. Oddly, I couldn't read them - - the Kobo claimed that the content was locked and it refused to display the books. A lot of googling later, I discovered that the Kobo assumes that any book with an apostrophe in the title

has locked content. All I had to do was remove the apostrophe and then I could read the book in all its glory! That is just plain dumb – what were the Kobo engineers thinking of when they implemented that feature? Perhaps they were just very tired from their endless work schedule and let that little bug slip through unnoticed.

So what will I use the Kobo for? I certainly won't be buying any DRM ebooks to read on it. Consequently the only books on my Kobo will be epub documents that I have created myself from my own computer files and free books that I have found on the internet. Fortunately there are heaps of those available. I've already got a lot of

Henry Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs novels from Project Gutenberg, for example. So I'm sure my Kobo will get a lot of use. But in its current state of development, it is not going to replace proper, made out of paper books in my affections. My Kobo is strictly for public domain / creative commons material that is otherwise unavailable. I hope that doesn't upset the Kobo engineers too much.

iThought iSaw A Shiny

It was iPad day in New Zealand so iWent to Dick Smith to consult with a techxspert. The man himself was there demonstrating away like mad. The crowd was iV people wide and iX people deep. Greasy fingers, toes and the occasional willy poked the display models and, in response, pretty icons zinged back and forth on smeary screens. There was a distinct odour of techno-lust in the atmosphere. Or possibly it was sweaty feet.

"iWant one," iSaid.

"WiFi by itself or WiFi and 3G

network?" asked Dick Smith.

"What's the difference?"

"WiFi connects to the internet through a wireless router such as the one you absolutely must have at home if you want to get any use at all out of the iPad, and 3G connects to the internet through the telephone network at enormous cost to you which results in hugely obscene profits for the phone company."

"iThink that 3G is not for me,"
iSaid. "My WiFi router at home will suffice. Good job I have one, eh?"

"Indeed it is," said Dick Smith. "
iAssume, being the well prepared nerd that you so obviously are, that you also have a PC running Windows?"

"Yes," iWhispered, ashamed. "Is that really necessary?"

"The iPad won't work without it," explained Dick Smith. "You need to run iTunes on a separate computer to set up and maintain your new gadget. The iPad is sexy, but it won't stand up alone. It needs the helping hand of a professional to bring out its most satisfying performance."

"Does iTunes work on Linux?"

"No."

"Not even if iOffer it a glass of Wine?"

"Especially not then. Steve Jobs has had a liver transplant and so he doesn't allow his minions to drink alcohol any more. He rules Apple with a rod of

iRon, you know."

"What are his feelings about cider?" iAsked.

"Only with Rosie," said Dick Smith gnomically. "Now which iPad is to be yourPad?"

"The WiFi model, please."

"iWill see if iHave one in the storeroom," said Dick Smith. He vanished into the back room and had words with a harassed looking person hiding behind a pile of cardboard boxes. The man delved deep into his pile and emerged holding a significant box. Dick Smith took it from him and carried it in triumph to me. "Here it is!" heDeclared. " And now weCome to the sordid commercial part of our

intimate relationship."

"iHave money," iTold him.

"That's just as well," heSaid,
"because iWant lots of it."

"iAm fed up with this joke," iSaid.

"You should try selling these things for a living," heSaid. "iWas sick of the joke within five minutes of putting them on display. We've been open since sparrow fart; it is now the middle of the afternoon and iHaven't even had time to get myLunch yet!"

"Are they selling well?" iAsked.

"iSold nothing else all day," heSaid. "Nobody wants any of the other boring stuff in the shop. This is the only thing that people are interested in buying today."

iTook my cardboard box home and unpacked it. Rather to my surprise, iDiscovered that the battery in the iPad was fully charged, so iCould start using my new gadget right away. Just like me, Steve Jobs is a member of the instant gratification generation and little touches like this show that he truly understands his target market.

myPad is just as wonderful a toy as all the media articles say it is. It has its drawbacks, of course. It isn't a proper computer (unless you jailbreak it, but that invalidates the warranty). It is severely limited in what it is allowed to do and it point blank refuses to let you get inside it and fiddle around, which is very frustrating for geeks like me.

However if you are willing to treat it as what it is rather than curse at it for not being what it isn't, it soon becomes clear that it is a magnificent gadget, full of possibilities and the source of endless fun.

Mainly there is the sheer child-like pleasure to be taken from the clever elegance of the design. Apple really do know how to make extraordinarily beautiful objects. Just holding it in your hands evokes a technological orgasm. And then you turn it on and start to stroke it and your cup of delight runneth over. Applications zoom up to fill the screen and you control them with suitable gestures of the fingers. Do you feel the urge to indulge in a

larger font? Simply squeeze your finger and thumb together, touch them to the screen and then separate them. The image behaves like an elastic surface and stretches out beneath your fingertips, increasing the size of the letters as it grows. When you read an eBook and need to turn the page, just position your fingers exactly as you would with a real book and make the same gesture you would make to turn a paper page and the electronic page flips over just like a real one! I didn't read a word of the first eBook I loaded on to myPad. I just turned its pages all the way through to the end. And then I went back to the beginning and turned them all over again.

The only fly that I've found swimming in the soup of myPad is that stray cat hairs floating around the house tend to plonk themselves down on the screen in great abundance. Presumably there is a small static charge attracting them. I have found that it is important to resist the temptation to brush them off -- whatever application currently has the focus tends to go berserk at such random gropings, and who can blame it? I've tried blowing them away, with mixed success. The hairs do tend to detach themselves, but they are usually replaced with a thin layer of spit which is even less aesthetically pleasing. Once the power is safely turned off, I

find myself constantly polishing the screen with the same sort of microfibre cloth I use for cleaning my glasses. It works quite well, actually...

But when you get right down to the actual nitty gritty of it, myPad is really only a device for showing off just how cool iAm in coffee shops and pubs. I'm absolutely certain that it will prove to be a geek babe-magnet. iCan easily imagine myself browsing the web with one finger and using my other fingers to titillate all the giggling, squirming geek groupies one by one by one (just like me, the iPad doesn't multitask).

iRule!

Jughead

"The jug is dead. Long live the jug."

After many years of faithful service, my electric jug could no longer muster the strength to boil water. Old age and decrepitude had set in, not to mention a touch of dementia.

Depressed, the jug took to its bed. It could no longer work; its days of independent living were over.

The jug doctor agreed with me.

"The kindest thing to do would be to put it painlessly to sleep in a yellow council rubbish bag."

So that's what we did. And then, in

an attempt to short-circuit the grieving process, I decided to go shopping for a replacement.

The new jug, Woolworths' cheapest, was not yet fully grown. It was unable to live without a permanent connection to the power. The previous jug, properly mature, had a base from which it could detach itself and walk around at will, sneering at the toaster and pulling the leg of the slow cooker which, poor bullied thing, simply couldn't run fast enough to catch the jug and give it the pummelling it deserved.

But the new jug had just a single power cable which needed to be unplugged in order to take the jug over

to the sink to fill it with water. Mind you -- once the water was in the jug and the power cable was reconnected, it boiled up really well. When the jug was just a young, impressionable pot, long before its element made a full circuit, someone had obviously invested a lot of time and effort in the potty training of it. But nevertheless the constant plugging and unplugging was a nuisance. Robin never really took to it at all.

"It's an ugly juggle," she said. "It will never mature into a juggernaut."

"But it's doing so well," I protested. "It's really very proud of itself."

"Humph!" said Robin, unconvinced. "What's it got to be vain about? Is it

pretending to be a jugular?"

And there things lay for a while. The jug soon settled in to the routine of life as a Robson. In its maturity, it adopted a new hare style (jugged, of course), but it never did learn how to free itself from the tyranny of tethering.

Things came to a head one ominous Saturday..

It began much like any other Saturday I got up and boiled the jug. As always it was grateful for the attention, and it steamed up a treat. I made a cup of instant coffee. Sipping thoughtfully, I wandered round the kitchen making a shopping list.

"Buy stuff," I wrote. "And beer."

I decided to check with Robin and see if there was anything special she needed. She was still in bed, snoring gently. If it hadn't been for the noise she was making, I wouldn't have been able to see her at all. She appeared to be mostly cat. Porgy was draped over her head, Harpo was warming her feet and Bess was curled up on her tummy.

"Need anything from the supermarket?" I asked.

"Urrgghhhnnnnngggggg," said Robin.

I wrote it down. "Anything else?"

"Gggdddnnwwwgggsssng."

I wrote that down as well and went to Woollies. I came back laden with stuff. And beer. And Robin's special

treats. I put the stuff away in its proper place and the beer in the fridge. It took a bit longer to find a place for Robin's things, but eventually I fitted them in. Then I went into the bedroom to report to Robin. Neither she nor the cats had moved in the hour or so that I'd been away.

"The urrgghhhnnnnngggggg is in the cupboard," I said, and the gggdddnnwwwgggsssnig is hanging up."

"Pppppussleflush," said Robin. She began to twitch semi-humanly, a sure sign that she was about to get up. The cats eyed her anxiously and adopted defensive postures. Zombie-like, Robin rose from the sheets and twitched

herself into the kitchen.

"Coffee..."

Disdaining the jug with which she still maintained her hate-hate relationship, she poured water into the coffee maker. She delicately inserted a filter paper and spooned coffee into it.

"Coffee..."

She flicked the switch and the red light came on.

"Coffee..."

Nothing happened.

Gradually Robin became aware that the coffee maker was silent. No gurgles as water trickled through the coffee grounds steeping thick, brown life giving liquid from them. Nothing. Silence. No coffee. The horror! The

horror!

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggggghhl

I raced into the kitchen. Robin, a look of extreme shock on her face, pointed inarticulately at the coffee maker.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggggghhl she explained.

I examined the coffee maker carefully but the conclusion was never in doubt. It was broken. No coffee.

"It's dead," I said. "Bereft of life, it is no more. It's pining for the fords -- anglia and cortina. Possibly prefect."

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaagggggggggggggggghhl said Robin, and she hit me with the new gggdddnnwwwgggsssng.

I made her a cup of instant coffee

and she became capable of speech once more. "Let's go shopping," she suggested. "We can get a new jug as well as a new coffee maker." And so that's exactly what we did.

The electric shop had lots of goodies on show. Jugs and coffee makers in every shape and form known to humankind, and some that weren't. There were gleaming stainless steel ones and black dramatic plastic ones. Some were tall and thin and some were short and fat. And every single one had a digital clock embedded in the base, goodness knows why.

"Pick me! Pick me!" The chorus was deafening. And each had its own undeniable charm.

Robin's heart melted. "Can we take them all?"

"Well..."

"Ooooh look at that! It's shiny! Do we need one?" Robin's attention was distracted and she poked a gadget of particular intricacy.

"No, we don't need one," I said.

"What is it anyway?"

Robin gave me a look of withering scorn. "It's a gadget of particular intricacy of course," she said.

"According to the leaflet in the box, it opens cans and circumcises gerbils."

Something else attracted her attention. "Oh that's so clever," she said, dragging me over to the other side of the shop where something sparkled

in the sunlight that poured through the window. It was long and slim with far too many knobs and switches. There were slots festooned with heating elements for making perfect toast. Nestled snugly at one end was a pot with a small coffee filter and clipped to a convenient clip at the other end was a deep dish with a detachable lid into which eggs could be broken. The leaflet explained that, in less than four minutes, this technological marvel could simultaneously make two slices of toast, a pot of coffee and a poached egg; all of which would reach perfection at exactly the same time. An ideal breakfast with no fuss or bother.

"?" said Robin.

"!" I replied.

"&?".

"0", I said firmly.

Finally we chose a squat black coffee maker with a clock, and a mature jug with a base from which it could easily detach. The jug didn't have a clock, but it did have a blue light, which in my opinion, more than made up for its inability to tell the time. We took them out to the car and drove home. They were both apprehensive and they cried throughout the journey. However once they were plugged in and filled with water, they soon settled down to make the best of their new home.

The tethered jug, predictably, was

not happy.

"What about me?" it wailed. "Didn't I do a good enough job? Wasn't my water hot enough? Didn't I deliver copious quantities? Please don't do this to me. Please."

"There, there," I said soothingly as I unplugged it, and its light went out for the final time.

It went without a struggle. Perhaps, loyal to the end, it knew that this was for the best.

I keep the corpse on the kitchen windowsill. I like to think that it enjoys the view.

In Which We Are Conventional

The plane landed at Melbourne with a bump and a rattle. It was World SF Convention time, Aussiecon 4, and Robin and I were keen to see what was on offer. But first we had to find our hotel. Since we were staying at the Hilton, that shouldn't be too hard...

We hopped in a taxi.

"Γειά σου," said the taxi driver.

"Πού θέλετε να πάτε?"

All the taxi drivers in Melbourne are Greek, except for the ones that aren't.

"The Hilton Hotel on South Wharf,

please," I said.

"Δεν ξέρω όπου το ξενοδοχείο Hilton είναι." The taxi driver sounded puzzled. He dug around under the dashboard and produced a rather tattered looking book of maps. "Θα εξετάσω έναν χάρτη!"

Eventually, after much study and scratching of the head, he found where the Hilton Hotel might be and he set off to drive us there. Melbourne is a city of sloping structures, and we drove past many a curious artistic shape that pierced the skyline at surrealistic angles. I felt as if I was travelling through a picture by Magritte or Dali. It was the perfect landscape for a science fiction convention.

Eventually we reached South Wharf. There was an Exhibition Centre where the Convention itself was being held, and a Shopping Centre full of shops that weren't open because it wasn't 10.00am yet. The Hilton Hotel was between the two, and just behind it was a land locked wharf where a very large sailing ship was moored. The sails were furled, and it rocked gently to and fro.

"How did they manage to get that huge boat in there?" asked Robin.

"There's no access to the sea."

"Probably it's a time machine in disguise," I suggested, "Perhaps it's a TARDIS which actually has a working chameleon circuit, unlike that decrepit

pile of junk that Doctor Who stole from the Time Lords back on Gallifrey."

"Yes, that would make sense," said Robin. "Exciting isn't it?"

