

Triffid Tales Volume 1



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Publication Credits

Published as an EBook 2010
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In the Wet

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

It started one Sunday morning when a huge fountain erupted without warning just outside my garden fence. It was about 15 feet tall and obviously under enormous pressure. I watched horrified, as hundreds (possibly thousands) of gallons of water poured all over my garden and ran off into the street below, carrying some of my garden with it. I rang the council. There

was nobody there except a rather casual Sunday operator. "We've got an emergency further down the road," she said. "We didn't have any choice. We had to open a valve to relieve the pressure."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thingy was out and had voice mail turned on. I left a message but nobody rang back so the next day I tried again. A completely different set of voices expressed an enormous desire to help and transferred me between several departments since they themselves, they explained earnestly, had no responsibilities in this area. Eventually

I got a phone that just rang endlessly. After 10 minutes of listening to this I hung up and tried again.

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

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

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

As it happened, he was right. A washing machine in one of the flats above the office had got blocked and overflowed, flooding the flat and voiding itself all over our ceiling. But I

couldn't help regarding it as an omen.

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

"Do you really need me to be

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

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

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

"I like cats," he said.

The insurance assessor found lots of surface damage which had obviously been caused by a flood of semi-biblical proportions. However there was a lip around the foundations and that appeared to have diverted the bulk of

the water around the house and across the garden rather than letting it underneath and so the foundations seemed unharmed. Indeed, he claimed they were in surprisingly good condition for a house as old as mine.

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

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

Once I read a short story in which a man had the power to make it stop raining. Whenever it started he would say "Rain, rain go away. Come again another day." And the rain would go. The dénouement of the story was that one day all the rain he'd wished away

for so long came back - all on the same day. That day has now arrived in New Zealand. Those few drops of rain that appeared just as the insurance assessor spoke have continued unabated. Some of New Zealand's heaviest ever rainfall has been recorded over the last few weeks and large areas of the country have been flooded. Since I got a head start over everybody else in the street, my garden is now mostly liquid.

A notice arrived from the council. On 25th July 1998 the water supply would be cut off from 9.30am to 12.30pm for repairs to be made to the pipes. Huge bulldozers appeared and dumped half the road on the grass verge outside my house (I no longer

have a grass verge. Good - it doesn't have to be mowed). Miles of bright orange pipes vanished underground to the accompaniment of much foul language as it was discovered that these were metric pipes and those *in situ* were imperial and the two could not be joined together.

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

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

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

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

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

Transport

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

"Driver," said Sally, in a worried tone, "shouldn't you have gone straight

on to Owairaka there?"

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

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

"I are here," he announced proudly.

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

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

"All right, all right," said the radio. "I'll tell him to bring the bus back. You

go and choose another one."

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

"OK. We go now."

We all trooped over to the other bus and the driver strapped himself in and started the engine. The bus rose on its suspension and then settled down again. The driver looked pensive and switched the engine off. Then he returned to the original bus. Soon he was back with a thermos flask and a brown paper bag which he packed carefully away. He started the engine up again and we bounced thoughtfully on the suspension for a while until he

switched the engine off and hurried back to the original bus again. This time he returned with a rabbit's foot which he hung carefully over a convenient switch.

Vroom, vroom. Time to go.

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

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

"Never heard of you," said the lady

behind the desk.

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

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

"Here's my confirmation fax"

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

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

"Help," I hinted.

"The plane's full," she explained.

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

"I've got lots of plastic cards," I offered. Real life isn't like TV, she didn't offer to let me rub her tits; but she did disgorge an incredibly expensive ticket. I bet I was the only passenger on the plane who paid full price. I wondered about the eight people (nine now, since I'd jumped the queue) who couldn't get on. What were they feeling about the situation?

Once I broke Europe.

I was in a train heading for

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

The Europort is the busiest port in Europe. Trains leave it almost every

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

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

The Eyes Have It

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

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

odd phenomena to my father.

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

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

"Catch it! Catch it!"

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

The moment was all too brief and the potential remained unrealised. The object was moving far too fast and I saw it far too late to do anything constructive about it. With unerring accuracy it hit me on the nose and the world got even more blurred than normal as my eyes filled up with involuntary tears. I didn't know a nose had so much blood in it.

I moved progressively closer to the

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

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

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

"You made up all the answers you

gave the optician," my father insisted. "There's nothing wrong with your eyes."

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

"New glasses?"

"Yes."

"They suit you."

The world that revealed itself to me once the glasses were perched on my nose was a miracle of clarity. I remember being surprised to find that things had edges. I'd never seen edges before – to me objects just faded away into vagueness at their boundaries and

it was a revelation to find that in reality they were sharply defined. And while intellectually I had always known that roads had another side (after all, just like the chicken, I crossed the road on occasion), I was astonished to find that I could actually see it in all its glory long before I got there. I began to realise just how circumscribed my world had actually been.

My eyes gradually deteriorated all through my teenage years, finally stabilising in my early twenties. My prescription remained unchanged and I got into the habit of visiting the optician only when the frames fell apart (not an unusual occurrence with the cheap British frames – my New

Zealand optician was quite scathing of them).

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

I find myself constantly taking my glasses off to read things that are close to me (my long distance vision remains stable and my glasses are still essential for that). More and more I find myself in sympathy with my grandfather's often expressed grumble that the print

in newspapers is much smaller than it used to be. Another eye test would appear to be required. Fortunately there is an optician directly across the road from the office...

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

Then we had the glaucoma test. The early onset of glaucoma is detected by a rise in pressure inside the eyeball.

They have two ways of testing for this. One shoots a jet of compressed air into the eyeball. Obviously it makes you blink, but the machine measures the deformation of the eyeball just before the blink and deduces the internal pressure from the amount of distortion. It's all over in the blink of an eye (ahem!).

The other, and much more unpleasant way, involves dripping vivid yellow goo into the eye. This is a local anaesthetic. Once the eyeball is numbed, a machine pushes a probe against the surface. Again the internal pressure is measured. The test itself takes next to no time, but for the next hour or so you weep copious

fluorescent tears and people laugh at you. (But you look impressively cool under the UV lights in a night-club).

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

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

So now my only problem is trying to remember where I put my glasses last time I took them off to read a

footnote or check the date. And believe me, that's a real problem.

Bodily Functions

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

and down.

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

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

took a celebratory drink. All was well in her world again.

Animals have a natural and quite uninhibited approach to the mysterious workings of their bodies. Humans have a much more peculiar attitude about the whole business. The astronomer Tycho Brahe (he of the silver nose) is popularly supposed to have died of an exploded bladder because he refused to leave the dinner table to relieve himself as long as his host was still present. I can't claim to have gone that far, though once, for a bet, I did go for a month without taking a dump. It's a good job I have brown eyes. Nobody could tell I was full of shit...

When I was a child, I led a

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

Consequently I was most ill-prepared for the hurly burly of school life when I was finally packed off there aged about five. I vividly recall bursting for a pee on my first day but being completely unable to ask where

the toilets were because I was sure that nobody would have the faintest idea what I was talking about. The inevitable result ensued and I still recall the humiliation of being dried off and told off simultaneously. It was an inauspicious start to an academic career...

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

I started to ask increasingly

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

The back of the box advertised a companion toy "The Visible Woman". I asked for one for my birthday but my parents seemed strangely diffident and I never got one, much to my

disappointment.

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

When I was a student I would spend

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

Unlike the permanent employees, I wasn't allowed to stick needles and scalpels into people and take the blood myself. All I was allowed to do was put

it into machines and on to slides when it arrived in the lab. I was quite peeved about this; I rather fancied the idea of sticking sharp, pointed objects into people, but apparently it was **AGAINST THE RULES.**

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

Her first task was to take a smear from my thumb for microscopic

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

WALLOP!

The scalpel sunk about quarter of an inch into the ball of my thumb (I half expected to see it sticking out of the other side). She let go and it vibrated gently back and forth then came to rest. Dumbfounded, we both

looked at it for a moment and then we screamed in unison. To this day I don't know who screamed the loudest.

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

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

Shortly after I started working in my first permanent job, I was sent on a first aid course and I saw many

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

Now I really did have objective evidence that people didn't look like a leg of lamb all the way through. "The Visible Man" had been completely truthful in everything he'd said to me all those years ago.

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

I learned how to treat someone who has fallen off a building and impaled themselves on a fence. "Don't do

anything," was the doctor's advice. "Ring for an ambulance and then hold their hand and talk to them until the ambulance arrives. The paramedics won't do anything either except saw through the fence. They'll take the patient to the hospital with the fence still stuck through him. Do you know why?"

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

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

Journey

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

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

Her voice rose in both frequency

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

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

"No," the nice Ansett lady behind the desk said to me, "I don't think there is any chance at all of getting you to

Wellington today and it will probably be quite late on Monday before we can re-schedule you."

My first day back at work after the Christmas holidays was not turning out to be an overwhelming success.

However even as we spoke and while I was glumly contemplating my future, an announcement came over the tannoy:

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

Since that was exactly where I was standing, I determined to take advantage of the offer. To think was to

act. I wasted no time.

"ME!!!", I volunteered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have always been convinced that if it is raining somewhere then obviously there must be some other place where it is not raining. If you can

find the border between these two areas, then there must be a place where you can stand with one side of your body getting rained on and the other staying dry. However I've never been able to find such a place - the border always seems to be too fuzzy. But this time I found it; the border between the dark rain clouds and the sunshine was almost geometrically straight. I was tempted to stop the car and just stand there enjoying the oddity, but if I did that some idiot would probably crash into me, so I carried on driving.

Feeling peckish, we decided to stop in Taupo for a nibble. "Where's a good place to eat in Taupo?" mused Natalie. I had no answer. The last time I was in

Taupo was midnight eight years ago, and nothing had been open so I'd had a picnic by the lake with the remnants of my lunch. "Oh look," said Natalie, "there's a parking space. Let's pull over and then we'll decide."

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

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

their big dicks by racing past at 150 kph, but we left them to it.

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

Perhaps there is a law against them having a cell phone.

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

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

On Monday I hopped out of bed and into the shower. Nothing but freezing

cold water emerged. I could tell straight away that my week was going to continue in the same manner in which it had begun. A plumber was called and on Tuesday, and for the rest of the week, I got exactly 45 seconds of hot water in my shower before it turned freezing cold again. On Wednesday I was awoken at 4.00am as large and enthusiastic council workmen emptied trash bins with enormous gusto and on Thursday I was awoken by a phone call at 2.00am. It was a wrong number.

Friday dawned clear and clean. After my normal 45 second hot shower followed by a cold one for as long as I could stand it, I checked out of the hotel and went to the office. That

evening I took a taxi to Wellington airport, wondering if I would be able to get home.

The flight was utterly uneventful.

Milo and the Burglars

Over the years my cat Milo has taken to climbing on top of me when I lie half asleep in bed. He makes himself comfortable and then begins to purr very loudly and dribble to excess. I have become quite accustomed to this – indeed I almost welcome it; and these days I find it very hard to get to sleep without ten and a half kilograms of noisy fur slobbering in my earhole. One night recently we had all assumed our customary positions and were drifting lazily away when there was an enormous **CRASH!** followed

immediately by the strident tones of a burglar alarm shrieking its head off. Sally reached the window before me because she didn't have to remove ten and a half kilograms of cat and pour the saliva out of her ear first.

Consequently she was rewarded by the sight of three youths racing in panic away from the dairy across the road. By the time I arrived the excitement was over, though the alarm continued to shriek. We rang the dairy owner.

It would appear that the burglarious youths had attempted to smash one of the glass panels of the door with what looked like a paving slab or a lump of concrete, thereby making two mistakes with one action. Firstly they failed to

appreciate that the glass was reinforced, and instead of shattering and allowing them entrance it merely took on the appearance of crazy paving and sullenly barred their way. Their second mistake was being unaware that the alarm was configured to respond not only to movement but also to vibration and so it immediately went into panic mode as the concrete rebounded from the glass and the shockwaves spread outwards. Indeed, so sensitive to vibrations is the alarm that on occasion it has mistaken the sounds of over-enthusiastic early morning council rubbish bin emptiers for an army of marauding vandals and woken up the entire neighbourhood

with its caterwauling. Mind you, who am I to claim it was mistaken?

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

nest with wax. Sometimes my dreams verge on the bizarre...

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

alarm.

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

time and splashed away towards his car.

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

Head Games

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

Doubt first set in when I noticed people walking around with their glasses perched on the top of their

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

Such accidents do not make you look cool to the assembled multitudes relieving themselves in the same trough. The subsequent dampness in the hair and behind the ears after retrieving the glasses is also less than pleasant. So these days I have a poofy ribbon tied to my glasses instead and

when I take them off they dangle securely on my chest instead of perching precariously on my head. When I eat my lunch, crumbs and excess gravy drop on to my glasses instead of on to my trousers, which saves me a small fortune in dry cleaning bills. However when I put my glasses back on again I can no longer see through them, which adds an interesting dimension to the drive home after work. On the other hand, when I suffer an attack of the midnight munchies all I have to do is suck the lenses - a definite plus, I think.

After a while it began to dawn on me that I never saw any of these headily-bespectacled people actually

wearing their glasses properly across their eyes. So I took comfort in the supposition that they were simply making a fashion statement and must have attached their glasses to their bonce with superglue and duct tape. Nothing else could possibly explain how the spectacles stayed so firmly in place. But nevertheless the first doubts about my cranial structure began to surface...

Then I bought a walkman.

These days walkmans (walkmen?) come with unobtrusive earphones that plug directly into the earhole. I had long observed the gliterati walking around with them casually inserted, fully wired for sound. It looked

excessively elegant and I was consumed with envy. The design of the earphones is such that a small stem poking out of the speaker is supposed to sit snugly in a gap between several fleshy structures in the outer ear, thereby holding the speaker firmly wedged up against the eardrum, thus ensuring that the maximum possible volume pours into the interior of the skull, guaranteeing terminal deafness within moments.

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

It was only then that I noticed a significant detail – many of these

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

Then I bought a hat.

I have long lusted after an Akubra - that Australian hat with the large curly brim that keeps the sun off both the neck and the face. It has a leather strap

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

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

The world went dark as something about the size and shape of a small apartment building plunged over my

head and enveloped my lower portions, utterly obscuring my vision.

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

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

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

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

excessive exposure to sensory deprivation.

"We may have a problem here."

The voice was now sounding distinctly worried.

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

Vanity suggests that it isn't me, of course. The real explanation is that Australians all have enormously big heads. Or perhaps they hold their hats

on with duct tape and superglue. No other explanation would seem to fit the facts. Unless of course there really is something odd about my head...

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

How to Recognise a Student

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

A fine time was had by both teacher and students and much knowledge was exchanged, to the great benefit and enjoyment of all.

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

Often it begins when the student arrives at reception.

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

"Which course are you on?"

"Errr." A look of panic begins to spread over the student's face and there is much hunting through pockets, bags

and briefcases. Somewhere there must be a copy of the official welcome fax that gives details of the course being attended?

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

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

Once I was privileged to hear the following dialogue:

"Which course are you here for?"

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

"Would that be Microsoft Word Building Skills?"

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

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

Most students do actually manage to place a cup beneath the spout and press the button corresponding to their refreshment of choice (though failure in these early stages is not entirely

unknown). The liquid crystal display then changes and exhorts the customer to "Please Wait". There are grinds and groans; liquid gushes and the machine vibrates in a demented manner. The general impression is that it is about to take off and blast a hole in the ceiling on its way into low Earth orbit. The student begins to quiver with anxiety.

There is a brief moment of silence as the machine takes a deep breath and girds its loins for a final stupendous excretory effort. The student often takes this as a signal that it has finished its task. Despite the fact that the display still says "Please Wait", the student snatches the cup away, stares in bewilderment at the thick sludge it

contains and watches helplessly as vast quantities of savoury liquid pour into the waste tray. The display then changes and says "Select Beverage" again and the machine sits smugly, waiting for its next victim.

Some students never manage to muster the requisite skills for taming the coffee machine, and they spend the entire course in a state of acute caffeine deprivation. They have far too much blood in their coffee stream as a result, and so they learn very little and get poor evaluations from their instructor. Perhaps we need to run a coffee machine operating system course?