"I agree," I agreed.

The Hilton Hotel was hugely luxurious. The view from our room was of South Bank Promenade where, every evening, we could enjoy the huge jets of flaming gas that shot into the sky at hourly intervals, incinerating low flying seagulls for the amusement of wandering tourists. The guidebook told us that every time the jets went off they consumed a year's supply of gas for a domestic household. If you squinted just right, the spectacle looked exactly

like a fleet of rocket ships taking off for Mars. Very appropriate for a science fiction convention.

The bed in our hotel room had a mattress that was two feet deep and wonderfully comfortable. When you lay down on it you fell immediately asleep and your rage at being awoken was almost homicidal.

"What more could anyone want?" I asked Rhetorically.

"Nothing," said Rhetorically to me as she fell asleep on the bed.

The room had both a shower and a bath (luxury, luxury) and it was also equipped with a hot and cold running Paris, ooh la la! Naturally I immediately indulged myself, but

strangely it gave me no pleasure. It just made me sneeze.

I blew my nose and then investigated all the myriad cupboards and wardrobes in the room. In one of them I found an open safe with a combination lock. Inside the safe was a leaflet that told me how to choose my own private combination. Immediately I chose one and locked and unlocked the safe a few times just to prove that it worked. Then I put our passports in the safe and locked it firmly.

"I've put the passports in the safe," I told Robin, "so that they won't get lost or stolen."

"What a good idea," she said. "Now, let's go and investigate the

convention." To hear is to obey, and so that's exactly what we did.

The Melbourne Exhibition Centre is a gigantic building with umpteen floors and a myriad of rooms on every floor. Quite honestly Aussiecon 4 was a little lost in such an enormous building and we rattled around in it. The week before the SF Convention, the centre had hosted a UN Convention and I suspect that even the entire world, as represented by UN, might have been a little bit lost in the building. Truly the centre is *huge*.

We registered ourselves with the convention and went exploring in order to get our bearings. Gaggles of fans gossiped in corridors and played spot

the celebrity. Robert Silverberg walked past dripping groupies. Kim Stanley Robinson looked suavely intellectual. Charles Stross's flat Yorkshire vowels cut through the conversations. An American fan came up behind me and said, "Hello George."

My name is not George, but nevertheless, in the interests of international fraternity, I turned round and said, "Hello."

"Oh," said the fan, taken aback as he saw me close to for the first time, "you aren't George Martin."

"It's an easy mistake to make," I said. "After all, I am wearing the same kind of jacket and cap that George Martin wears, I have a grey beard just

like George Martin has, and I am roughly the same endomorphic shape as George Martin. However when you meet the real George Martin, you will find that he is much larger than me in every single dimension, including the fourth. Also, he's a famous science fiction writer and I'm not. But other than that, we're absolutely identical."

"Sorry," said the flustered fan backing away with embarrassment, "sorry, sorry..."

The dealers room was full of stalls selling obscure books from small (mostly Australian) presses. I bought far too many of them and started to suspect that my luggage would be severely overweight when I flew home.

Books are *heavy*. Robin bought some t-shirts, a shoulder bag, some postcards, two books with hollowed out interiors for hiding jewellery in, some jewellery for hiding in the hollowed out interiors of the books, and some small furry aliens which stretched and wriggled with pleasure when stroked.

Panel discussions on subjects both obscure and arcane took place every hour on the hour in all the myriad of tiny rooms scattered through the Exhibition Centre. Often it was hard to choose which one to attend. Mostly I think I should have chosen one of the other ones. Some of the events for children looked far more interesting than those for adults, but unfortunately

I wasn't allowed in to the rooms where they were taking place because I had a beard. Children don't have beards in this universe, though they do in mine.

There was one very large room with tiered plush seating and a stage. Here the guests of honour gave their speeches.

Kim Stanley Robinson interviewed himself and refused to answer the questions that he was asked. Instead he answered the questions that he felt he *should* have been asked. The interviewer was left feeling very frustrated, but the interviewee spoke learnedly on Mars, Antarctica and the impact of science on society, to the benefit of all in the audience.

Shaun Tan showed us a drawing of a dinosaur that he had done when he was three years old (his mother is a hoarder and she never throws anything away).

"People ask me how I started drawing," he said. "I find this question hard to answer, so instead I just ask them why they stopped drawing. All children draw all of the time when they are young. But sooner or later, most of them stop. I just never stopped."

A perfect formula for an illustrious career as an illustrator.

After Shaun Tan's speech, Robin and I made our way back to the Hilton thinking vaguely of using the Paris for an hour or so. A fan came up to Robin

and said, "Excuse me, could you ask Mr Martin to autograph a book for me?"

"I'd be happy to," said Robin, "but the man with me isn't Mr Martin."

The fan looked bewildered.

"Honest," I said in my best non-American accent. "I'm not George Martin."

The fan stared suspiciously at my convention name badge and read the name written on it. I noticed that he moved his lips as he sounded out the words to himself.

"Oh, sorry," he said and slunk away.

Robin and I carried on towards the Hilton. "I wonder how the fan knew

that I was in charge of you," mused Robin. "Perhaps I give off supervisory vibrations?"

"I expect that's probably the case," I said. "You know, if the convention ever decides to have a science fiction writer look-alike competition, I think I'm in with a good chance of winning."

"Who would you enter as?" asked Robin.

I thought about it for a while, but really there was only one possible answer.

"Isaac Asimov," I said.

The convention lasted for four days. Both Robin and I had a ball as we over-indulged ourselves in food, drink, conversation and the sybaritic luxury

of our hotel room. We were both sorry when it was all over. But we were looking forward to spending the next few days staying with Robin's sister Wendy, Wendy's husband Jon, the children Ella and Tilly, and Daisy the dog. The accommodation would be less luxurious than the Hilton and I for one would certainly miss the Paris, but, in compensation, there would be children to play with and a dog to take for walks. On balance, it seemed like a fair exchange.

We checked out of the Hilton and caught a taxi. The driver wasn't Greek.

"أين يمكنني أن يأخذك؟" he asked.

Robin gave the driver the address that we wanted.

"لا مشكلة"، said the driver and he took us straight there.

Everyone was thrilled to see us. Daisy brought us her favourite squeaky rugby ball and a saliva soaked teddy bear. Tilly had just lost a tooth and she proudly showed us the gap and the actual tooth itself that she was saving for the tooth fairy. Unfortunately she later lost it, so she had to write the tooth fairy a letter instead. But that worked just as well. Ella played us a concert on her clarinet, Wendy gave us food and Jon gave us beer and wine. The conversation and the fun flowed backwards and forwards unchecked.

And just before midnight I suddenly remembered that I'd left our

passports locked securely in the safe in our room at the Hilton.

In Which Alan Travels In Time

*It was twenty years ago
today*

*Sergeant Pepper taught
the band to play....*

John Lennon &
Paul McCartney

"I've booked you onto a Unix training course," said my boss.

I was puzzled. "I use Unix every day," I said. "My extensive knowledge of Unix is one of the reasons you hired me for this job in the first place. Why do I need a training course?"

"You don't," he said. "I want you to

evaluate the course to see if it's worth sending your clients on it."

I was having major problems with my clients. They had a nasty habit of ringing me at all hours of the day and night.

"The computer's broken!"

"Can you describe what happened?"

"No."

"Type this magic spell for me..."

And then I would listen to the clatter of the keyboard in my headset as their fingers fumbled and failed to find the correct keys. Generally whatever they ended up typing would make the situation worse, not better. It wasn't really their fault -- they had very little understanding of their computer

systems and as far as they were concerned, what I was asking them to type really *was* a magic spell. Any education that could ameliorate this irritation had to be a good thing. It seemed that for once in his life my boss had had a good idea.

"Where and when?" I asked.

"There and then," he said. And so it came to pass.

The training company was called Auldhouse. It was a very new company and the course I was attending was one of the first they had ever run. The trainer was a charmingly vague American lady called Cathy Curley who appeared to be somewhat overwhelmed by the sea of faces that

stared stonily back at her.

"OK - let's get ourselves logged on..."

It soon became clear that there were far too many people in the class, and Cathy was in danger of losing control as she tried to deal with all the questions and pleas for assistance that were coming at her non-stop from all sides. It also didn't help that at least two of the students were pompous idiots who kept trying to show off by constantly interrupting with questions whose sole purpose was to impress the rest of us with their grasp of obscure minutiae. Hey, everybody -- look at all the clever stuff I know. It was clear to me that all their depth was in shallow

places.

Cathy was obviously very knowledgeable about Unix. She knew the subject backwards, forwards, sideways and upside down. She made everything look easy, even when it wasn't. I discovered later that she had actually worked at Berkeley with some of the original developers of the operating system. I began to wonder where I'd left my autograph book...

I was particularly impressed with the way she handled the training material. There was always a spoonful of sugar to take with the medicine -- lots of nice jokes, and amusing exercises for us to do. Cathy was also extraordinarily good at varying the

pace and rhythm of the lessons; we'd grind slowly up a peak of learning and then pause for breath and race down the other side with a joke followed by a relaxing cup of coffee. If you drew a graph of her class showing achievement versus time, the shape would be a saw-tooth or possibly a sine curve.

In an effort to ease the pressure on her (and also to curb the excesses of the showoffs who were annoying me), I tried to help Cathy with some of the questions and the practical exercises. Nothing was ever said in any formal sense, but it quickly became understood between us that when the students were doing the exercises,

Cathy would look after one side of the room and I'd look after the other. It seemed to work, and I had a lot of fun.

At the end of the week I went back to the office.

"How was it?" asked my boss.

"Pretty good," I said. "I think we ought to start sending my clients on the course as soon as we can."

"I'll see to it," he said.

Unfortunately he was overtaken by events before he could organise anything. Not very long after our conversation took place, mysterious men in shiny suits and tightly knotted ties appeared. They held whispered conversations in locked offices with all the managers. Something was

obviously going on, and it wasn't long before we were all summoned to a meeting at which it was revealed that the company was to be reorganised along more efficient lines. This was, of course, a very positive thing and the future was bright with promise. The light at the end of the tunnel, we were assured, was positively blinding in its intensity. All we had to do was travel through the tunnel together -- well, those of us who remained would travel together. It seemed that a lot of people would be exploring other options instead, and perhaps spending more time with their families.

The next few months were total chaos. My boss was an early casualty

and I was shifted from department to department as my job description and responsibilities were organised, reorganised and then modified again. I changed managers like other people changed underwear and on one never to be forgotten day I was introduced to my new boss in the morning, and then I was introduced to his replacement in the afternoon. It was not a happy time and I was not a happy vegemite.

Then I saw a job advert -- Auldhouse was looking to hire a Unix trainer. Well, why not? I sent off an application.

A couple of days later, across the other side of town and quite unbeknownst to me, a conversation

took place between Cathy and her boss Judy.

"Cathy," said Judy, "is there any way you can postpone your trip back to America? We're finding it terribly difficult to replace you. Would you believe that we've only had one response to the job advert?"

"I'm sorry Judy," Cathy was firm. "It's far too late to change the arrangements now. I'm getting married at the end of the month. The church is booked, the relatives are making travel arrangements. I'm sorry, but I'm flying home to California at the end of the week. I'm going to miss you, and I'm going to miss New Zealand, but I'm definitely going back to America."

Judy frowned, and her partner Duncan said, "Have you any suggestions about who we might find to replace you? Perhaps one of the students you've been teaching over the last few months? Do any of them stand out in your mind?"

"The person you really need," said Cathy thoughtfully, "is the guy who helped me out on that first course. He was really good. I can't remember his name though."

"The only person who's responded to the job advert," said Judy, "is somebody called Alan Robson."

"That's him!" said Cathy firmly. "I remember the name now. That's the guy. He's the one you want."

"I'll send him a letter inviting him to come for an interview," said Duncan who liked to do things very formally.

The job interview was an absolute farce.

"Hello, Alan. I'm Judy," said Judy, "and this is Duncan."

"Hello, Judy," I said. "Hello Duncan. I'm Alan."

"When can you start?" asked Judy.

And so I had a new job. I went back to the office and handed in my notice to my latest manager.

"Why are you leaving?" He sounded honestly puzzled. "There are so many exciting opportunities just around the corner."

About two months later, the

company ceased to exist. But by then I was long gone...

On the morning of my very first Unix class I didn't have butterflies in my tummy, I had vultures. I could feel them bumping into my stomach lining and pecking hard to see if I was dead yet so that they could start to feed. I looked at the faces of my students, and the faces looked back at me, some with enthusiasm and expectation, some with disdain. What was I supposed to do now?

I tried hard to picture all the teachers I'd had in my life. What did they do? How had they handled things? The only example that came to mind was my Latin teacher screaming that I

was a steatopygous bushman when I declined to decline *mensa* for him. Somehow I felt that this would probably not be an appropriate teaching technique to use on my Unix students. I tried to remember how Cathy had done things. Surely I couldn't go wrong if I followed her example?

"OK - let's get ourselves logged on..."

And we were off and running!

Then somebody blinked and twenty years passed; just like that. A lot of things happened during those years. Judy and Duncan sold the company and retired to live a life of sybaritic luxury and golf. I got a new boss called Melanie and a line manager called

Craig. I ran an awful lot of Unix training courses. And even today, twenty years down the track, I'm still using some of the teaching techniques and jokes that I heard Cathy use on that very first course. By now I've got the timing of the jokes honed to absolute perfection.

Mind you, it was fifteen years before I managed to get my first laugh.

"Let's go for lunch to celebrate your twentieth anniversary," said Melanie.

Lunch was in one of Wellington's most magnificent restaurants which sits in the heart of one of Wellington's sleaziest areas. I suspect that tired and emotional businessmen searching for fleshy pleasures of the evening often

use the restaurant as an excuse when they bump into acquaintances and colleagues beneath the red lights. "Oh! I'm just on my way to Logan Brown," they say. "Got to dash!"

Lunch began at 12.30 and it finished about 4.30. Surprisingly it wasn't particularly liquid, just particularly magnificent with precisely timed pauses between each course. A wonderfully gastronomic time was had by all.

I was given some extra special twentieth anniversary presents to mark the occasion. A t-shirt with appropriate anniversary embroidery, a leather document case with the word "Auldhouse" embossed on the front,

and a truly superb Parker pen with a Unix joke engraved on the barrel. It is a positive pleasure to write with the pen (early drafts of some parts of this article were written with it -- it's easy to tell which parts; they're the best bits). I'm going to have to be very, very self disciplined about putting the pen away whenever I finish writing something. I don't ever want to lose it.

And now I'm back at work. It's my twenty first year as a trainer and I have a Unix course to teach. Let me see. How to begin?

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Unix System Administrator walked into a pub...

Alan And Robin Re- Fuse

Morning rituals chez Robson are as predictable as the sunrise. About an hour before the alarm clock is due to go off, 8.3Kg of anxious fur jumps on the bed and whines worriedly in my ear. Porgy is a cat of low self esteem and he is convinced that unless he constantly reminds me of his presence in the house, I will forget that he exists and will not fill his breakfast bowl with goodies.

If the whining fails to rouse me, he paces up and down on my chest for a few minutes and tries a few

experimental jumps, hoping perhaps to elicit an "Ooof!" from me. Sometimes he misjudges his target on purpose and crashes down from a great height, claws fully extended, right on my naughty bits. My "Ooof!" tends towards the soprano, and I begin to contemplate the advantages of felinicide.

Having succeeded in his aim of drawing attention to himself, Porgy then curls himself up around my head and purrs loudly in my ear. Sometimes he rasps his tongue over my nose, which feels rather like being rubbed down with wet sandpaper. Layers of nasal skin flake away as I lie there praying for the alarm to go off so that

the day can begin.

Eventually it rings, and Robin screams with fright as she is dragged headlong out of a deep and satisfying slumber. I sooth her with calming sooths and then, yawning and stretching, she heaves herself out of bed. Porgy immediately forgets all about me. Robin is up! She'll do! Harpo and Bess, waiting politely outside the bedroom door, seem to agree with him.

Robin heads into the kitchen trying not to trip over three cats who are winding themselves backwards and forwards between her legs, crying with eagerness to be fed and holding occasional impromptu boxing matches. She puts biscuits in their bowls and

then heads for the bathroom where hopefully a shower will bring her fully awake. I lie in bed, relaxed by the distant sounds of running water and companionable crunching. I turn on the radio and listen to the news.

Eventually a cloud of steam with Robin inside it floats into the bedroom.

"Lights!" warns the cloud of steam, and I close my eyes to protect my delicate corneas from the photonic rocks that electric lights always seem to throw out in the mornings. It's a good job that daylight photons out in the real world don't have mass otherwise we'd all be stoned to death every day.

Now it's my turn in the shower and

off I go, leaving the cloud of steam to get dressed.

On the particular morning of which I now speak, all began as usual. My shower was a little lukewarm, particularly towards the end when it got decidedly chilly, but I simply assumed that Robin had soaked herself a bit longer than normal and used slightly too much hot water. I dried myself off and trudged back to the bedroom to get dressed. Robin, less steamy than when last I saw her, was now dressed and breakfasted and about to leave for work. I waved goodbye as I clambered into my underpants; a bit of multitasking that is very hard to do without breaking a leg, but

nevertheless it is a skill of which I am an internationally acknowledged master. For a small fee, I am willing to give lessons...

When I got home that evening, all the taps marked **Hot** were producing only **Cold** water. Oh dear.

"Could it be a fuse?" suggested Robin.

I went to the fusebox. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that most of the circuits were protected by old fashioned ceramic fuses. One or two had been upgraded to circuit breakers, but a surprisingly large number were still using the old technology. The water heating circuit was one of these. I removed the ceramic fuse and looked

inside it. There was no fuse wire to be seen and streaks of metal on the ceramic base suggested that the fuse had somewhat dramatically self destructed at some point in the not too distant past. I actually had some fuse wire in my tool cupboard (heaven knows why), so I repaired the fuse and put it back. All we could do now was wait.

The next day I turned on a **Hot** tap. High temperature water gushed forth. Yippee! Problem solved.

BANG!

That sounded ominous. I went back to the fuse box and pulled the water heating fuse again. The fuse wire had literally exploded under the load and

melted itself all over the inside of the ceramic. Somewhat foolishly, I replaced it again. It lasted about five minutes.

BANG!

Time to call in the professionals.

Ken the electrician came armed with impressive gadgets that had digital displays. He poked probes into dark places on the water heater and looked at the numbers on his dials.

"Hmmm," he said thoughtfully. "I know the fuse is out," he said, "and therefore there is no current going through the circuit at the moment, but nevertheless I think I'll turn the switch to the water heater off, just in case I accidentally short circuit something."

He pressed the switch with his thumb.

"That's rather stiff," he said in surprise, and he pressed it again, using two thumbs this time. The switch refused to change position. "Aha!," said Ken. "A clue!"

He got down on his knees and examined the switch more closely. He sniffed it. He rubbed his finger over the top of the plastic box in which the switch was housed. "Feel that," he said to me.

I felt it -- the plastic under my fingers was slightly rough and bubbly.

"That's got quite hot at some point in the not too distant past," said Ken. "Hot enough to start melting the

plastic. I'm surprised you didn't smell it; it reeks of rat piss as it melts."

"Oh we'd never have noticed that," said Robin. "Neither Alan nor I have much of a sense of smell. That's the secret of a truly happy marriage, you know -- when neither partner can smell anything."

Ken considered this solemnly. "You have a good point there," he said. "I always get on much better with my wife when we both have colds." He produced a screwdriver and began to dismantle the plastic box.

The inside of the box looked like a battlefield in miniature. The wires leading into the switch were black and burned and the switch mechanism itself

was a solid, distorted lump where the plastic had melted and flowed into surrealistic deformities.

"No wonder I couldn't close the switch," said Ken. "That's never going to move again."

He clipped the wires and removed what was left of the switch. He examined it closely and broke away some bits of plastic. "Look at that," he said, pointing at a particularly interesting bit. "That got so hot it's partially melted the brass of the terminal. You're lucky the fuse blew when it did. If this got much hotter, it could have started a fire, and that would have done your house no good at all!"

He scraped away the burned insulation from the wires, fitted new rubber sleeves and wired in a new switch. He remantled the plastic box and replaced the ceramic fuse with a circuit breaker.

"I don't trust the fuse any more," he said. "It obviously exploded quite violently, so goodness knows what stresses that put on the ceramic. We don't want it disintegrating some dark and stormy night."

He turned everything on and poked his probes into dark corners again. The numbers obviously satisfied him for he began to pack away his tools.

"There you are," he said. "That should do the trick."

The next morning, the usual 8.3Kg of anxious fur jumped up on the bed. The daily ritual had begun and my shower, when I got to it, was satisfyingly hot.

Alan Has Visions

One Saturday early in December 2010 I went to bed so as to sleep the sleep of the just returned home from a party. When I awoke the next morning, my whole world was subtly changed.

Wherever I looked spider webs, blobs and suggestive silhouettes drifted across my field of view. Even closing my eyes didn't help much. I could still see the shapes glowing in the darkness against my eyelids. Funny, I thought; somehow that doesn't seem quite right.

The dark shapes are called floaters. Everyone has them at some time or other and generally they are of no great

significance. But now I seemed to have rather more of them than I had ever had before. They were all concentrated in my left eye. My right eye was quite free of them. Nevertheless my whole field of vision was covered with them as my brain tried hard to reconcile the two quite different views of the world that it was receiving. Perhaps I had inadvertently picked up somebody else's floaters at last night's party and brought them home with me? But wherever they had come from, they were singularly annoying. It is very distracting to sit and read a book only to have something the size and shape of Queen Victoria's profile drift across the words and obliterate them completely.

Neither she nor I found it at all amusing.

I checked my symptoms at various medical sites on that there interwebby thing that turns up on my computer every so often. The conclusion was inescapable. Clearly I was pregnant.

Perhaps I should consult an ophthalmologist? But first I had to learn how to pronounce ophthalmologist. It turned out to be surprisingly difficult, even for a man with a degree in chemistry who had never had any trouble at all with the tongue twisting consonants embedded in that curious chemical phenolphthalein, the part time laxative and titration end point indicator.

Perhaps the problem lay in the extra syllable lurking in ophthalmologist. Maybe practice would make me perfect.

I checked the intertubes again. Alarming suggestions of leprosy sent me scurrying to the telephone. On the whole, pregnancy seemed a more preferable diagnosis. Though there remained the small, but distinct, possibility of housemaid's foot, athlete's elbow or maybe even tennis knee.

"8.30 tomorrow morning," said the ophthalmologist's receptionist.

I arrived in plenty of time.

"Please fill in this form," said the receptionist. I took the form, and a pen

and tried hard to squint through the girders of the Eiffel Tower as it slid across the paper.

"Name."

Hmmm. The hard questions first. I struggled through that and moved on to the next.

"Address."

Today was a good day. I could manage that.

"Height, weight, inside leg measurement. Do you dress to the right or the left?"

I scribbled some figures and ticked the box marked 'Not In These Trousers'.

"You can go through now," said the receptionist. So I went through.

"Just sit here," said a nice nurse.

"First of all we'll give you a little eye test." She held a black piece of plastic across my right eye, the one without floaters. Everything went much darker.

"Can you read what's on the chart pinned to that wall, please?" she asked.

I concentrated hard.

"Marilyn Monroe, Mount Fuji, the Titanic and something that might be a bunny rabbit."

"Good," she said and transferred the dark plastic to my left eye, thus exposing my severely short sighted right eye.

"Can you read what's on the chart pinned to that wall, please?" she asked.

"What wall?"

"Excellent," she said, and made a note. "Now I need to give you some drops that will make you dilate."

"I thought I only needed those in the last stages of labour." I was puzzled. Surely my pregnancy wasn't that far advanced?

"No, silly," she said. "It dilates your pupils so that we can see inside your eyes. Open wide!"

Anything to oblige. I stretched my mouth to twice the diameter that I usually present to my dental hygienist.

"No," said the nurse. "Your eyes, you idiot. Here -- let me do it." With thumb and forefinger she held my eyelids open and squirted half the Pacific Ocean onto each eyeball. I felt

a momentary pang of conscience about all the sharks left to drown in the thin air of the Mariana Trench.

"The doctor will see you now."

The nurse took me into a small, dark room where a man sat waiting behind a complex machine full of dials, lights, mirrors and lenses.

"Hello," he said. "I'm the Doctor."

"Who?" I asked.

"Mackey," he answered, and we shook hands.

"Just rest your chin on this chin rest," said Doctor Mackey.

I did so, and he adjusted some levers that raised my head slightly and tilted it back. A brilliant white light shone dazzlingly into my eyeball and

Doctor Mackey peered at me through a magnifying lens.

"Look up. Now down. Look right. Look left. Look right again."

"Can I cross the road now?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "It's all clear. You've had an acute posterior vitreous detachment. We usually call it a PVD for short. Doctor's jargon."

"Just as I thought," I said. "What's a PVD?"

He produced a cross sectional model of an eyeball and began to point at bits of it. "The jelly in your left eye has detached itself from the retina at the back. It's also ruptured a small blood vessel which has leaked into

your eyeball. The floaters you are seeing are blood clots. Fortunately there seems to be no sign of any damage to the retina. Sometimes, when the jelly is particularly firmly attached, it leaves small rips in the retina and the fluid in the eyeball leaks in behind the retina and starts to detach that as well. If the retina detaches and you don't have treatment, you'll go blind within a very short time. But you seem to have escaped that. Lucky you."

"What causes a PVD?" I asked.

"Old age and decrepitude, mainly," he said. "Debauchery and unclean living. Most of the seven deadly sins in fact. Short sighted people like you are particularly prone to PVD. I imagine

the other eye will do it at some time or other as well."

"Oh," I said. "When?"

He shrugged. "Next week, next year, ten years time. Who knows?"

"What can we do about it?"

"Nothing much," he said. "You're making a good recovery. Your immune system will take care of the floaters all by itself over the next six or seven weeks. You might want to consider wearing sunglasses for a few weeks; the darker field of view will help your brain to cancel out the more annoying effects of the floaters. There's less contrast for it to cope with so it doesn't have to work quite so hard. Just watch out for people who mistake you for a

film star and ask for your autograph."

"Oh I'm quite used to that," I said.

"It happens to me all the time. Is there anything else I need to be careful of?"

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "your eye is in quite a delicate state at the moment. While it fixes itself you need to avoid doing anything that will put any stress or strain on it. You'll have to give up bungee jumping for a few months and don't have any arguments with your wife. If she hits you in the eye I won't answer for the consequences."

"Do you need to see me again?"

"No, not unless the symptoms get worse. If you start getting more floaters or if you see flashes of light it

might be a sign that more detachment is occurring. That needs to be checked immediately in case there is any retinal damage left behind. But other than that, have a good Christmas."

"Eye, Eye, doctor," I said, saluting smartly.

We Can't Take You Riding In Our Car Car

It was a dark and stormy night. Robin and I, each of us well supplied with a cat to cuddle, snuggled down into the safety and warmth of our bed while we listened to the wind and the rain howl and crash against the windows. Little did we know that outside our house, camouflaged by the shelter of the storm, a terrible crime was taking place...

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Robin's car pool partner was

picking her up that morning to take her into work and so she went out bright and early, leaving me half asleep and practising my world famous impression of the meat in a cat sandwich. Porgy was asleep on my right side and Harpo was cuddled up close on my left. Robin had been gone for about two minutes when the front door opened and she came back in. Perhaps she'd forgotten something. The cats and I ignored her. If we kept quiet, maybe she'd go away again.

"Alan," she said, "the garage door is open and the car has gone."

"What!" I sat up in bed, scattering indignant cats far and wide.