Once settled in the classroom,

students often exhibit many more odd behavioural traits.

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

to sacrifice a live goat on top of the DHCP server.

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

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

The more studious and serious-minded class members will treat the

instructor as the source of all knowledge. They will take advantage of the opportunities the course gives them to regale you with questions of monumental complexity (and self-contradiction) regarding scenarios so extremely unlikely that several ice ages will come and go in the nether regions of Hell before they come to pass. Often the student will become lost inside a twisty maze of subordinate clauses and the question will gradually glide to a puzzled full stop. (Equally often, the general tenor of the question will reveal that the student has utterly failed to understand anything you have said for the last three days).

Faced with this situation, the

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

Then we come to the lab exercises and the student is required to manipulate a mouse and caress a keyboard. This too is a great separator of sheep from goats. The tongue protrudes a quarter of an inch from the left corner of the mouth, a deep frown of concentration furrows the forehead,

and a single finger hovers tentatively over the keyboard as letters are searched for. Eventually an approximate match is found and the finger stabs wildly. Damn! Where's the backspace key? The hunt starts again.

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

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

The next day the student turns up with a briefcase stuffed to bursting point with a printout of a 500,000 line

monstrosity that gives every appearance of having been written by a left-handed warthog in the middle of a very bad acid trip. (They never think to bring the program on a diskette so that we can actually run it to see where it breaks).

Structure? Logic? We don't need no steenking structure! Logic is strictly for the birds. You begin to realise why the student has so far failed to complete any of the programming assignments in the class, and you resolve to make sure that the student never finds out your email address.

Perhaps worst of all is the student who thinks (if that is the word I'm groping for; I don't believe it is) in

watertight (some might say thought-tight) compartments. Such people are constantly amazed to find that the things they studied in chapter three have some relevance to the subject of chapter four. Applying them again in chapter five is utterly beyond their comprehension.

Such a blinkered, straight-down-the-middle-of-the-road reaction to a technical problem often implies that the student is really searching for the philosopher's stone of computing. They just KNOW that there is one simple answer to life, the universe and every computer problem. A cookbook, a recipe list, one simple series of steps leading to computing nirvana. They

bitterly resent that I don't tell them what it is. Why do I have to torture them with arcane concepts and force them to type bizarre things and click on buttons with the frightening caption Advanced on them?

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

All students who attend courses are asked to fill in a background form

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

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

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

Even worse are the students who do not fill in a background form because they are incapable of doing so. One

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

Sometimes though the background forms are less than useful. Once I read a form that contained no information other than the student's name and the course name; and recently one form

had as an answer to the question
"Course being attended?", the big, bold,
black word NONE.

I should be so lucky.

Diatribes On Language

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

However even when people are supposedly speaking the same language

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

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

increasingly surrealistic) discussion about the merits of various different kinds of clothes pegs.

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

More seriously, the communication gap can also be widened when perfectly familiar words are used in ways that fail to match their meaning. I came across just such a phenomenon recently when I sat through a Microsoft training

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

Later, after the course, I looked the

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

The written word is a communication tool that that tends to require an even greater precision than

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

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

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

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

concerning the passive voice;
something that I find less than helpful.

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

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

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

checker will warn you about words that are spelled differently but sound the same. Homonyms are not synonyms and English has rather too many for comfort. Consider the following paragraph:

There is only one way to discuss whether the weather is fine. You're on your own if you think they're others. If you think they might be rain you should ask someone if you could borrow their umbrella, or perhaps where an overcoat. If someone asks wear you got it, be discrete. If you are seen at the scene of

an umbrella burglary, refuse to talk on principal. Carrying a discreet number of umbrellas is not a crime unless your school principle says so.

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

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

is completely wrong. I really don't

know how many homonyms English has; I think it might be an open ended list.

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

Most punctuation is actually pretty robust and can be mis-used without detracting too much from the sense. Misplaced or omitted commas just add awkwardness and a vague sense of disquiet. The use of the semi-colon is becoming a dying art. However the full

stop is not so forgiving. Omitting it (or putting it in the wrong place) can completely destroy the sense. Let's try the above paragraph again:

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

discreet number of umbrellas
is not a crime unless your
school principle says so

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

Perhaps the most abused
punctuation symbol is the apostrophe.
There are those who claim it is an
archaic irrelevance and they would like
to get rid of it completely. However
removing the apostrophe from our

written language would greatly increase our homonym list – how would you distinguish, for example, between "were" and "we're" without it?

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

Putting a full stop at the end of a sentence presupposes that you know

what a sentence is. The structure of a language (its grammar) defines this sort of thing and in English it can be a slippery beast indeed. Unlike many languages, English is almost completely uninflected. Where other languages change the ending of a word to indicate its function in a sentence, English depends on the position of the word to define its function.

There are remnants of an older, inflected language in modern English. Consider the sentence "He saw him". You can't turn it round – "Him saw he" is nonsense; "him" is not allowed in the position reserved for the subject of the sentence and "he" is not allowed in the position reserved for the object. The

feminine form is even more startling – "She saw her" and "Her saw she". Mostly it doesn't matter though. "The sheep saw the sheep" can swap around quite happily.

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

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

Even assuming that all of this works properly, we are still left with the style of the writing, the rhetorical tricks that dress up the prose in an attempt to get the message across. The way you say something can profoundly affect the way the message is received.

If I said "Hey! Titface! Pass the sodding salt!" You would be less inclined to oblige than if I'd said "Could you pass the salt, please?". Such stylistic tricks are called rhetoric and Aristotle wrote a whole book about it (called, not unnaturally, **Rhetoric**).

The tricks are common coin and most of us use them without thinking, and without knowing their names. A metaphor allows us to draw a relationship between two things that are similar to a common (unstated) third. To say that a robin is the herald of spring means that a robin is to spring as a herald is to the message he brings his prince. No literal relationship is intended. A simile, on

the other hand, would imply a literal relationship and we could then say that a robin is like a herald of spring (which is nonsense, since there is no such thing as a *real* herald of spring, but never mind). Almost invariably a simile reveals itself by involving words such as "like" or "as if". Usually a metaphor is abstract and a simile is concrete (which explains why the abstract simile I used above doesn't work properly). Aristotle remarked rather drily that a simile is a metaphor with an explanation.

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

to mean a ship or describing a computer system as a box.

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

With hyperbole we have an exaggeration for effect ("If I've told you once I've told you a million

times..."). Litotes gives the same effect by use of the negative and often comes across as a dry or amusing understatement ("I am not unused to saying this...").

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

overjoyed to have their books remembered and used for as long as Quintilian's was!

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

We are talking about communication and clarity of expression. It is simply not possible to communicate effectively if the

communication channel is corrupt. The language is flexible and will take a lot of abuse before it finally gives up – but the greater the degree of corruption, the more the rules are mistreated, the harder it becomes to extract any meaning from the text. Just consider how much meaning was destroyed in my umbrella paragraph by only two simple abuses of the system.

Rules are made to be broken and language is an ever-evolving thing (God forbid that it should ever stagnate). But you simply cannot break the rules meaningfully if you don't know what the rules are in the first place; that's a given. Many people today do not know what the rules are

because nobody has ever thought to tell them. The study of spelling, punctuation, grammar and rhetoric has largely vanished from our educational system. People who produce illiterate prose (and therefore fail to communicate) are generally not stupid, they are merely ignorant. And ignorance is correctable.

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

uncommon skill.

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

Snap, Crackle, Pop.

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

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

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

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

After a time I attempted to stand. Success! I could even put my whole weight onto my left foot. More first aid

lessons reappeared in my head – the ends of broken bones rasping together make a most distinctive noise. It is called crepitation. I listened carefully. No crepitation. Perhaps the ankle was just badly sprained.

From the corner where it lives I retrieved my walking stick; the one with the secret compartment for hiding brandy in. Unfortunately there was no brandy. Oh well, you can't have everything. With its support I limped around for a time. Things got back on to more of an even keel. I sat for a while with a book.