"The garage door is open and the

car has gone," she repeated. "I've got to go to work. Can I leave you to deal with it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

The door closed behind her as she left again and I struggled into some clothes and went out to examine the crime scene. The garage looked empty and forlorn. I closed the door. The lock had been levered off. Broken pieces of it were scattered on the ground in front of the garage. I opened the door again. I noticed that there were shards of safety glass glittering on the garage floor. Presumably the thieves had smashed their way into the car. I closed the door and went back into the house. My next tasks were obvious; phone the

police and the insurance company so as to put the investigative wheels in motion.

First the police. I opened the cupboard where we keep the telephone directories, but the white pages were missing. I vaguely recalled that Robin had recently looked up a phone number. No wonder the directory was missing -- many years ago the gigantic pile of stuff in Robin's room reached critical mass and imploded. Now her room contains a small black hole which greedily absorbs anything that wanders within its gravitational influence. Over the years we've fed it cats, clothes, casual visitors and Mormon missionaries. I knew that I would never

see the telephone directory again.

Oh well, time to see what the googles had to say on the subject. I soon found a phone number for the Wellington police and I rang it.

"Police, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

There was a *beep, beep, beep* in my ears as buttons were pressed and then a new voice said, "Watch house, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

After a couple more transfers I finally ended up with someone who seemed able to deal with my problem. I described the broken lock on the garage

door and gave the police the registration number of my car. In return they gave me an incident number to use with the insurance company. I thanked them and rang off. Now to contact the insurance people. That was easy; their phone number was printed on the policy. I rang it.

"Insurance, can I help you?"

"My car has been stolen," I said.

"Just a moment, I'll transfer you."

Again I found myself involved in a telephonic game of pass the parcel. Eventually, after speaking to several people who denied all knowledge of anything whatsoever to do with insurance policies, I finally found someone who grudgingly agreed to

take my details. "There's an excess of \$300 on the policy," said the insurance man. "The car itself is valued at \$3,300 so taking the excess into account you'll get \$3000 back on the claim. We'll need you to fill in a claim form before we can take it any further."

That's the problem with cars and insurance. The value depreciates and so when you come to replace the car you find that it's worth next to nothing. No matter what happened over the next few days, it was clear that I'd be seriously out of pocket.

About ten minutes after I finished talking to the insurance people, the phone rang.

"Hello, this is the police," said a

dark blue voice. "We've found your car."

"Gosh, that's impressively quick service," I said. "It must be a world record. I only reported it stolen an hour ago."

"The car has been abandoned on Black Rock Road. Can you come and meet us there, please?"

Black Rock Road is about half a mile away.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," I told the voice.

My car was sitting by the side of the road with a police car parked on guard behind it. The car was a mess. The windscreen was completely opaque, heavily gouged and spider

webbed with cracks. All the other windows were shattered, smashed to smithereens. There were glass shards all over the floor and the upholstery and the road. There were several dents and scrapes on the passenger side panels where the car had crashed into something. The lock on the driver's door had been torn out so that the door could be opened. The ignition lock had also been forced apart in order to start the car, and the broken remnants of it were dangling down at the end of the exposed wires. The ceiling light had been ripped out for no very obvious reason. There was quite a lot of blood soaked into the upholstery and there were several large bloody smears all

over the outside of the driver's door. Obviously whoever had broken into the car was utterly inept and had cut themselves rather badly in the effort to break in. The engine was still running, and the petrol gauge showed that the tank was still almost full. Obviously the car had been stolen, driven about half a mile and then just trashed and abandoned. It made no sense. Why break into a locked garage to steal a car, only to abandon it almost immediately? Particularly when there were other cars parked out in the open on the road. Surely they'd have been much easier to steal?

"Can you examine the car and see if there is anything in it that doesn't

belong to you?" asked the policeman.

I glanced over the wreckage.

"That screwdriver isn't mine," I said. "And neither is the small stick on the floor. The cell phone on the back seat isn't mine either."

It seemed clear to me that we weren't breeding our car thieves for intelligence. What kind of moron leaves behind the screwdriver that they used to break into the car? And as for not noticing that your cell phone has fallen out of your pocket! Words fail me.

I sat in the police car while the policeman took a statement from me.

"This has all the hallmarks of a revenge attack," he said. "Why else

would they go to all the trouble of smashing their way into your garage, only to abandon your car almost immediately and trash it so severely? Have you got any enemies who would do that to you?"

"Well," I said, "one of my cats hates me, and he bites me whenever he gets the opportunity. But he has a perfect alibi. He was asleep on the bed all night. Anyway, he doesn't know how to drive a car."

"No," said the policeman. "I doubt if it was a cat who did this."

"I wrote a book review last month," I said. "I was very critical of the book. I said it was one of the worst novels I'd ever read; that the author couldn't write

his way out of a wet paper bag. I was very rude about his writing competence."

"Ah! A clue!" said the policeman. "Where does the writer live?"

"America," I said.

His face fell. "No," he said, "I don't think that works either."

Neither of us could come up with any other ideas. It seemed that the motives of the morons would forever remain a mystery.

"We'll tow the car away for forensic examination," said the policeman. "We'll be able to get a good DNA analysis from all the blood he has spilled. If it matches anyone on the database, we'll soon find the little

ratbag."

Soon a tow truck arrived and drove off with the wreckage. "I'll take you home," said the policeman. "I'd like to look at the garage." So I got my first ever trip in a police car. It was quite thrilling. He had his radio turned down low and an almost inaudible voice muttered mysteriously about crimes and criminals as we drove up the road.

All too soon, we arrived back at my house. We got out of the car and the policeman looked closely at the torn and mangled lock on the garage door. "They've obviously gone to a lot of trouble to force their way in," he said. He walked into the garage and looked carefully around. "Oh!" he said. "Look

at this!" He was pointing to something on the floor. I went in to see what he was looking at. There were several large patches of blood on the garage floor and there, right in the middle of a puddle, was a single small footprint. The thief had been wearing trainers and the pattern of the tread was clear and sharp in the blood.

"We'll get the forensic people to look at this as well," said the policeman. "Lots of good clues here."

"This guy's lost a lot of blood," I said. "I wonder if he's had to have hospital treatment?"

"We'll certainly check that out," said the policeman.

"With any luck, he'll get a massive

infection and die screaming in agony," I said.

"We can but hope," said the policeman.

Later that afternoon a forensic examiner arrived. I felt quite sorry for him. He was dressed in full police uniform with a thick anti-stab jacket covering his chest. He was sweating profusely in the hot sun and he looked enviously at the shorts and T-shirt that I was wearing.

"Now then," he said, "what have you got to show me?"

He took photographs of the broken lock and he dusted the garage door for fingerprints. "Nothing useful there," he said. "Just a lot of smudges. They must

have been wearing gloves. I didn't find any useful fingerprints on the car either."

"What about the cell phone they left behind?" I asked.

"Oh that was full of clues," he said. "It had a lot of photographs of his bro waving their arms about in gangsta attitudes, and a whole heap of text messages to his mum."

"I suppose even car thieves have mothers," I mused. "I wonder what she thinks of his evening hobby?"

"Probably not much," said the forensic man. "Now where's the bloody footprint that the report mentioned?"

I took him into the garage and showed him the blood puddles. "I doubt

we'll get much useful DNA from these," he said. "The floor is a bit dirty for that. But that doesn't matter; we got some lovely clean swabs from the blood in the car. I'll take a photo of the footprint though."

He stuck a small paper arrow to the garage floor. It pointed directly at the footprint so that there could be no doubt about exactly what to look at in the photograph. He put a ruled strip of paper down beside the footprint so as to give some indication of scale. Then he took the photograph and picked the pieces of paper up again. He also took a DNA swab, just in case.

"How long will it take to get the DNA results?" I asked.

"Probably about ten days," he said.

"Gosh, that's fast," I said. "I would have expected that it would take at least a month."

"Oh no," he said. "New Zealand has one of the best forensic lab services in the world. We get a very rapid turn round on results." He seemed quietly proud of that, and who could blame him?

The next few days passed in a blur. I was almost constantly on the phone with the police and the insurance company sorting out this and that detail. It seemed that there were an infinite number of i's to cross and t's to dot.

The insurance assessor confirmed

that the car was a write off. It would cost far more to repair than the car itself was worth. In many ways I was pleased about that. I don't think I'd ever have felt comfortable driving it again, and I was particularly not looking forward to sitting on the upholstery that the thief had bled over so profusely. Of course I now had to buy another car and finding the money for that was not going to be easy. The slightly derisory \$3000 that the insurance company was willing to pay out was merely a fraction of what I would have to pay for another set of wheels.

Since the car was being written off, I went to visit the wreck to reclaim

whatever bits and pieces of my personal property might have been left behind. Interestingly, everything was still there. Even the CDs were still sitting happily in their cases. The thieves had not even bothered searching the car for valuables. My opinion of their intelligence plunged to new depths, though their motives remained, if possible, even more murky and puzzling.

The police interviewed the person who had left the cell phone behind. Naturally he denied all knowledge of the crime and, in the absence of any other evidence, they had to let him go. It isn't a crime to leave a cell phone in a stolen car. It implies a lot, but it

doesn't prove anything at all. He voluntarily gave a sample for DNA testing so obviously he was quietly confident that he hadn't left any DNA behind. He wasn't the bleeder.

One week to the day after the car was stolen, Robin and I took delivery of a new (to us) Subaru Legacy. There's a button on the dashboard that, when pressed, causes a coffee cup holder to telescope out into the car. Who could possibly resist a feature like that? It was love at first sight.

Porgy

Porgy the Cat is dead. He was nine years old, which is no great age for a cat. But Porgy had a life full of illness and injury, and his last illness was just too much for him.

However in between the times of pain and fear, he was a happy cat. He didn't ask much from life; just a warm lap, lots of cuddles, yummy food and constant reassurance that his bottom was pretty.

"How does it look this morning?" he would ask anxiously, thrusting his bottom into my face for its daily inspection.

"It looks fine, Porgy. Just perfect."

"Are you sure? I had a feeling that perhaps it was just a little bit asymmetrical today."

"No, no. There's nothing to worry about. It's everything a bottom ought to be."

"Good," said Porgy in tones of deep satisfaction. "Is it breakfast time now?"

"Yes, Porgy. It's breakfast time."

Porgy had one major talent. He was extraordinarily good at identifying the best seat in the house and then sitting in it. The best seat in the house was the seat that I was sitting in. His logic was irrefutable. Alan is in charge of the universe and his choices are always the best. Alan is sitting in that seat.

Therefore that is the best seat in the house. Porgy was a very Aristotelian cat who always thought in syllogisms. None of this new fangled Null-A first order predicate logic for him, thank you very much!

If ever I got up to make a cup of coffee or visit the loo, Porgy would invariably be curled up in the seat I had just vacated when I returned. He would look at me through half closed eyes, pretending to be asleep.

"Porgy!"

"What?"

"You're in my seat again."

"It's the best seat in the house. And it's particularly good today. You had a little fart just before you got up didn't

you?"

"Well, what if I did?"

"It adds a comfortable fragrance. I'm going to sleep now." The eyes would now be fully closed.

I had been out-manoeuvred again! And so I reconciled myself to an evening of watching television from the second best seat in the house; the one that Porgy had just vacated.

I have a habit of stretching out on the sofa when I'm reading a book. I hold the book in my left hand and prop my left arm on the arm of the sofa. This leaves my right hand free to turn the pages and to pick up my glass of beer. Porgy always regarded this as a perfect opportunity for a bottom

inspection. He would plonk himself down on my left arm and tickle my nostrils tactically with his tail while he checked out my book.

"Why are you reading this tripe?"

"It's a good book!"

"No it's not." Porgy could be quite scathing in his disapproval of my reading material. He felt that books should be about important and significant things and he was constantly disappointed to discover just how few people wrote stories about mouse hunts and breakfast biscuits and crackly toy snakes with catnip inside them.

Eventually Porgy's 8.5 kilos of furry book criticism would cut off the

circulation in my left arm. All feeling would vanish and my book would fall to the floor as my nerveless fingers failed to retain their hold on it. When this happened, I was left with no choice -- I had to slide my arm out from underneath Porgy and then massage the life back into it. Sometimes I would scream with the pain of returning circulation. Porgy was usually a bit indignant when I did that.

"Why are you moving your arm and making all that noise?"

"My arm's gone to sleep."

"I'd go to sleep as well, if only you'd lick my bottom. That's what a proper mum would do."

"I'm not your mother, Porgy. I don't

want to lick your bottom. Why don't you do it yourself?"

"Oh all right."

And then, after a thorough bottom lick, he would fall asleep.

He was always quite choosy about where he slept. When he was just a little kitten, his favourite place to sleep was a kitten sized basket with a fur lining. He could curl up in its warm softness and just drift away. He never lost his fondness for that basket, even though he couldn't fit into it any more. No matter how tightly he curled himself up, he could only ever get the tip of his tummy in. The rest of him overflowed its tiny boundaries in every direction. Nevertheless it remained a

favourite. He knew what he was sleeping in even if the rest of the world couldn't tell that it was there at all once he'd plonked himself down on it and covered it up completely.

Porgy didn't have many domestic chores, but one duty that he took very seriously involved him supervising my morning shower to make sure I did it right. He would wait outside the bathroom door until the sound of running water stopped and then, while I was briskly towelling my naughty bits, he would push the door open and wander casually in.

"Morning, Alan," he would say.
"How was the shower today?"

"Pretty good, thank you Porgy.

Warm, wet, soapy. Just like it's supposed to be."

"I still need to check it out and confirm that you did it properly."

Then he would go into the shower cabinet and lick up the soapy residue with the air of a wine connoisseur tasting a vintage unoaked Chardonnay. Except he never spat it out.

"Yes, a definite hint of sweat with an overtone of soap and a finish of unmentionable bodily fluids in the back of the throat. Tastes like you really did clean all the nasties off yourself. I'll let you go to work now."

"Thank you Porgy."

He hated Sundays. I don't shower on Sundays because it's a day of rest.

On the other hand, Sundays often found me chopping raw meat for a casserole. This invariably attracted an audience of adoring cats. Porgy always made sure that he got his unfair share of the leftovers. Perhaps there were compensations for the lack of showers that day.

Porgy didn't move around much; that's one reason why he weighed 8.5 kilos. When he was a young cat he broke his back legs and had to have both hip joints surgically removed. This meant that he had to learn to walk all over again and my heart went out to him as I watched him struggle with this.

But he was a courageous cat. He

had the heart of a lion, and he never gave up. Slowly, painfully slowly, he learned to support himself again and to put one foot in front of the other. He never re-developed much muscular strength at the back of his body after this, and his rear legs remained very weak for the rest of his life. He compensated (some might say he over-compensated) by developing enormous muscles in his front legs and chest. He used his massive front legs to haul himself along and to pull himself up trees, fences and furniture and on to laps. Both Robin and I have permanent scars on our thighs where Porgy dug in the pitons that he used for front claws so that he could heave the rest of

himself up into a comfortable sleeping position. And the mattress on our bed leaks stuffing from the holes he left when he joined us each evening so that he could wrap himself around our heads and purr loudly in our ears all night, thus preventing us from sleeping and leaving us tetchy and bad tempered all the next day. Porgy enjoyed that a lot -- it was his major hobby.

Because he was so hugely strong and wide-bodied at the front and so comparatively thin and weak at the back, he looked a little lopsided and deformed. It was easy to understand and sympathise with his obsessive worry about the symmetry of his bottom.

One of his favourite places in all the world was a hydrangea bush by the side of the house. He could hide inside it and absolutely nobody except me knew that he was there. From this place of safety he could watch the world go by. Unfortunately not a lot of the world went by since the hydrangea was well inside our garden, far away from the street where the action was. But all the things that really mattered to Porgy were always there for him to watch. There were blades of grass moving in the wind and sometimes a bee would bumble by. However the highlight of his hydrangea day was when he noticed legs walking past. If he recognised them (in other words, when they were

my legs) he would always chirrup "Hello", so that I would stop and pat him.

And if he kept ever so, ever so still (not a hardship for Porgy; stillness was his default state) he might catch a butterfly or possibly even a mentally defective lizard which he could bring inside the house and boast about.

Once I saw him staring at a hedgehog. It stared back.

"What do I do now?" asked Porgy. "It's got too many pointy bits."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not well versed in cat and hedgehog etiquette. Whatever you do, don't show it your bottom. Why not just run away?"

"Good idea," said Porgy. And that's

just what he did.

We have buried his ashes under the hydrangea bush where he spent so many contemplative hours. The silence when I walk past is deafening; but there is some comfort in knowing that he is still there, still watching over all the important and interesting parts of his world.

Toast

Toast is the most important and versatile item in the gastronomic universe. At breakfast time it suppresses the pangs of night starvation. At lunch time it adds interest to boring sandwiches and in the evening, in homoeopathic quantities, it can be imbibed in a celebratory manner.

"Gentlemen, The Queen!"

"God bless her, and all who sail in her!"

Let me tell you about toast...

When I was a child we had a toasting fork and, as a special treat, I

was sometimes allowed to spear slices of bread and toast them on the glowing embers of the coal fire in the dining room. Getting the toast perfect was a precise and delicate skill. The toasting fork had to be angled correctly and the bread had to be just the right distance from the coals. Failure in either of these things could ruin the whole enterprise. I had no great problems with distance, but angles were tricky; the bread had a tendency to slide around on the prongs of the fork, and on more than one occasion a minute adjustment of the slant would cause the bread to fall off the fork and land in the fire, thus defeating the whole purpose of the exercise. But when everything

came properly together, the toast was just perfect. It was golden and crisp with an elusive, smoky piquancy that tantalised the taste buds. Knowing what I know now about the combustion products of coal, I am not entirely sure that eating all that toasting fork toast was a good idea. But gosh, it was yummy!

We also had a toaster, but my mother was highly dubious about it. If left unsupervised, it had a tendency to produce lumps of charcoal rather than legitimate toast. When this happened, my mother became somewhat agitated at the waste of bread.

"Eat your toast!"

"But mum, it's all black and

burned."

"Charcoal is a well known antidote for arsenic poisoning. Eat your toast!"

"But I haven't been poisoned with arsenic."

"How do you know that? Napoleon died a slow, lingering death from all the arsenic in the paste that stuck the wallpaper to his bedroom walls. These things take time. Eat your toast!"

That sounded interesting. How do you get poisoned by your wallpaper?

"How did that happen, mum? Did he commit suicide by eating the wallpaper? Do you have to eat a whole wall full, or will small strips from a dark corner do just as well? Perhaps he put it in his pipe and smoked it? If I

promise not to eat or smoke the wallpaper in my bedroom, can I be excused toast?"

"Prevention is better than cure. Eat your toast!"

I ate my toast. And, being full, I didn't eat my wallpaper, thereby proving that toast really does protect you from the wallpaper's deadly dangers. Always listen to your mother. Mothers are invariably correct.

Mostly my mother made toast in the grill. The grill was at eye level so she could observe it at all times and could easily remove the tray from the heat when the toast was perfect. My mum's toast was always perfect...

An ideal piece of toast is golden

brown from edge to edge, with not a trace of black or burned bread to be seen. Once the bread has toasted, it must be allowed to cool. Only barbarians butter their toast while it is hot. Toast is not blotting paper; it is not supposed to be absorbent.

Toast cooling mechanisms are also very important for that perfect final result. Ideally the toast should be placed in a toast rack (we had a lovely silver Georgian toast rack -- I wonder what happened to it?). A toast rack holds the individual slices of toast a carefully calculated distance apart so that the steam from the hot toast can escape into the atmosphere without condensing on the surface of the toast.

If you don't have a toast rack, it is also quite acceptable to prop the slices of toast together at an acute angle as if you are building a house of cards with them. Under no circumstances should the toast be left lying flat while it cools. The steam will condense beneath the toast and it will soak up the water like a sponge, becoming pliable rather than friable, soggy and quite disgusting.

Once the toast has cooled, a thin layer of butter should be applied. The butter should stretch from edge to edge but no further; no toast surface at all should be exposed and there should be no buttery overhangs. If any butter at all soaks into the toast, then you

buttered it too soon and it is now ruined. Throw it away and start toasting again.

The buttered toast should then be covered with marmalade; preferably Seville orange marmalade, though other orange marmalades are acceptable if the real stuff is temporarily unavailable. Some people prefer grapefruit based marmalades. I am not one of these people, but I can understand the craving.

On the other hand, heathens, barbarians, philistines and people who are utterly beyond the pale like to cover their toast with peanut butter, vegemite, marmite or jam. Such people are barely human and they are

absolutely never invited to the best parties.

Eating a slice of toast excites all the senses. There is the simple aesthetic perfection of the layered symmetry of the presentation; the mingled scents of bread, butter and oranges and then the crisp texture of the toast itself as your teeth take that first succulent bite and a delectable *crunch* sound echoes through your aural cavities. The crispness is complemented by the smooth silky softness of the butter which itself is overlaid with the bitter tang of Seville oranges. All these things combine together into a truly perfect gastronomic delight. Trust me -- when

the Gods on Mount Olympus become bored with ambrosia, they eat toast.

When I was a student, we didn't have a toaster. All we had was a solid hot plate. After some experimenting, we discovered that toast can indeed be made on a hot plate, though it requires close observation and more than a little skill. Simply turn the hot plate up as high as it will go, slap a slice of bread on, turn the bread over just before it bursts into flames, repeat the same formula for the second side, and then remove the toast and eat it. We charcoaled a lot of bread before we finally learned how to precisely identify the flash point, but, on the bright side, none of us ever died of

arsenic poisoning and the wallpaper remained unchewed.

This simple toast recipe proved both tasty and fraught with peril. For mysterious chemical reasons that we never quite managed to solve, toast prepared in this manner proved to be a highly effective laxative. We had only two toilets between ten of us.

Consequently an evening of toast tended to involve much buttock clenching. But we were addicted to toast and we were quite unable to stop preparing and eating it...

You cannot get toast in hotels. It often appears on the breakfast menu, but nevertheless, it remains elusive and largely unavailable.

Some hotels take the easy way out and require you to order your toast and then wait for it to arrive. Experience suggests that you can read at least two newspapers from cover to cover before the toast appears. And when it does finally arrive, you are invariably presented with two slices of lukewarm bread rather than with toast. Obviously the bread has been slapped in a toaster or put in a grill for about thirty seconds in order to take the chill off, and then sent out to your table. So why does it take so long to prepare? I have never been able to solve this conundrum.

The two slices of lukewarm bread will cost you \$14. More "toast" will cost you incrementally more; \$7 a slice

every time. Do they bake hotel bread with gold dust instead of flour?

Other hotels provide toasting mechanisms in the breakfast room and you are expected to make your own toast. Since the hotel staff have no hand in the preparation of the toast, this represents an obvious cost saving to the hotel. Consequently such self-prepared toast is charged at \$10 a slice.

The most common device for making your own hotel toast is a machine with a conveyor belt that sucks your bread deep into its interior, passes the bread across a red hot grill and then spits it out again. The slower the conveyor speed, the more time the bread spends beneath the grill and the

darker the toast. At least that's the theory. It tends not to work very well in practice.

The first time you send your bread through the machine, it invariably re-appears barely toasted at all. Therefore you send it through a second time whereupon clouds of smoke arise from the machine. The over-toasted bread re-appears as charcoal. Your day is ruined, though you do remain safe from arsenical wallpaper.

I have never, ever found one of these machines that could produce proper toast -- they seem capable only of extremes. One such machine in one hotel was so badly adjusted that it required multiple passes of the bread

before it became even faintly toast like. A breakfast patron lost patience with it and sent his bread through once too often. The smoke alarms went off, the sprinkler system kicked in and the breakfast room had to be evacuated. The wallpaper in the hotel was alarmingly chewed that day as starving guests roamed the corridors like zombies.

"Toast! Toast"

"Brains!"

"Trout!"

No, I was not that breakfaster, and yes it really did happen.

Now you know the secret lore of toast. However the rules of toast do not necessarily apply to other toastable

products -- and they particularly do not apply to crumpets. Unlike toast, a crumpet should never be left to cool. Crumpets are designed to be buttered and eaten when piping hot. The molten butter is supposed to be soaked up by the crumpet and then slowly disgorged as you chew.

The perfect crumpet is warm, fragrant, moist and slightly greasy. That's why Englishmen refer to their girlfriends as "...a bit of crumpet."

Observations

It is Easter and therefore the shops are closed for two days. Along with everyone else in the country, I developed a fear of starvation and so I went to the supermarket in order to stock up.

It was, of course, seething with people. I drove round the car park three times before a shopper with a boot full of goodies finally finished packing their car and drove away. I pulled into the space before anyone else noticed it and then ran the gauntlet of cruising cars, all desperately looking for a parking slot before arriving safely at

the supermarket doors. I grabbed a trolley and went inside. The shelves were getting quite bare. Stocks, particularly fresh food stocks, were not being replenished as the supermarket itself wound down for the holiday.

I wandered round, buying the things I normally buy. Fresh vegetables, bread, avocado oil. I found that I was completely unable to buy caviare, stuffed vine leaves, Dijon mustard, sesame oil and venison brains.

Fortunately I had no immediate need for any of them, but I did wonder what on Earth the people who had stripped the shelves bare of these items were going to be doing with themselves over Easter.

As a special Easter treat I also bought some rather nice pork which I intend to turn into a huge pot of curry over the weekend. And, just in case I ran out, I made sure to buy lots and lots of onions. I have a theory about cooking: first fry your onions and then decide what you are going to cook. Everything starts with onions. Probably that's why I don't make desserts -- people get quite horrified when I serve them Black Forest Gateau on a base of fried onions.

Whenever I go shopping for groceries, I enjoy observing the contents of other people's trolleys. Why is that lady buying 15 two-litre bottles of coke? Will she buy another

15 next week? I wonder if she (and, presumably, her children) have any teeth left? That man over there probably lives alone and doesn't know how to look after himself. He has nothing but tins and packages of pre-prepared frozen dinners in his trolley. I feel quite sorry for him. That lady is owned by at least 10 very hungry cats. Look at the huge pile of gourmet cat food cans in her trolley! Tucked in one corner, hiding behind all the cans, is a small packet of mince, a leek and a carrot. She won't be eating very much today, but her cats will be happy.

Easter trolleys are twice as entertaining as ordinary weekend trolleys. That man is having a barbecue

and everyone in the country is invited. I didn't know there were that many sausages in the world! How did he manage to squeeze them all in to his trolley? I wonder if he has heard the weather forecast. Does he know it is going to rain all over Easter? That man has the right idea -- he has 5 dozen bottles of beer and a packet of peanuts in his trolley. I suspect that he bought the peanuts because that was all that he could fit into the trolley after he put 5 dozen bottles of beer into it. In my opinion, he doesn't have nearly enough peanuts to go with the beer, but after the first dozen, I doubt if he will care. Why has that extraordinarily slim young lady crammed her trolley full of

pork chops that appear to be all fat and almost no pork? How does she stay so slim? Perhaps they aren't for her own consumption; she obviously hates her husband and is trying to kill him with a heart attack. That young couple's trolley has a bottle of champagne, some smoked salmon, a cream cake and a packet of K-Y Brand His and Hers lubricant. Happy Easter!

I have 877 ebooks on my iPad. I haven't paid for any of them because they are all, quite legitimately, available as free downloads. Soon I will have 878 ebooks on my iPad because I have actually bought and paid for my first ever commercially

produced ebook. I had to pre-order it; it won't be published for another couple of weeks or so. But I'll download it as soon as it becomes available.

Will I ever read all 878 books? Probably not. It's more a case of just wanting to own them all, simply because I can. And of course there's also the very science fictional thrill that I get from carrying a whole library around with me.

In 1989, Ben Bova wrote a satirical (and very prescient) novel called **Cyberbooks** in which he accurately predicted pretty much everything that has actually come to pass in the ebook world, together with quite a lot that hasn't happened (yet). The novel is

about an MIT software engineer called Carl Lewis, the inventor of the first electronic book. He is absolutely certain that his invention will revolutionize the publishing industry and bring enormous benefits to everybody. The coming of ebooks will make books inexpensive and therefore available to everybody everywhere. Unfortunately the publishers do not agree with this viewpoint. Much mayhem ensues. Ironically, **Cyberbooks** is now itself available as an ebook.