As the day progressed, the pain in my ankle increased. I kept expecting that it would even off, but it didn't. It

just went up and up, there seemed to be no top to the scale, just an ever-increasing agony which became more unbearable by the minute. Nauseating pain travelled up the whole of my leg. It was centred on the ankle, but it throbbed sickeningly all the way up to my thigh. The ankle itself began to swell again. By now I'd run out of sweetcorn (it was completely defrosted) and I began to contemplate the dubious virtues of a packet of peas; but the ankle was swelling up like a football and I started to feel that it might possibly be beyond even the power of frozen peas to affect a cure. It was time to give up. I rang some friends and asked them to drive me to

the emergency clinic.

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded wearily and handed the money over. She gave me a receipt and took me through. My leg was placed at various awkward angles and

mysterious machinery hummed ominously. I limped back to the waiting room and about five minutes later the nice lady reappeared.

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

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

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

"Really? Let me see." He examined the X-ray plates closely. "Oh yes, there it is. See that dark line?" He indicated a shadow on the plate. I nodded. "That's

the break – just at the bottom of the fibula, where it joins the ankle. Hmmm – a bit higher up and you'd have to go into hospital to have a plate screwed on. But I think you'll be OK with a plaster cast and a set of crutches."

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

"How tight are your jeans?" she asked.

I demonstrated.

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

I professed myself quite happy to

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

"You can't have a shower for six weeks," she informed me. "The plaster we are putting on now is not a walking plaster. You mustn't put any weight on it at all or it will crack and we'll have to start all over again. In a week or so,

when the swelling has died down, we'll change it for a fibreglass one. You can walk on that. But meanwhile you'll be on crutches, I'm afraid." Like all medical people, she appeared to take a gloomy pleasure in telling me the bad news.

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

I wimped out and took the black ones.

The nurse soaked some plaster-of-paris impregnated bandages and wrapped them around my foot and

ankle and half way up my leg. She finished the job by covering the cast with a crepe bandage that she fastened in place with a patented gadget. Then she covered the patented gadget with a strip of sellotape, and it was done. "I'll go and fetch your crutches," she declared.

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

"That's right," I said.

He examined the X-ray closely. "Nice cartilage," he said. "See that gap

there between the bones? That's cartilage. Nice resilient surface, that. Wish mine was that nice." He relapsed into gloom, contemplating his lack of cartilage.

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

resisted the temptation.

Martin took me home.

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

You can't take a pee in the conventional way and you can't wash

your hands afterwards (not that you really need to).

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

You can't clean your teeth. You can't chop things up in order to cook them. You can't go upstairs to play with your computers and most importantly, you can't pick up the cats bowls in order to feed them (not that they need it, given their depredations

on the local wild life). It would appear that some ingenuity would be required.

Blisters and aching muscles just had to be put up with, but all the other problems proved solvable.

Strategically placed chairs allowed all the day to day functions to be performed. Once I was sitting down, both hands were free again. After that, the only major obstacle to progress was the depressing (and hazardous) realisation that every time I tried to walk through a doorway my black cat Milo was sitting in it, and every time I approached one of the strategic chairs, my black cat Milo was asleep on it. He got a little annoyed at being constantly crutched out of doorways and turfed off

the nice comfortable new places to get his head down.

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

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

But all good things must come to an end, and so I returned to the fracture clinic to find out what fate awaited me.

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

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

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

more slowly and clumsily, but eventually I was on the table.

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

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

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

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

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

Presently the doctor appeared,

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

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

"Ouch!" I hinted.

"Can you stand on it?" he asked.

"Walk a few paces?"

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

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

we'll see how you are getting on."

He turned on his heel and left.

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

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

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

until they weren't there any more.

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

Over the next few days the bruising started to fade to a much less startling shade and even the swelling started to go down. Getting out of bed in the morning remained agony – the ankle stiffened up overnight and even moving it (let alone walking on it) remained problematical until it loosened up again. This generally took twenty minutes or so of limping (I still

needed crutches for this bit; "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"). After that it became bearable and I could attend to the usual morning tasks. Showers remained difficult – one slip on the soap would probably snap the leg in two and clambering in and out of the bath was a scary balancing act. But I managed it. One day at a time.

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

Warrantable Risks

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

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

and grease seems less than attractive to me. And the fingernails! Oh my dears, the fingernails...

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

Mike is about six foot eight in every measurable dimension and gives the distinct impression that, if he really felt like it, he could pick the car up and

carry it under his arm into the testing bay. However he would never do this, because he hates cars with a deep and utter loathing and would dearly love to exterminate them entirely. Peter has virtually ceased to ask Mike for warrants because Mike, as a matter of course, fails about 90% of the cars brought to him.

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

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

Search though he might, Peter couldn't find a single adjustment

toggle. Nothing to twist, nothing to tighten, nothing to turn. The seat had all electrical adjustments. Lots of switches and buttons to move it hither and yon in the interests of driving comfort, but nary a screw or bolt. It appeared to be welded firmly to the frame.

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

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

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

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

Telephones

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

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

Ring, ring.

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

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

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

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

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

examined them all closely.

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

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

"?" I said.

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

idea to wire it into the same socket as the bedroom phone."

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

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

have made trans-dimensional phone calls to my doppelganger. Perhaps I read too much science fiction.

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

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

Pennies dropped with a sudden clatter. "Come with me," I said and I

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

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

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

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

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

Three bells out of four, but a different three this time. Progress of a sort, I suppose. The sequence was repeated. No matter what he did, only three bells rang, but we managed to get every permutation of three out of four. Four out of four we just couldn't

manage. The engineer descended into a brown study. This was an insult to his engineering virility, and he wasn't going to let it defeat him. He'd never be able to hold his head up in public. Imagine what the lads would say!

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

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

So now, for the first time in five years, I have all four bells again. Whether or not I still have an anomalous resistance I have no idea. But I do know that ever since the magic

man played with my sockets I have a much faster and much more reliable connection to the internet.

Q, as they say, ED.

Scunthorpe

(With thanks to Kathleen Bergner)

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

So perhaps it is fortunate that the Duke of Wellington was not the Duke

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

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

If the Battle of Balaclava had been

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

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

When you come home of an evening, would you say hello to the scunthorpe, tickle it under the chin, make a scunthorpe for tea, settle down in front of the scunthorpe to watch a scunthorpe, have a cup of scunthorpe

and then (feeling tired) climb into your scunthorpe, switch on your electric scunthorpe, kiss the scunthorpe good night and settle down for a good scunthorpe (snoring occasionally, the while).

Scunthorpe me! Didn't we get off lightly?

Tagine

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

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

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

A tagine, Laurie explained, is a Moroccan cooking device. Apparently the originals are completely ceramic

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

All this was explained as Laurie chopped and sautéed and simmered.

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

"Help yourself."

I helped myself, and took a bite.

Instant orgasm! Seldom has anything quite so breathtakingly delicious slithered down my throat. When the moans of pleasure finally subsided, I had reached a decision. I needed a tagine of my own.

Across the road from our office in Auckland is a kitchen shop rejoicing in

the name of **Milly's**. I went in and looked around. They had lots of sexy kitchen stuff, but no tagine. I enquired at the counter.

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

"It's a ..."

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

"Can you get another one?"

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

Do you want it?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I've come for my tagine."

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

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

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

for another two weeks."

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

Again the phone was invoked.

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

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

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

"I'll have it now, please," I said.

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

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

And oh! the food! Next time you come for dinner, I'll do you this wonderful Jamaican Lamb dish I've found. You'll love it, I promise. But

don't go looking to buy a tagine of your own. There aren't any, and it's all my fault...

Alan and the Exploding Woman

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

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

Teaching this class had an interesting effect on my lecturing rhythms for I found I had to time my sentences so that they fitted nicely between the coughs and sneezes. Generally I managed to squeeze in about four words between paroxysms

and I began to develop a distinctly minimalist style of speech. The essentially random nature of her periodic explosions also required much repetition from me as my last sentence vanished beneath waves of white noise. At some point in her life it would appear that she'd had 500 watt amplifiers surgically embedded in her throat. Students three classrooms away complained.

During the course of each day she sucked slyly on a bottle of violently pink medicine (could it be, perchance, the infamous Lily the Pink's patent remedy?). In addition she kept popping the occasional pill. Her eyes became progressively more glazed and

sometimes they crossed. A violent cough followed by a discreet spit generally straightened them out again, but the effect was only temporary.

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

At the end of every day, when the students had all gone home, I would pick up the saturated, snotty, phlegm-infested tissues that she positioned

very carefully in neat piles on top of her computer, and throw them into the bin.

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

Spelling

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

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

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

Nice Lady: Pick up address please?

Me: Maioro Street.

Nice Lady: Spell that, please.

Me: M – A – I <long pause> O – R
– O

Nice Lady: M – A – R – I – R – A

Me: No, no. M – A – I <even longer

pause> O – R – O

Nice Lady: M – A – O

Me (interrupting): M – A – I

Nice Lady: M – A – I

Me: O – R – O

Nice Lady: R – O – R

Me: O – R – O

Nice Lady: M – A – R – O – R – I

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

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

"Name please?" asked the returning officer.

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

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

Bonce

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

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

"Look out!" one of them called.

"?" I thought to myself.

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

"Are you all right?"

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

"Are you all right?"

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

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

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

Before I knew it, a cup of tea, a plate of biscuits and a packet of panadol appeared in front of me. My pupils were examined to see if they reacted to light and if they both remained the same size. Fingers were

waved. Would my eyeballs track? All appeared to be in order.

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

I contemplated the possible effects

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

I spent the rest of the day in a curiously disembodied state. Nothing felt quite real and I have absolutely no

idea what I said to the students as the class progressed. I leaned the whiteboard up against the wall and continued to write and draw on it. The next day a man arrived and fixed it to the wall with screws so long that I began to wonder if they would poke out into the next room. No way would this whiteboard ever fall off again. Not unless the whole wall fell out with it. Mind you, Wellington is in an earthquake zone...

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

Ten minutes later the projector exploded.

Geography

I dialled a phone number. Ring, ring.

"Hello?"

"Are you free for lunch?"

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

"Where's that?" I enquired.

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

I sauntered down Queen Street looking at numbers. An ornate old building with a legend carved into the

stonework proclaimed itself to be at one and the same time the Bank of New Zealand and number 125. The building was just a façade, kept for the sake of its attractiveness. The bank was long gone and as I entered I became aware of the bustle of people as they hurried between the shops which now occupied the entire available foyer space.

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

I spied an escalator and rode it up. On the next floor were more wooden benches as uncomfortable as the first.

No mural. Where was I to sit? How was Maree to find me in all this hustle and bustle? Panic set in and I took the lift to the 24th floor (as one does).

"Yes sir?" enquired the receptionist.

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

"Certainly Sir. Please take a seat."

The seat was distinctly comfy and there were things on the wall. Had I perchance misheard the directions? Did I blink and miss the sentence "Take the lift to the 24th floor". I didn't think I'd missed it, but you never know.

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

"I got lost," I explained. "And

confused. I couldn't find the comfy chairs and the mural."

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

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

"See!" she said. I saw.

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

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

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

"In all my time going up and down this street," said Maree firmly, "I've never seen that door before. Nobody has ever seen that door before. Everybody, without exception, has always gone through the door with "125" on it in big bold, black numbers - the door that leads into the foyer with

the mural and the comfy chairs. Half the population of Auckland has visited me at work at one time or another and every single one of them has been able to find the foyer, the mural and the comfy chairs with no trouble at all. Only you, in the entire history of the universe have ever managed to find a DIFFERENT door with "125" on it that leads somewhere else. How do you DO this?" She stamped her foot in exasperation.

I hung my head in shame, and my hat fell off.

Geography? Don't talk to me about geography.

Squashy

When in Wellington, I stay in an hotel with a lift that has direct access to the street. In order to protect the guests from nightly assaults by maniacal hordes of ravaging Wellingtonians, the lift has a security mechanism. A small keypad somewhat akin to that found on ATMs, and serving much the same purpose sits just above the panel of floor access buttons. In order to reach the residential floors the potential liftee is obliged to enter a four digit secret code number into the keypad. Should this be

done correctly, a cheerful chirrup announces that the required floor may be selected within ten seconds. Failure to choose a floor within that time necessitates starting the whole procedure again. Should the secret number be keyed incorrectly, a sullen silence results and the floor access buttons remain stubbornly inactive.

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

The guest strides confidently towards the lift, card clutched in hand. However confidence erodes the closer they get to the lift and once they are

actually inside it, mild panic often ensues. Many times I have stood in silent amusement at the back of the lift and watched people struggle with the arcane and mystical mechanisms required to induce it to ascend.

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

I have seen people punch their code number into the floor selection buttons and their floor number into the keypad. Again the lift remains immobile.

I have seen people so overcome with delight at their skill in entering

the secret number into the keypad that they completely forget to select a floor number. Sudden realisation usually dawns as no lift movement is detected, but by then it is too late and the secret number must be entered again.

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

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

manipulation.

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

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

squashy...

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

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

"What can I do for you today?"

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

"Would you like your beard trimmed as well?"

"No thank you," I said. "No offence,

but people without beards shouldn't trim beards."

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

She snipped and snipped, manoeuvring my head backwards and forwards, chatting freely the while. She told me her life story and I told her mine. Slowly the exuberant mass of

curls came back under control. My head was smooth and sleek.

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

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

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

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

She did a marvellous job, shaping

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

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

"Would you like me to trim your eyebrows?"

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

A squashy is a New Zealand bush hat designed to survive hard usage. It can be squashed up into a small, tight bundle, squeezed into a bag, carried from one end of the country to the other and when removed from the bag

will resume its proper shape with no wrinkle or distortion. It is the ultimate fashion accessory and no Robson can afford to be without one. The label in my squashy proclaims:

SQUASHY SUEDE

WATERPROOF

Kiwi Classic Hats

NEW ZEALAND

Original

Authentic

There is a picture of a kiwi, a koru

and a flax plant. And the words:

Made in Australia

Memories of Melbourne

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

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

They bribed me with Luxury. "The usual hotel is booked out and so at the

end of the week we have booked you into a hotel in Brighton. It's right by the sea in one of Melbourne's most luxurious and exclusive suburbs.

You'll love it!"

"OK."

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

"As you can probably tell from the noise, we are having some trouble with the flaps. I've called the engineers out

to have a look. I don't think it will take very long. Just a few minutes."

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

It seems to be a universal rule that no Air New Zealand plane will ever take off on time (I have flown a lot with Air New Zealand and never once has the plane met its announced

schedule), but this one was now more than an hour late, and that's excessive even for them. We rumbled down the runway and lumbered into the air.

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

To pass the time, I continued a

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

We began our descent into Melbourne airport and I was quite upset to hear the flaps make the same unhealthy graunching noises that they had made when they were tested on the ground at Auckland. I began to wonder just what the invisible engineers in the yellow mechanism had done to them.

Had the repair worked? We landed without incident, but I'd love to know how narrow the escape really was...

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

Funny, I thought. Are they going to spray us? It has been a long time since I've seen the quarantine people walk up and down the aisles spraying insecticide on the passengers in case any of the people in the seats are fruit flies in disguise. I thought they did it automatically through the air conditioning nowadays. Oh well. Maybe the spraying device was

connected to the flaps and was consequently out of order. We came slowly to a full stop at the gate.

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

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

We waited.

The doors opened and two large policemen and a policewoman strode fiercely to the back of the plane, every eye upon them. I could see them

remonstrating with someone. Then they disappeared, presumably through the rear door. Finally we were allowed to disembark. The policemen were now standing in the gate and I overheard one of them saying to his mate, "I told him to stop being a silly bugger and not to do it again."

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

My boarding pass said that I was allowed to enter Australia through the express lane for priority processing. I have never seen any evidence whatsoever of an express lane on any

of my visits to Australia and this trip was no exception. All the passengers were filtered through the same check in desks irrespective of what it said on their boarding cards. The queue snaked on forever. Eventually I reached an immigration official. He was labelled "Frank Kilroy". He glared at me with eyes made malignant by a long, hot, tiring day and a million recalcitrant passengers.

"Passport."

I handed it over silently. I just KNEW that if I made any smart-arse remarks about Frank Kilroy being here, proctologically inclined gentlemen with an infinite supply of rubber gloves would be summoned to converse with

me. I restrained myself, but I think I ruptured something in the effort.

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

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

Thursday dawned hot and humid

(of course). A taxi was summoned. Brighton beckoned...