Fifty years ago Yuri Gagarin became the first human being in space. He wasn't the first living thing to leave

the Earth That honour belongs to Laika, a Russian dog, who was blasted into orbit in Sputnik 2 on November 3rd 1957. She died in orbit -- she was always intended to die in orbit, Sputnik was not designed to re-enter the atmosphere and return to Earth. Nobody had figured out how to do that yet. There is a statue of Laika and a plaque commemorating her at Star City, the Russian cosmonaut training facility.

I grew up knowing that space travel was real. The newspapers were full of space stories. After some initial setbacks, America was soon orbiting animals of its own -- chimpanzees, all of whom returned safely to Earth.

Then, in a blaze of publicity, seven astronauts were chosen for manned missions. Presumably the Russians were also busy doing the same thing, but they weren't telling anyone what they were up to. So it came as quite a surprise, to me at least, when Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth.

I was amazed at the wonder and excitement of it all. I wanted to be an astronaut. I knew I could never be a cosmonaut because I didn't speak Russian. But surely I could be an astronaut?

Alan Shepard was the first American in space. He was my hero. He had the same first name as me! Almost a month after Gagarin orbited

the Earth, Shepard flew his spacecraft (Freedom 7) on a suborbital, ballistic trajectory. Because of delays in the countdown, Shepard had to lie there in his capsule for hour after hour after unending hour as technical problems were discovered and overcome. By the time his rocket eventually blasted off, Shepard was very relieved in every sense of the word. He made his flight lying in a puddle of cold urine.

Space flight suddenly didn't seem quite as romantic as once it had. Perhaps I should be a computer programmer instead? The only problem with that ambition was that there was no such thing as a computer programmer yet. Never mind -- I could

wait, and I did.

To Cook Or Not To Cook? That Is The Question...

The cooker in my kitchen wasn't quite as old as me, but I ran it a very close race. When it was cooking its first meal, the Beatles were at the top of the charts and I was struggling with the intricacies of the ablative absolute in Latin classes half a world away. So when the cooker and I finally made our acquaintance, we were both of us well past the first flush of youth.

It was brown -- well, either that or there had been an awful lot of food

spilled on it over the years. This gave it a somewhat gloomy appearance.

Considering when it was born, it really should have been enamelled in day-glo orange, but I'm very glad it wasn't.

The timer was clockwork, and its cogs and gears were so congested with the grease from a million joints of roast beef that it was no longer capable of timing anything at all, unless the dish required infinitely long cooking. Very few recipe books recommend cooking times that long...

The oven was suffering from senile dementia. It would warm itself up nicely to something slightly above the temperature that I'd selected -- the thermostat was not the most accurate in

the world and it tended towards the hotter rather than towards the colder -- and happily sit there for a few minutes. Then it would forget that it had already heated itself up, and so it would turn on its coils again for a little while. The temperature would start to rise well above the setting on the thermostat. But after a few minutes, the cooker would remember that it had forgotten that the job was already done, and so the coils would go off again. Then a short time later it would once more forget that it had remembered that it had already reached the optimum temperature, and so the coils would turn on again as the cycle repeated itself. If left alone, this behaviour

always resulted in an oven set with an initial temperature of (say) 150 degrees which had reached a final temperature of 350 degrees with all the elements glowing white hot as they desperately tried to raise it even higher. Since food cooked in this manner tends towards the excessively crispy, I therefore had to keep a very close eye on the oven in order to discourage its demented behaviour. And so every time it turned itself on, I would dial the temperature down a bit until it turned itself off again. Thus a constant oven temperature of 150 degrees (give or take 50 degrees) was cleverly maintained by lower and lower settings on the controls. By the time the

cooking was done, the oven would still be somewhere in the region of 150 degrees, even though the dial would now be set to round about 10 degrees and my nerves would have frazzled themselves into shredded wreckage.

I compensated for this eccentricity by seldom using the oven at all. Fortunately there were four powerful hotplates on the top. These worked quite well and over the years they cooked me many a successful stew, casserole and curry. I find it hard to tell these three dishes apart -- I think the differences depend far more upon the guests at the table than they do upon the ingredients of the food itself. If

your guests won't eat nasty foreign muck, just tell them it's a stew; if they find stews dull and old fashioned, tell them it's a casserole and if they find casseroles too bland tell them it's a curry. Make sure that you serve the appropriate side dishes for whatever you have decided the main course is pretending to be and Robert is your avuncular relative. Works every time!

And then, one weekend, the hotplates decided to play the same silly games that the oven was playing. None of this slow simmering, thank you very much. Slow simmering is for wimps. Lets get it over and done with. Up with the temperature! Soon the hotplates were able to give me only two

temperature choices. On and off. Yin and yang. Hot and cold. Top and bottom. Maximum and minimum. Up and down. Black and white. Computer nerd though I am, I simply couldn't face the future with a binary only cooker. Culinary creations require far more subtlety than that. It was time for a new cooker. Sunday morning dawned bright and clear; a perfect time to head off to the showrooms!

It soon became clear to me that modern cookers came in two flavours. Cheap white ones and expensive stainless steel ones. Brown was definitely not possible in either incarnation. Unfortunately, even the cheap white ones were priced in the

eye-watering range as far as my wallet was concerned. And the stainless steel ones, while undeniably sexy, were about the same price as a luxury car, with almost as many gadgets but without the ability to roar down the motorway at 100kph.

I pointed to the cheapest of the cheap white ones, four rings and an oven, just like my old brown one.

"I'll have that cooker, please."

"Certainly sir. When would you like it delivered?"

"Tuesday, please. And will you take the old one away and dispose of it?"

"Of course we will, sir. Would you like us to give it a long, lingering, painful death or would you prefer a

quick and easy euthanasia?"

"Oh, the latter, please. I don't want it to suffer. I'm not a cruel man."

That afternoon I cooked my last ever meal on the old brown cooker. I played the usual game of temperature tag with the senile oven. I think it must have known that its end was nigh because it bit me viciously as I took the roasting pan out, and I now have a vivid burn on the back of my right hand which shows promise of an interesting scar.

Tuesday dawned and two men delivered my new cooker. One of the men looked like Russell Crowe and one of them didn't. They wheeled the new cooker in to the house and the one who

didn't look like Russell Crowe said, "Watch out for the snake," to the one who did look like Russell Crowe as he walked past the toy rattlesnake that we have hanging from a lamp on the wall. I rattled the tail and the one who looked like Russell Crowe smiled a secret smile.

The one who didn't look like Russell Crowe unplugged the old cooker and then disconnected its power cable which he left neatly coiled on the kitchen sink ready for the electrician to connect to the new cooker. They took the old cooker away. It whimpered pitifully as it left the house it had lived in for nearly fifty years, but I hardened my heart. The one who looked like

Russell Crowe patted the snake as he walked past it and it bit him on the bum.

While I waited for the electrician to come and connect up the new cooker, I passed the time by cleaning up several decades worth of greasy, brown manky bits that the old cooker had excreted all over the floor beneath itself. Despite the advice given in the TV adverts for miracle cleaning products, you can't just spray and wipe this stuff away. Prolonged and vigorous scrubbing is essential. And even then it doesn't necessarily work too well, particularly when the goo has been there for so long that it has fossilised into something closely resembling a collection of

coprolites. Perhaps I was cleaning a very old and very gradual increment of excrement!

Eventually I got the area vaguely clean and then the electrician arrived.

The first thing he did was screw a complicated looking device to the floor.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's an anti-tilt device," he said.

"What's an anti-tilt device? And why do I need one? The old cooker didn't have one."

"It's the law now," he explained.

"You see, in the years following the delivery of your old cooker, far too many little old ladies opened their oven doors, bent down to inspect their

scones, and then slipped and fell onto the open oven door. Their weight on the door caused the oven to tilt forwards and fall down on top of them, crushing them to death and getting the scones dirty. This was widely regarded as being bad for business and therefore all modern cookers are required by law to have an anti-tilt device so that when the little old ladies fall across their oven door the cooker stays upright and they live to bake more scones."

"What a good idea," I said. "How does it work?"

"Oh it just hooks into the back of the stove and holds it firmly in place so that forces from unexpected angles won't topple it over. It works in

earthquakes as well."

"Presumably that's an unexpected side effect?" I asked.

"Oh, indeed," he said.

He wired it all up, tested it out and said, "There you are, squire. All done. Happy cooking!"

It's my first ever brand new cooker. All the cookers I have used in the past have been pre-loved and have exhibited various eccentricities of control caused by miscellaneous bits wearing out and being replaced by things that weren't quite right or, in some cases by not being replaced at all. So I was quite looking forward to playing with a cooker that had all its mechanisms in place and which did everything exactly

as it was told to do; no more and no less. I carefully planned the first week's menus in order to make the maximum possible use of every cooking surface available to me rather than for the sake of any nutritional content in the food itself. That meant that I could get the greatest possible cooking pleasure from my new toy.

As might be expected, I had some initial timing issues because years of coping with ancient and eccentric cookers had given me all the wrong reflexes.

The first major setback was caused by the oven heating itself up to the temperature I'd told it I wanted and then just stayed there. This was quite

an unexpected surprise. I'd completely forgotten that ovens did that. And because the oven never overheated itself, the vegetables roasting in it proved to be nowhere near ready when the stew/casserole/curry on top was thoroughly cooked. Fortunately stews/casseroles/curries are very forgiving of longer cooking times than they are expecting. It's the long, slow simmering that makes them so flavourful and my new hotplates had such exact fingertip temperature control that very long and very slow simmering was easily attained. "A stew boiled is a stew spoiled" as the old wives words of wisdom have it. They know what they are talking about, those

old wives. Pay attention to them. I set the stew/casserole/curry to barely bubble and when the vegetables in the oven finally caught up with the simmering feast, the result was scrumptious.

I've been practising a lot and I think I've got the hang of it now. So do you want to come to dinner? I promise to try and guess who you are (obligatory movie joke for all you media fans out there...

Beer And Just Desserts

So there we were, sitting in the hotel at the SF convention and thinking about food, as you do.

"Let's go to Galbraiths," said Simon. Galbraiths serves beer brewed on the premises to traditional recipes. To accompany the beer, it serves hearty grub. Simon's suggestion was received with universal cries of appreciation and one very important question.

"How do we get to Galbraiths?" I asked.

"I'll consult a native guide," said Simon and he shot off to find one. Soon

he returned, full of information. "It's fifteen minutes walk in that direction," he declared.

We gathered our hats and our coats and walked in that direction. An hour later, a certain amount of disquiet began to make itself felt.

"Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" asked Robin.

"It's raining, and there's a hole in my shoe, dear Lisa, dear Lisa," I said.

"I recognise this street," said Simon. "Galbraiths is fifteen minutes walk in that direction."

Eventually this statement turned out to be true, and Galbraiths loomed large before us. Cold and wet and tired, we staggered gratefully into its

welcoming warmth. I ordered a pint of Bitter and Twisted, a classic ESB style beer. Simon had a Grafton Porter, a pitch black ale, thick and hearty, one of the basic food groups, best drunk with a knife and fork. Robin had a Bohemian Pilsner, a full bodied lager tasting faintly of Czechoslovakia.

"How about some food?"

I ordered Bangers and Mash, sausages laced with Galbraiths Bellringers Best Bitter and served with savoy cabbage and creamy mashed spud. Simon had Fish and Chips, fresh fish fried in Galbraiths Bohemian Pilsner batter served with tartare sauce and hand cut chips. Robin had Black Treacle Sponge Pudding.

"Why are you starting with dessert?" I asked.

"In case there's an earthquake before we finish the meal," Robin explained, giving me a don't be an idiot look. "I don't want to miss out on dessert."

"This part of the country doesn't have earthquakes," Simon pointed out. "It has volcanoes instead."

"All the more reason to start with pudding," said Robin. "Think how silly I'd feel if a volcano erupted through the floor and I hadn't had anything sweet yet."

Galbraiths used to be a public library. It's a beautiful old building with polished wooden floors and

timbered walls. On cold wet days a hearty fire roars in the fireplace. I confess that I'm torn. In my opinion, libraries should stay as libraries. Books are precious. But on the other hand Galbraiths serves wonderful beer. In the days when I lived in Auckland, I sometimes visited Galbraiths alone and drank my beer while reading a book.

With my food I drank an Antipodean Pale Ale, much like the famous IPA but perhaps hoppier. The first mouthful is hugely bitter, requiring sausages to cleanse the palate. But after that the maltiness seeps through and leads to a dry, hoppy finish. Definitely a beer for the hop fanatic. Robin drank a Bellringers

Bitter, claiming that the copper colour and fruity finish offset her treacle sponge perfectly. Simon had a Bob Hudson bitter, named in honour of the man who taught Mr Galbraith to brew beer. It is a tangy, refreshing bitter ideal for session drinking. I knew a man who drank a pint of this every day of his life. It killed him in the end.

Of course, he was 102 years old at the time.

Now it was time for dessert. I had black treacle sponge pudding, Simon had bread and butter pudding and Robin had the Fish Of The Day.

Then it was time to return to the hotel. There was universal agreement that walking back was not an option

and so we called a taxi. The taxi driver was a Johnny Cash fanatic and he played "Ring Of Fire" at full volume throughout the journey.

"Oh listen," I said, "he's playing the vindaloo curry

One Cat, Two Cats, Black Cat, Tabby Cat

Harpo The Stealth Cat is the master of a minimalist feline martial art called delayogami. When you approach him in order to give him a pat he will, if he is in a bad mood (which he always is), lash out with one lightning fast, razor tipped paw. The rest of his body doesn't move a muscle. Harpo does not believe in unnecessary effort. You withdraw your hand immediately, of course.

"Ha, ha! Missed me again," you chortle triumphantly and you go about your business. Harpo returns happily to sleep. He knows something that you

don't, and five minutes later, just when you are least expecting it, the pain hits you like a hammer blow and the blood begins to flow, dripping redly onto the pages of your book and obscuring vital sentences. Stealth cat wins again! Cursing, you head off to the bathroom in search of antiseptic cream and sticking plaster. Harpo grins malevolently in his sleep.

He's lived with us now for about seven years. He's big, black, sleek, powerful and vicious; the lord of all he surveys. There's no trace left at all of the cold, wet, starving, flea-ridden bundle of desperate fur that turned up so pathetically on our doorstep all those years ago. He knows that he is in

charge of the world and he isn't scared of anything in it except visitors and vacuum cleaners. Since the lady who comes once a fortnight to clean our house is a visitor *with* a vacuum cleaner he finds her doubly scary and she has never seen anything of him except his fluffy tail racing desperately for the undergrowth. She treats my sticking plastered fingers with scorn. "He's a scaredy cat, he'd never hurt you!"

Since Harpo is demonstrably scared of visitors and vacuum cleaners, I suspect that he may also be scared of violins, vibrators, volcanoes, Visigoths, vintage volutes and vegetarian vindaloo. Fortunately for his peace of

mind he has not yet come across any of these. Once a year he definitely proves himself to be frightened of both vaccinations and vets. I shudder to think what might happen should he ever encounter a vampire or a Volkswagen. I have no explanation for his monomaniacal alphabetic neurosis. I asked him about it once.

"I find it valuable for ventilating voles when I'm hunting," he told me, leaving me none the wiser.

Sometimes, late at night when he is sure that nobody is looking and when there is a 'q' in the month, he turns into Harpo The Cuddle Cat. The claws retract, the red gleam in his eyes dies away and he climbs on to a lap, his

motor revving loudly in top gear. He snuggles and wriggles, demanding to be patted. Because we are too scared of him to disobey, we stop whatever we are doing and do as we are told. He radiates bliss from every molecule. Occasionally he dribbles.

Harpo is a long haired cat. Long haired cats need regular brushing in order to keep their fur sleek. However Harpo hates having his fur brushed. People who try and brush him are immediately terminated with extreme prejudice. As a result of this policy, his fur is generally matted and tangled and full of dags. Every so often we have to take him to the vet to be de-dagged.

"Hello Harpo," says the vet. "How

are you today?"

"Kill, kill!" says Harpo. The subtleties of delayogami are put to one side. Flesh is going to be shredded.

"I'll let the nurse do this," says the vet as his mangled fingers drip blood. "It's just routine."

The nurse is already dressed in a suit of armour. She is equipped with electric shears. The magic sword Excalibur, sometimes called the Scourge of Felines, is sheathed in a scabbard on her back. The hilt peeks coyly over her left shoulder. She carries Harpo off into the back room. The spitting and swearing dies away into the distance. Eventually the nurse and Harpo return. He is now a short

haired cat with bald spots and a bad mood. The nurse's armour hangs in shreds. Both she and Harpo are exhausted. Harpo glares at me.

"Just wait till I get you home," he threatens.

"I'm cooking a casserole tonight," I tell him. "How about I give you some raw beef?"

"I *might* forgive you eventually."

Now that Porgy is dead, Harpo is top cat. His Hairy Majesty takes this duty very seriously and he spends much more time at home than once he did. He sleeps on guard, one ear poised to listen for Bess who must periodically be reminded that she is bottom cat. Harpo is not currently

aware that I have photographs of him and Bess curled up asleep together on the sofa, radiating peace and perfect harmony. One day, when the occasion demands it, I will embarrass him with these pictures and blackmail him into not ripping me apart.

Bess seems to know that something fundamental has changed in her life now that Porgy has vanished. It is hard to say whether or not she misses him (she paid very little attention to him when he was around, though she did bring him get well soon rats when he was sick). She has definitely grown more needy of late, constantly requiring laps and cuddles and reassurance. "Please don't send me to

wherever you sent Porgy. I don't want to go. Please keep me here at home with you."

She follows us from room to room. She hates to lose sight of us. If I didn't shut the toilet door she'd even keep me company in there. Sometimes as I sit on the throne reading a book and contemplating the infinite, there are scratches at the door and pathetic whimperings from outside.

She insists on sleeping on the bed with us at night. Of course, it is winter at the moment and very cold, and the bed is very warm. Even Harpo, who is hard and tough and totally impervious to the extremes of wind, rain, sleet, snow and temperature, sometimes

sleeps on the bed these days. It's easy to be cynical when you are owned by cats.

Both Bess and Harpo continue to supplement their diet with rats, mice, lizards and the occasional bird. Bess invariably brings her prey into the lounge so that we can properly admire her skills as a hunter. Robin, who is in charge of corpses, semi-corpse and vomit (all of which are closely connected to each other), has enormous fun chasing the semi-corpse round the room. There are an amazing number of hiding places in the average lounge and Robin is intimately familiar with all of them.

"Bess, Bess -- take it outside!"

Bess looks puzzled. "But it's yours now. I don't want it any more. Look! Quick! It has run underneath the stereo. Oh! You are hopeless!"

Robin arms herself with a long pokey thing and sweeps it back and forth beneath the stereo. The semi-corpse runs out and hides underneath the sofa. It's going to be a long night...

Harpo is a much more pragmatic hunter and all his trophies are immediately taken into the bath where he carefully dismantles them and arranges the bits and pieces artistically across the porcelain. This makes it very easy for us to clean up the mess, of course, though it does have a negative impact on our enthusiasm for taking

baths. We have been careful not to tell Harpo how much we appreciate his hunting habits in case he stops doing it out of sheer feline perversity.

One cat, two cats, black cat, tabby cat. These are the cats today.

Alan And Robin Go Troppo

Deep in the frozen Antarctic wastes, the Ice God stirred, yawned hugely and woke up. There was a cat sitting on his chest, purring and dribbling. It was so cold in the Ice God's bedroom that the saliva dripping from the cat's mouth froze as soon as it hit the icy air and the icicles hanging from the cat's mouth gave it the appearance of a sabre-toothed tiger. One of its ears was ripped and bleeding.

The Ice God scratched his shaggy armpit and said, "What are you doing

here, Greymalkin? Why did you wake me up?"

"I've just come back from a trip to New Zealand," said Greymalkin. "I was having a talk with my cousin Harpo The Devil Cat."

"I remember him," said the Ice God and he shuddered with fear. "He's the utterly evil master of delayogami who lives with Alan and Robin."

"That's him," said Greymalkin, and he too shivered with fear, though he pretended it was just from the cold because he was a cat, and that's what cats do. "Harpo told me that Alan and Robin are about to go for a holiday on Rarotonga, a beautiful Pacific Island, and that means that he and his adopted

sister Bess will have to go to the cattery at Purrville. They don't want to go, so Harpo suggested that perhaps you might want to help them out."

"Suggested?" queried the Ice God.

"That's right," said Greymalkin.

"And he lashed out at my ear, just to give me a reminder."

"Delayogami?" asked the Ice God.

"Indeed," said Greymalkin gloomily. "It didn't start to bleed or hurt until I was almost back here. He's good, that Harpo. Very, very good indeed."

"Well," said the Ice God, "I suppose we'd better do as he asked. I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Harpo."

The Ice God struggled out of bed,

and with Greymalkin at his side, he walked down the corridor to the control room where the storm rheostats were kept. Starting from the left, he moved every rheostat up to its maximum setting. Outside the control room, the Ice God and Greymalkin could hear the rumbling birth of a huge winter storm. The Ice God adjusted the directional vector control and the storm headed North, straight for New Zealand.

"That should do it," said the Ice God.

"Crude," said Greymalkin, "but probably very effective. I think I might go to Rarotonga myself, just to keep out of its way." He slowly faded from view like a Cheshire Cat, but instead of

leaving his smile behind, he left his icicle sabre teeth. They tinkled to the floor and the Ice God swept them under a bench. Then he went back to bed.

* * * *

By Saturday I was starting to worry. We were due to fly out of Wellington at sparrowfart on Tuesday. The flight from Wellington to Auckland connected with a flight from Auckland to Rarotonga at sparrowfart plus two. There wasn't a lot of leeway in the schedule. A delayed flight out of Wellington would be catastrophic. And it was starting to look as though delays were going to be inevitable. The weather forecasts were predicting

blizzards throughout most of the country, and by Saturday morning the bottom of the South Island was completely covered in snow. All the airports in the South Island were closed and so were all the roads. The storm was heading inexorably for Wellington and was predicted to reach its peak ferocity on Tuesday morning. The view from my window was not looking good.

"Robin," I called, "come and look out of the window."

Robin was knitting something mysterious, seamless and tube-like on a circular needle. "Just let me finish this row," she quipped. After a few minutes of serious knitting she said,

"OK. What can you see out of the window?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's snowing and the visibility is zero."

"What?"

"Snow is falling out of the sky in fluffy lumps and covering the lawn."

"But it doesn't snow in Wellington."

"It does now."

For the first time in living memory snow was falling on the capital city. The hill suburbs were soon white and shiny and there was even snow all the way down to sea level. Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. It dominated the front page of the newspapers and it was the first story on

the television news. Who cared about trivial things like the financial crisis or wars in far off sandy countries? There was snow in Wellington. It was unprecedented.

Our lawn quickly vanished under several inches of snow and I could see cars slipping and sliding up and down the road. There would be black ice on the road by tomorrow as the overnight temperature plummeted. If the snow kept on falling, the road would soon be impassable.

"Even if the airport stays open," said Robin thoughtfully, "the taxi might not be able to get up the hill to our house. It won't take much more of this to cut us off completely."

I checked the airport web site.

Flights to and from Auckland were still taking off and landing but there were long delays. All our travel arrangements were teetering on a knife edge.

Sunday lulled us into a false sense of security. The day was bitterly cold, but the morning sky was clear. Most of the snow had gone from the road and buses and cars appeared to be travelling up and down it with minimal skidding. However it didn't last. By the late afternoon the sky had clouded over again and more snow was falling.

"I didn't want to go to a tropical Pacific island paradise anyway," I said. "One and all, they are grossly

overrated."

"There's still a couple of days to go," said Robin encouragingly. "It might have all blown over by then." She didn't sound convinced.

On Monday, Robin had a brilliant idea.

"Let's see if we can reschedule our flights and go up to Auckland today instead of tomorrow morning. That gives us a lot more leeway and a lot more chance of actually getting to Auckland before the Rarotonga flight takes off."

I hunkered down with a telephone and my Air New Zealand Koru Club card.

"Welcome to Air New Zealand,"

said a robot. "Please enter your Koru Club membership number."

I pressed buttons.

"Thank you," said the robot. "I see you are an important customer. I will transfer you to an operative immediately"

I said a silent prayer of gratitude as I imagined all the unimportant customers sitting in their never ending, never answered telephonic queues and loudly cursing my name as I elbowed my way to the front.

I heard a ringing sound and then an actual human being said, "Hello, this is Tanya. How can I help you."

I explained my predicament.

"No problem," said Tanya and I

heard the clatter of a keyboard. "There you are -- I have you booked on flight 428 at two o'clock this afternoon."

"Thank you Tanya," I said. And then I started ringing Auckland hotels. If we managed to get up there at all, we'd need an overnight stay before our flight out on Tuesday morning. Thank goodness I have huge allowances on my various gold credit cards.

Because of the change of plan, we now had about four hours to get the cats to the cattery, pack our cases, and arrange with the neighbours to empty our mail box while we were away. Step one: find the cats. Ah! There they were, curled up asleep on the bed which still retained a certain warmth from our

occupancy. I closed the bedroom door so that they couldn't escape while Robin got the cages out of the garden shed. I donned a pair of leather welding gloves that went all the way up to my elbows, grabbed Harpo and poured him head first into the cage that Robin was holding vertically. Years of bitter experience have taught me that this is the only safe way to get him into it. By the time he re-orientes himself and attempts to tear me to shreds, the cage door is closed and he is helpless.

Shrieks of rage filled the air. "You bastards! I'll get you for this. And just wait until the next time I see the Ice God. Incompetent fool! I'll tear him asunder."

Bess went relatively quietly. "Oh no, not again," she said, doing her world famous impression of a bowl of petunias.

I bundled the cages into the car and we drove up the road to Purrville, our favourite cattery. There were snowmen lining the road, one outside almost every house. All the neighbourhood children had obviously been having a wonderful time with the snow.

Now that the hardest part was over and done with, we did the easy things. Two suitcases were hurriedly packed, I left a message on the neighbour's answering machine about the mailbox and then I called a taxi. Snow fell steadily as we drove to the airport. The

Ice God was still trying really, really hard to keep us at home.

There were long delays on almost every flight into and out of Wellington. The airport was marginal at best and the air traffic controllers were making the most of the very brief windows of opportunity afforded them by the ever changing weather. It was a miracle that the airport was operating at all. All flights to the South Island were cancelled of course. The departures board announced that fights to Dunedin were cancelled because of "...DUD weather conditions". Someone behind the scenes appeared to be enjoying themselves. I was surprised that they hadn't finished the sentence with a

smiley face.

Our Auckland flight took off shortly after 3.00pm on Monday 15th August just ahead of another flurry of snow. Our flight to Rarotonga was due to take off from Auckland at 9.30am on Tuesday 16th August. Because of the vagaries of the international date line, it would arrive in Rarotonga after a three and a half hour flight at 3.00pm on Monday 15th August. Who says time travel is a physical impossibility?

* * * *

We arrived in Rarotonga exactly on schedule, just as we were taking off from Wellington. Monday 15th August was brilliantly sunny and warm. We

walked across the tarmac to the arrival hall feeling sweaty and overdressed. Customs and Immigration stamped our passports and welcomed us to Rarotonga with big smiles. Then we were met by the lovely Kimi, our shuttle bus driver, who would take us to the Sunset Resort Hotel where we would be staying for the next ten days. Kimi hung garlands of heavily scented flowers around our necks. She gave us each a chilled bottle of water and a cold cloth with which to wipe away the sweat. Then she drove us to the resort with all the windows open. "Air conditioning," she explained.

Once we were settled in, we took a little walk to explore our surroundings.