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

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

trickle of air came out of the vents.

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

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

"Yes please."

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

returned to the reception desk.

"Do you have a street map, please?"

"Where do you want to go?"

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

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

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

man was on the desk. I explained my problem with the phone.

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

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

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

"Can you call me a taxi please?"

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

I began to wonder if everyone in the hotel had been to sarcasm and rudeness school. I went into breakfast while I waited for my taxi. As I entered

the restaurant, a group of gossiping waiters turned their backs on me in order to continue their conversation.

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

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

which stretches in smooth yellow swathes as far as the eye can see. And at irregular intervals the Brighton Boxes stand and stare.

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

Possession of a Brighton Box is the ultimate status symbol in this supremely status conscious suburb. On the rare occasions when they appear on the market they change hands for fantastic sums. One recently sold for

\$120,000. Can you imagine paying that sort of money for a one-roomed shed with no electricity, no running water, no facilities of any kind?

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

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

The plane back to Auckland was barely ten minutes late taking off. It must have had a downhill wind because it made up the lost time (and more beside) and we landed about twenty minutes early. My boarding pass was marked "Express Lane In", and unlike Australia, New Zealand always seems to have one working. The formalities were over in less than ten seconds. A taxi was waiting and we drove off into the night.

It was good to be home.

Enigmatic Variations

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

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

Our plane was nearly an hour early and so we had to wait at the airport for Robin's family who were due to meet us at the scheduled arrival time. Unfortunately her father was in charge

of the meeting arrangements and so we knew that the family wouldn't be there until the exact moment of (scheduled) touch down. Had her mother been in charge, the family would have been there at least two hours before the scheduled arrival time, just in case. Robin's mother shares all my neuroses and we get on famously as a result. Unsympathetic souls pull our legs unmercifully, but we don't care.

While we waited, I basked in the heat. Even though the sun had gone down, the night air was still very hot. Eventually the family arrived. Mother, father, brother, nephew, niece and Herbert, an iBook laptop computer who accompanies Robin's niece Alex

wherever she goes. When Herbert is turned on he says, "I am smelly and nobody loves me." in a variety of heart-rending voices.

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

The area depends for its existence upon bore water drawn from deep beneath the ground. The water stains everything red. Concrete pillars, footpaths, even the trees all look rusty.

A few years ago a cyclone in the North agitated the sea to such an extent that the swell stirred up the sand and also the red earth beneath it. For several days, the seas around Perth were incarnadined as though blood were leaking from a giant's corpse. Australia is red all the way down inside.

The sun beat down pitilessly from a clear blue sky. A hotel advertised a heated swimming pool as an attraction, but for the life of me I could not see why they bothered. We drove past a CALM (Conservation and Land Management) bush reserve with a barbed wire fence around it, presumably to stop the feral trees from escaping and rampaging around the

countryside beating up foreign flowers and demanding pollen with menaces. The foliage was brown and desiccated, though later we learned that there had been unseasonably heavy rains in January and as far as the locals were concerned, everything was green and flourishing. I began to understand why the average Australian, visiting New Zealand for the first time, invariably says, "Gosh! How **green** everything is!"

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

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

The maze turned out to be a fence with two offset gaps on each side of the rail line thus forcing the pedestrian to zig-zag through them and check for oncoming trains along the way. After such a dramatic sign, I had been expecting something on the order of Hampton Court maze with security guards on hand to rescue the poor unfortunates who were unable to solve it by rigorously following the left hand rule, and I was quite disappointed. However the rail system had not finished with me yet. Just outside Fremantle station I spotted a sign which enigmatically proclaimed:

End of Train Ordering Territory

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

Passenger Trains Do Not Stop At This Station

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

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

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

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

The prison was built in the 1850s by the convicts themselves (a strange irony) and was in continuous use until 1991. The cells were 7 feet long and 4 feet wide; barely wide enough to stretch your arms out and just long enough to sling a hammock. Cat swinging was completely out of the question.

Prisoners were locked up in their

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

When the prison was refurbished

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

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

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

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

for weddings.

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

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

the lake to crop the tourists.

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

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

preponderance of names such as Joondalup, Karrinyup, Wanneroo and Innaloo.

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

A special display of gold pouring is

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

security guard who was standing behind us monitoring the proceedings very carefully indeed.

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

Every time the gold is melted, a minuscule amount is lost due to evaporation. The demonstration area was the site of the original furnaces. This area was decommissioned when the old furnaces were replaced with more modern equipment in a new area of the building. One of the original furnaces remained for the edification

of the tourists and the area around the old furnaces was cleaned and the sweepings and demolition material were re-smelted. Umpteen hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gold was recovered; the detritus of many, many years. The area around the tourist furnace was not processed and nobody knows how much gold remains there.

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

There is a strict dress code for the furnace workers in the mint. Jeans are *de rigueur*. Trousers with turn ups are not allowed in any of the working areas. Gold particles could accumulate

in the cuffs and over time a reasonable fortune could be collected inadvertently (or sometimes perhaps, advertently). It took the authorities quite a while to wake up to this one and the dress code in the early years had no such specification. Nobody knows how much gold was lost this way.

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

The next day we checked the weather forecast. But it wasn't going to be warm and sunny. On April 27th we had winter. It rained stair rods and the sky was solid cloud. The dry ground

soaked up the water greedily and the sea tossed and turned with an enormous swell. A few hardy surfers braved the weather and were rewarded with some quite exciting waves for their pains.

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

Three Feet Six Inches (Slimline)

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

Wellington and Johnsonville are only a short distance apart as the crow flies. You can drive between them in

about ten minutes, for the road can go over and around any geography that it doesn't like (and since New Zealand road engineers are paid by the corner, it does quite a bit of that). The railway doesn't have that option. Unruly geography has either to be removed or gone straight through.

The area is oversupplied with some quite vicious terrain. Immensely dense mountains cluster close to each other for comfort. The engineers who built the line had to grind seven extremely long tunnels through the more recalcitrant outcrops. Five of these tunnels lie between Wellington and Crofton Downs - and that's only the first stop on the line! It probably has

more tunnels per kilometre than any other railway in the world. The difficulty of this huge engineering feat, coupled with the sheer density of the stone meant that the tunnels had to be very thin and consequently the line has acquired what amounts to its own private rolling stock, for no other equipment owned by the railway will fit the tunnels. The people in charge have scoured the world to find replacement rolling stock, but it hasn't been easy. Everything that runs on the Johnsonville line has been bought second hand from obscure railroad companies in obscure (generally Eastern European) countries and it is all somewhere between thirty five and

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

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

I turned up at Wellington station and purchased a ticket to Crofton Downs. As I walked towards the

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

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

"Excuse me everybody!" A lady dressed in a TransMetro uniform and

wearing a vivid Day-Glo yellow jacket on top of it came striding down the platform. The lights reflecting off her jacket and her immaculately coiffured blonde hair made her look like a miniature mobile sunburst.

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

We all squeezed in. I was lucky – I got a seat. Not everyone was that fortunate. The train pulled slowly out of the station and rattled and wheezed its way along the tracks. Another great attraction of the Johnsonville line is the constant vibration that judders up and

down your body; a strangely erotic experience that sometimes results in embarrassingly obvious consequences.

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

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

"But we've got another more serious problem," she said. "The points

at Wadestown have broken, and so we have to operate them manually, and that's causing long delays. So we'd like to ask you to be patient with us, and we'll get you home just as soon as we can."

For most of the distance between Wellington and Johnsonville there is only one track. Again, this is a constraint forced upon it by the evil geography through which it winds. In one or two of the marginally less severely constricted areas a loop of track provides a passing place, and as long as the points are correctly set, a train can wait there while the train going in the opposite direction goes past, and then, with the points switched

again, it can re-join the main line and continue its journey. Thus the line can be served by both an inward and an outward bound train at the same time, to the great convenience of all.

Wadestown is one of these passing places.

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

The bright lady reappeared in our carriage. "I'm sorry about the delay," she said. "We've got some big, strong, competent men on the job now and

they are moving the points by hand. They reckon it will take them about fifteen minutes."

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

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

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

"Hello?"