There was a beautiful reef-enclosed lagoon just outside the hotel. There was deep blue, slightly angry water outside the reef. Waves crashed against the reef, and broke in roaring bundles of spray and surf. But inside the reef the lagoon was calm and green. Sunshine danced across it in sparkles of dazzling light. I've never seen a reef around a lagoon before, but it was just as I'd always imagined it from reading "Coral Island" when I was a child.

There was a big black dog fast asleep on the clear, white sandy beach. He woke up and blinked at us as we got close to him, but he was really far too busy to pay us any prolonged attention, and he went straight back to sleep. The

beach was so clear and clean because every morning seven maids with seven mops came out to sweep the sand for half a year. And Lewis Carroll was wrong -- they got it perfectly clear and smooth each and every day.

The sea inside the reef was shallow and full of multi-coloured fish which were obviously quite accustomed to having portly pakehas splash around them. They swam and shoaled so thickly that you almost felt you could walk on a living carpet of blue and yellow and stripy fish.

We left the coast and wandered up the road a little. A signpost pointed up a dilapidated side track. "Prison," it said. "And Craft Centre."

We walked past the Kikau Hut Restaurant. 200 metres further on we came across another sign. "Kikau Hut Restaurant", it said. "200 metres back".

We walked further along the road until we came to a dilapidated, tumbledown shack. A huge sign hung from it: "Ministry Of Infrastructure and Planning".

I think Rarotonga must have been settled by surrealists. I could tell immediately that I was going to enjoy myself here.

For many years, the Cook Islands (of which Rarotonga is the largest) were a New Zealand protectorate, and they still use the New Zealand currency. This makes Rarotonga a very

convenient place for New Zealanders to go for a holiday of course. However the Islands also mint their own coins and print their own banknotes. As you might expect, these domestic coins and notes are extremely odd and also very attractive at one and the same time. They have a \$3 note with a picture of a bare-breasted lady riding a shark. They have a \$2 coin which is silver and triangular and a \$5 coin which is a golden dodecahedron. And, uniquely as far as I am aware, they have both a \$7.50 coin and a \$2.50 coin.

All these domestic notes and coins are so weird that if you ever receive them in your change you immediately squirrel them away and refuse to spend

them because they make such lovely souvenirs. Consequently shopping in Rarotonga becomes a much more expensive experience than it otherwise would be!

The island of Rarotonga is almost circular, with a circumference of just over 30 kilometres. The coastal road goes all the way around it, and two buses drive along the road, stopping to let people on and off wherever the whim takes them. The buses are known as the clockwise bus and the anti-clockwise bus. However, in the evenings there is only a clockwise bus. You can't go widdershins after dark. Cthulhu doesn't allow it.

We took the clockwise bus into

Avarua, the capital city (indeed, the only sizeable settlement on the island). We could tell it was the capital city; it had two roads, two banks and a supermarket. It also had a most magnificent courthouse which was built for Rarotonga by the People's Republic of China. Unfortunately they built it to accommodate Chinese criminals. The Rarotongans, like all Polynesians, are very large people and they cannot get into the toilets in the courthouse unless they shuffle sideways through the door. I gather they have similar problems with the dock and the cells as well. Never mind -- once they get sentenced to time in prison, they can do lots of craftwork.

We took the clockwise bus back to the resort, which meant that we got to circumnavigate the island before returning. We got back just in time for happy hour. Cook Island Lager (brewed locally, of course) is \$5 a bottle during happy hour. Outside of happy hour it is \$6 a bottle. Happy hour is not hugely happy, but it has its moments, not least of which are the free peanuts.

There are nine breaks in the reef that surrounds the island and one of these, the largest, opens into the lagoon from which the original seven waka that colonised New Zealand sailed nearly a thousand years ago. None of the waka ever returned home and it wasn't until almost seven hundred

years later, when Europeans first came to the islands, that the islanders finally learned how successful their colonisation had been. There are still close ties between the Maori and the Cook Islanders, though the language has mutated slightly with the years. The Maori say *kia ora* as a greeting; the Cook Islanders say *kia orana*. The Maori refer to the original seven canoes (and canoes in general) as *waka*; the Cook Islanders call them *vaka*.

We took a trip on a four wheel drive jeep into the thickly jungled interior of the island. Bananas and paw-paws grow wild, free for the taking. Once you leave the coast, the

island quickly becomes very steep and rugged. The guide took us up a track to the largest waterfall in the world. Unfortunately there was no water falling down it; someone had turned off the tap.

The jeep struggled up a steep incline and stopped on a plateau. We got a perfect view of "The Needle"; a thin spire of rock that stands tall at the top of a mountain, looking for all the world like the Tower Of Orthanc. Robin positioned me very carefully and took a photograph of me with The Needle growing out of the top of my head. It was a perfect partner to the photo she already had of me with a coconut palm growing out of my head.

I think she might have a new hobby...

The guide showed us how to husk a coconut. "You need a special tool," he explained. "We call it a *ko*. In English, that translates to *sharp stick*."

He stuck the stick in the ground, pointy side up. Then he rammed the coconut down on to it so that the point came right through the husk and out of the other side. He prized off the husk as he pulled the nut off the stick, turned it round and jammed it down on the point again. He did that four times, splitting the husk each time so that it could be peeled easily away from the nut. Then, with the blunt side of a machete, he cracked the nut in two. He passed around the lower half which was full of

clear juice. We all took a sip. It was warm and sweet and very refreshing. He carved the flesh from the nut and passed that round as well. I found it rather tough and chewy and a bit tasteless. Robin had two helpings. "It's food, isn't it? It's been a long time since breakfast."

Saturday was cloudy and there was a breeze. The temperature dropped to slightly below the boiling point of lead. We visited the open air market in Avarua. The tourists were out in force, all dressed in t-shirts and shorts, enjoying the freshness. The locals were huddled deep into fur lined anoraks with the hoods up because they were freezing cold.

The market stalls sold local produce, brightly coloured shirts, pareus (sarongs) and jewellery made from black pearls. Lovely ladies wearing coconut bras and hula skirts danced seductively to the pounding, hypnotic rhythms of the drums. In the intervals between dances the sound system played traditional island music at skull splitting volume. CDs were for sale. I was tempted to buy them all so that silence would descend. I resisted the temptation. If I took the CDs home I might have to play them one day, and that would never do.

We went to Muri, about 20 minutes anti-clockwise from our hotel, and took a boat trip across the lagoon. The boat

was glass bottomed and large curious fish peered up through the glass at the tourists. We stopped at a small island for a barbecue lunch of freshly caught yellowfin tuna. It was the most delicious fish I have ever tasted in my life -- partly because it was so fresh and partly because it was marinated in a secret island ingredient known only to the chef, who referred to himself as Captain Cook. He well deserved the name.

His Co-Captain, Captain Awesome, dressed in full Rarotongan warrior regalia, climbed a coconut tree and dropped several large nuts to the ground. He climbed the tree so fast that Robin, who was blinking at the time,

completely missed it. He too was well deserving of his name. Again we got to drink the fresh coconut juice and we learned how to use fabric made from the husk fibres to squeeze out the cream from the grated flesh.

Then it was time for the crab races! First prize a coconut, second prize \$20,000, third prize \$10,000. We all chose a hermit crab from a cup and let them wander over our hands for a time. We each gave our crab a name. Mine was called Harpo because it nipped me as it staggered across my palm. Then Captain Awesome drew two concentric circles in the sand. We placed our crabs in the inner circle, and Captain Awesome woke them up with a blast

from a conch shell. The crabs scuttled hither and yon, cheered on by the crowd. The winner was the first crab to reach the boundary of the outer circle. Harpo came fourth; a valiant effort, he was only a small crab. Captain Awesome awarded the lady with the winning crab a coconut fresh from the tree. Unfortunately there are no pockets in a Rarotongan Warrior's costume and so he hadn't actually brought the second and third prizes with him. Oh, what a shame.

* * * *

All good things come to an end. Our flight home was scheduled to depart at 2.10am on 25th August so we

had to be at the airport just after midnight on the 24th. That evening, we wine and dined for the final time at our local restaurant which was decorated with old posters advertising cruises on Cunard and White Star Line ships. The poster advertising *The Titanic* was hidden behind a pot plant so that you had to squint to see it at all. The clock was dated 1879, and it came from Kensington Station in London. It ticked away our final hours in paradise.

The delightful Kimi took us to the airport in plenty of time for our flight. She hugged us both and made us promise to come back; an easy promise to make and one we hope to keep. A few hours later we were home. The

snow had vanished and the day was cold and crisp and clear.

Alan And The Bag Ladies

I was five hours early for my flight back to Wellington because my business in Auckland had finished sooner than expected. So I went to the Air New Zealand check in desk and said, "Can you transfer me to an earlier flight, please?"

The nice lady clicked keys on her keyboard and then frowned. "No, I'm sorry," she said, "but the ticket you have is not transferable." Then she brightened. "But I can check you in now and you can drop your bags off and go to the Koru Club lounge where

strange and sybaritic pleasures await."

I was dubious. "Will my bag be safe if I check it in so early?" I asked.

"Of course it will," she said firmly. "They have a well organised system in the baggage handling room and there's a waiting area set aside for each flight. Your bag will be perfectly safe."

"Can you guarantee that?" I asked. "You've lost my baggage before under these circumstances. Once I flew from Wellington to Auckland and my bags flew to Sydney and we weren't reunited for many days. I ran out of underpants, a terrible fate."

"You've got nothing to worry about," she reassured me. "The luggage has a bar code on the label which gives

the flight details and the bar code reader automatically assigns the bags to the proper pick up point. The luggage never gets lost these days. Trust me -- I used to work in baggage handling."

"OK," I said, convinced by her positive attitude. "Check me in and I will spend the time until my flight debauching myself in the lounge."

"You won't regret it," she said as she printed out my boarding card and baggage tag. "I hear that they have a new batch of chrome-plated dancing girls." The bar code on the baggage tag looked very authoritative. I dropped my bag on the conveyor belt and watched it move off into the baggage

handling area. It would have a lonely time of it for the next few hours as it waited for more bags for its flight to arrive. I hoped it wouldn't get bored.

I made my way to the security farce checkpoint. I put my laptop, phone, coins, hat and coat into plastic trays and sent them through the X-ray machine along with my backpack. Then I walked through the metal detector gates. No alarms went off, which mildly surprised me because I was still wearing my watch and my Medic-Alert bracelet. I had a gold chain around my neck, rings on my fingers and a big metal belt buckle. No bells on my toes though, luckily. All of these items tend to set the alarms ringing in more

paranoid countries, and I'm constantly getting wanded when I travel overseas...

I reclaimed my laptop, phone, coins, hat and coat and watched, bewildered, as my backpack came out of the X-Ray machine, stopped and then reversed direction and went back in again. A gaggle of guards gathered round the monitor, pointing at it and whispering to each other. Eventually the bag reappeared again along with a big, beefy, shaven-headed, cloven hoofed security man.

"Is this your bag, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Is there a problem?"

"No, not really," said the security man. "All the stuff in it has fallen down

to the bottom and is just sitting there in a great big lump. The X-rays won't go through and all we can see on the screen is an amorphous blob. Can I take a look inside?"

"Feel free," I said. Not that I had any choice.

He opened the backpack and rummaged around in the collection of miscellaneous computer clutter that comprised the amorphous blob.

"Thank you, sir," he said as he handed the bag to me. "That's all fine." I headed off to the Koru Club lounge. I felt an urgent need to debauch myself with forbidden pleasures.

The lounge was seething with people. Most of the free food had been

eaten, though I noticed that the monkey-brain salad remained largely untouched. However the containers of curried huhu grubs had been scraped clean. I helped myself to cheese and biscuits. The cheese had a curious flavour.

A harassed looking lady bustled past with a trolley full of spaghetti invercargillia. "Excuse me," I said, "what kind of cheese is this?"

"It's made from giraffe milk," she said. "Have you never seen the Air New Zealand cheese factory at the back of the giraffe enclosure at the Auckland Zoo?"

"Oh yes," I said. "I remember now." I helped myself to a pair of dormice

stuffed with lark tongues and wandered over to the bar. I chose a glass of wine fermented from grapes fertilised with the dung of unicorns and the blood and bone of yetis. The Koru Club lounge was living up to its exotic reputation.

Nibbling a dormouse, I wandered over to the stage. The dancing girls were preparing themselves and struggling hard to fit their breasts into chromium plated brass bras. They all looked like extras from the cover of a 1938 edition of *Astounding Stories Of Super Science*. Immediately I felt right at home.

Five hours passed in the blink of an eye. Replete with wine and cheese and with a souvenir bra in my pocket, I

boarded my flight to Wellington. We took off and, an hour later, we landed. I made my way to the baggage carousel.

Because I am a Koru Club member I am entitled to priority baggage handling. This means that my bags are always the very last to be unloaded from the aeroplane. So I wasn't too upset when my bag failed to appear on the carousel. However when there was still no sign of my bag after I had waited for almost as long as the flight itself had taken, I began to worry a little.

I made my way to the baggage enquiry office. I presented my receipt to the nice lady behind the counter.

"Oh yes," she said. "I remember

this one. It flew down three hours ago and it's been waiting here for you ever since. I've been feeding it biscuits and playing tag with it to stop it from pining for you."

She took my receipt and handed my bag to me. It seemed slightly chubbier than when I first checked it in. Perhaps the lady had fed it too many biscuits.

"So it travelled down here all by itself on an earlier flight?" I asked.

"Yes," said the lady.

"Doesn't that violate every security regulation under the sun?" I asked. "I thought unaccompanied bags weren't allowed on aeroplanes any more."

"That's right," she said. She didn't sound at all worried. "It's so cute with

its little fluffy zips! Can I feed it another biscuit?"

"No," I said, "I think it's had enough."

My luggage was harmless. There was nothing dangerous in it apart from a week's supply of dirty underpants, so it really didn't matter that the baggage handlers sent it unaccompanied on an earlier flight. But I wonder how often they screw up like this?

I wonder if I've found a weak link in the security chain?

The End