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

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

"Oh, I'm still in town. I heard there

was trouble on the line and so I thought I'd take a taxi. I was just ringing to see if you wanted to share it – but since you are already on the train I don't suppose that's really possible..."

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

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

He chuckled a dirty chuckle and rang off.

We continued to wait for the big, strong competent men to shift the points. Eventually they must have managed it for with a hiss and a gurgle the other train moved off into the night.

We waited a little longer while the points were adjusted again and then we lurched away. A few minutes later we pulled into Crofton Downs station and I disembarked. Ahead of me a dark, vaguely familiar shape walked purposefully up the street. I followed discreetly, wondering if I should dash up and tap it on the shoulder. I decided against it, being fearful of engendering righteous wrath should I be mistaken in the identity.

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

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

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

"Yes, great."

I explained about Laurie.

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

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

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

We explained.

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

beaten you otherwise."

The Unkindest Cut Of All

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

Several of my friends have been there before me so I had some idea of what I was letting myself in for. Laurie sings alto in a choir (this is rare – altos are usually female, men generally find it too difficult to hit the high registers). As he was taken in to the theatre for his operation he was amused to hear the

concert programme playing soothing music in the background:

Tchaikovsky's **Nutcracker Suite**. He made himself comfortable on the trolley and the surgeon remarked (in what was probably his standard reassuring joke at this point), "Don't worry, you won't be singing soprano after the operation."

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

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

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

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

"No I can't," I replied. "It's far too late

for that – I've booked a sick day from the office. If I cancel it now, I shudder to think what the paperwork will be like..."

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

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

to take your trousers off if you uncross your legs."

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

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

She picked up a gadget that positively bristled with dials and gauges and

flashing lights. "I need to take your temperature," she said.

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

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

I need to take your blood pressure."

By now I was wise, and I just sat there wondering what kind of space age device would appear. But she fooled me by trundling up a perfectly ordinary (and very well used) sphygmomanometer. She wrapped the cuff around my upper arm and pumped madly away. The cuff squeezed tight and then relaxed as she released the pressure. Again she wrote down a figure. "Well that's all nice and normal," she said. "Just go and sit in the waiting room again and I'll tell the surgeon you are ready."

I went and sat down and crossed my

legs again. The moment, it seemed, had now arrived...

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

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

Astonishingly, he was correct!

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

I never lost consciousness. I was perfectly well aware that things were

happening. They just didn't seem very important. They were a long way away and no concern of mine. I knew that a local anaesthetic was being injected into my scrotal regions and that sharp scalpels were slicing vitally important bits of me away. But I simply didn't care; I was far too relaxed and happy.

At some stage in the proceedings it occurred to me that I had spent the whole of my life up to this point as an eight bit binary byte. But now that my most significant bit had been flipped to zero, I was doomed to spend the rest of my life as plain ascii text.

I was rather proud of this insight. It proved beyond any shadow of a doubt

that I was an irremediable geek. But it also proved that even though the world had gone away I was still capable of coherent thought. Always assuming that the thought I'd just had was coherent of course; a debateable point at best.

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

"Gosh, that was fast," I bumbled.

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

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

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

I tried, but I kept forgetting (I felt fine – as far as I was concerned everything was working normally). The nurse

came back and told me off a few times. "Deep breaths," she said fiercely. "You'll breathe a lot better if you uncross your legs!"

She was wrong!

Eventually they judged that I was sufficiently *compos mentis* to have company and Robin was brought in to supervise me drinking a cup of tea. The nurse unclipped my locker key from my dressing gown and bustled off, returning a short time later with my clothes. She pondered the machine that went *ping!* for a moment and then disconnected me. "You can get dressed now."

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

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

pit of my stomach, and it was a steady, sickening ache.

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

However that in itself has proved to be dangerous. Milo, my ten and a half kilogram cat, likes nothing better than jumping up on to my lap to get stroked.

In the days that my lap has been newly exposed he has several times launched himself with the unerring aim of a stealth missile straight on to my stitches. As I scream, he purrs loudly, kneading my wounds ecstatically with both front paws and dribbling with delight...

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

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

Rumour has it that it takes 16 ejaculations to drain the tank completely. In order not to lose count, a friend put a bowl containing 32 mints by the side of the bed. After each ejaculation, he and his partner would

both eat a mint. When the bowl was empty he trotted off for his confirmatory test. It worked for him, perhaps it will work for me.

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

Early Warning Systems

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

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

As a child I attended a small primary school at the other end of the village. It rejoiced in the name Withinfields

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

One day, feeling hungry, and feeling

anxious about missing the vital bus I raised my hand.

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

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

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

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

The whole class erupted into hysterics at this remark. Even the teacher appeared to be having a hard time

controlling her giggles. "No, Alan," she remarked patiently, "I don't think that's a good idea."

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

As I look back on the incident forty years later, I still fail to understand the attitude of the teacher and the other children. My request to go and wait for the bus still makes perfect sense to me (though others appear not to agree). I felt then and I feel now that you should

always be early for everything in life. After all, when you are early, you can wait. When you are *very* early you can read a book while waiting (an advantage in itself). When you are late you are in the poo and the situation simply cannot be rescued. Surely this is self evident?

Apparently not.

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

"Shall I call the taxi?"

"Not yet." My wife shook her head.

"The train doesn't go for ages."

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

"Can I call the taxi now?"

"No."

I tried to read my book, but the words

made no sense.

"Now?"

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

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

We waited.

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

We waited.

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

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

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

It was our first and fiercest marital

disagreement.

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

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

"Hello sir," said the helpful lady at the check in desk. "Would you like me transfer you to the previous flight? It will be boarding in about an hour."

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

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

Sometimes the effects of being early rebound upon me. Recently I concluded my business in Wellington by lunchtime and so I made my way out to

the airport intent on catching the first flight home.

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

"Let me see." The lady did arcane things with her computer terminal.

"Yes that's fine sir." She handed me a boarding pass for the 1.30pm flight. I had about half an hour to wait. Just enough time for an interlude of orgasmic delight. I made my way to the luxury lounge and rang home then I rang the taxi company and arranged to be met at Auckland airport at 2.30pm. I settled down to pour vile fluids into

and out of my body. Then an announcement came over the speaker system.

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

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

monkey brains still warm in the skull,
and a clean spoon.

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

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

my plane as the boarding call was made. When I passed the departures display screen, I noticed that my original 1.30pm flight had now been completely cancelled.

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

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

Ten minutes later we pulled away from

the airbridge and trundled slowly towards the runway. Then we stopped, engines idling. The pilot spoke again.

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

We finally took off nearly 45 minutes late and we must have had an uphill wind because we didn't make up any time at all on the journey to Auckland. We were so late arriving that all the airport gates were already occupied by well-disciplined aircraft that were sticking rigidly to their schedules, and so we taxied to an obscure corner of the airport, disembarked via the portable

stairs and then walked for miles towards the dimly visible airport buildings on the horizon. There we walked through a maze of little twisty passages, all alike, with strategically placed airport staff to indicate the correct route when the choices got too confusing. Eventually I emerged through a door I'd never noticed before to find myself immediately behind my taxi driver who was staring hopefully at the stairs down which travellers from Wellington usually appeared.

"Hello," I said.

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

We collected my bags and set off for

the taxi. "Where to sir?"

I gave him my address.

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

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

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

last night's party.

Living In A Kafka Novel

This year New Zealand changed the way it handles the collection of income tax from salaried employees.

Previously we had to fill in an IR5 tax form every year. This was never a very onerous task and over the years the form became progressively simpler to complete, mainly because the tax authorities stopped allowing us to claim rebates for anything. Each year I dutifully filled it in, claimed for my income protection insurance policy

(the only thing left to me to claim), calculated my tax and applied for a refund of several hundred dollars. It became an annual ritual.

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

But this year everything changed. There were no forms to fill in at all. The IRD insisted that their magnificent new computer system and new reporting guidelines for businesses meant that they would have enough information on file to process

employees taxes internally. All we had to do was sit back and wait and the refunds would roll in automatically.

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

The tax year ended on March 31st. Round about the middle of June I received a document from the IRD which summarised my income to the end of the tax year. It was, I was gratified to note, completely accurate. They'd even included the \$30 I earned from writing a book review for a local newspaper, and they had noted the \$7.50 withholding tax deducted from the \$30. Included in the same envelope

was a small and simple form to fill in to claim any rebates I might be entitled to. I examined the form carefully. I could claim for donations to charity, and I could claim for childcare and domestic home help, but nowhere could I claim for income protection insurance. I rang the IRD and explained my position.

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

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

"We won't have the data fully

processed until August. An assessment form is a sort of replacement IR5."

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

"Oh we have. Except for special cases."

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

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

that. What's your IRD number?"

I told him and he looked me up.

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

"?" I asked.

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

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

"Well because of that \$30 payment and the fact that the tax was levied as a withholding tax, you are classified as a self employed person and therefore you

have to fill out an IR3 form."

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

"Sorry," said the man. "Those are the rules. You earned \$30 last year as a self employed person. So you must fill in an IR3. I'll arrange to have one sent to you. You can claim your income protection insurance on the IR3," he added enticingly.

The IR3 arrived towards the end of August. The accompanying small print informed me that IR3 forms must be

filed by the 7th of July. It would appear that I was in trouble again...

An IR3 is a form of enormous complexity. Among many other things, it required me to estimate my self-employed income for the next twelve months and to pay provisional tax on that estimated income. The explanatory booklet that comes with the form lists all the dire penalties that will be applied to your shivering carcass if your estimated income (and hence your provisional tax) turns out to be significantly lower than the actuality. The penalties start with ritual disembowelling for a first offence and culminate with eternal damnation and a

thousand lines for subsequent offences. I estimated my income at zero, thus making my provisional tax zero as well – there's no way I'm going through this rigmarole again next year. If the newspaper wants another book review, they can write it themselves!

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

Then came the great moment. I wrote down my claim for my income protection insurance. To this I added zero a few times (strangely, the total remained unchanged) and then for good measure I subtracted zero a few times as well. This too had surprisingly little effect on the final amount. I multiplied the figure by a magic number supplied by the IRD and the result suggested that they owed me a rebate of \$1,755.17. Gleefully I posted my form and sat back and waited for the money to appear.

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

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

I explained.

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

"Why is that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

shakes of an accountant's quill."

"That's different."

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

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

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

"Oh yes, but we discounted those payments because you are self employed so you have to calculate the

payments yourself and then we credit your calculations against the money we received as ACC contributions from your employer."

"But I'm not self employed!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now just think about my taxing tale for a minute. For the sake of a \$30 payment which attracted \$7.50

withholding tax, the IRD held three quite lengthy telephone calls with me and made me fill in a very complicated form. A clerk processed that very complicated form and transferred its figures to my records in the IRD computer, correcting my invalid Question 11 along the way. The collection of the \$7.50 tax probably cost them several hundred dollars in administration alone. Let's assume they spent \$300 to collect my \$7.50 tax. That's a cost of \$40 per tax dollar collected. This is not a productive ratio. If the same ratio applies to a significant fraction of this year's PAYE taxpayers (and anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that it does)

then the IRD must have made a significant loss this year. No wonder this country has debts that are slowly grinding it into oblivion. New Zealand must be the only country in the world whose tax department consistently fails to make a profit!

Heartache

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

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

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

I had to confess that there had been no such effect. The blood was still liquid with a distinct absence of lumpy bits. Mind you, the rainbow effect as the sunlight glinted off the layer of oil on the surface tended to give the game away. I think I might be a national

resource. They can attach my circulatory system to the inlet valves of the Marsden Point oil refinery. New Zealand will never have to import crude oil again; we can be completely self sufficient. Perhaps I'll get a medal.

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

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

Exercise (*yuck!*) was highly recommended and so I bought a second hand exercycle. The advert was irresistible ("late model, low

kilometres"). I pedalled every day. Not surprisingly, I lost weight.

But I didn't lose any cholesterol.

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

An appointment was made to see a cardiologist and an ECG examination was scheduled so that we could all find out how much damage had already

been done. I was instructed to bring shorts and running shoes for they intended to put me on a treadmill and measure all the different ways my body didn't cope with the pressure.

Fully equipped, I turned up at the appointed time.

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

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

"OK," I said.

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

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

"Now we have the sandpaper." She scrubbed vigorously at the freshly shaved areas then she dabbed an electrically conductive adhesive on the

patches of bare skin. I began to feel like a plank of wood that had been planed square, sanded smooth and smeared with glue. Perhaps I'd end up as part of a coffee table. These ambitions died as she attached electrodes to the adhesive. She hung wires on the electrodes.

"Oops," she said.

"What's happened?"

"I stuck one too many electrodes on you," she said. "I thought they looked a bit unsymmetrical." She pulled the extra one off and threw it away and then she rearranged the wires, frowned and rearranged them again. The wires

came together in a belt which hung loosely round my waist. A single, rather fat cable led from the belt to a machine that stood by the treadmill. A screen showed the peaks and troughs of several graphs that marched implacably across it from right to left in response to mysterious electrical activity inside my body. In the top right hand corner of the screen was a glowing green number.

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

There was a keyboard attached to the machine and she typed a few commands on it. The graphs changed

shape slightly as the scale altered. "I'll go and tell the doctor you are ready," she said. "He has to give you the once over before we put you on the treadmill. We don't want you dropping dead on us."

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

"Yes"

We discussed my complete lack of any symptom other than the high cholesterol itself. "I feel remarkably well, in fact. That's what makes the whole thing so ridiculous," I

complained peevishly. "It wouldn't be so bad if I felt ill, but I don't."

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

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

He agreed with me that it was a distinct possibility

He turned to the keyboard and played with it for a while. A window opened on the screen and displayed mysterious

figures and the graphs ceased their stately progress. Something went *beep*. "I think I've broken it," he said. "Damn computers. I hate them."

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

He looked puzzled. "What?".

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

He found it and pressed it and the machine started working again. "Thank you," he said, greatly impressed. "How do you know so much about computers?"

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

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

The treadmill began to move and I started to walk.

"Relax," said the technician in soothing tones. "Stop being so tense. You've got

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

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

"Six minutes." Again my blood

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

"Nine minutes." This time the speed increase seemed out of all proportion to the previous ones and I really had to hurry so as not to fall over. My body was leaning at a 45 degree angle as it fought against the treadmill that was trying to make it fall over in a heap. Try as I might, I couldn't get vertical. Looking in the mirror on the wall, I

could see that I had turned distinctly pink. I was panting quite hard now and my pulse was racing at 168. The technician was looking anxious.

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

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

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

She led me to a trolley and I stretched out and looked at the ceiling while she removed the electrodes. There were several cartoons stuck to the ceiling. In one, a sorry looking man lay on a bed. He was covered from head to foot with enormous zig-zag surgical scars crudely sewn together with huge Frankensteinian stitches. A doctor was

saying, "You'll be pleased to hear that the exploratory surgery found nothing wrong."

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

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

He said, "Regrettably..."

(Oh shit!)

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

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

likelihood of such an event. I had been lucky so far. This probably wouldn't continue.

Given the nature of my new diet, and the fact that I've always eaten a fairly low fat diet anyway, it seems likely that I have a genetic predisposition to high cholesterol. It is a completely symptomless disease, apart from the rather extreme symptom of the heart attack that appears one day out of the blue and kills you. However some people with astronomically high cholesterol start to deposit fat in unlikely areas of the body and often they will have a white fatty circle around the iris of the eye. My father

had such circles around his eyes. I remember noticing them as a child and thinking how odd they looked. At the moment my body seems quite tolerant of its high cholesterol and that too is probably genetic. But I can't continue to rely on it for protection.

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

In the short term (i.e. the next few months) I probably don't have much to worry about. In the long term I should

be able eventually to reduce my chances of a cardiac related illness to something more reasonable. The future looks hopeful, as long as I continue to eat sensibly and generally take care of myself.

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

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

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

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

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

students believe me when I tell them these things...

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

Nevertheless, we must still venture in to those areas. Rules are rules.

So, gritting my teeth, I embarked on a course of study designed to award me a Microsoft Certified Solution Developer certificate, or MCSD for short.

Recently I passed the last exam and got the certificate.

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

MCSD. I began to feel quite overwhelmed by all the attention.

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

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

I've been taking exams, on and off, since I was eleven years old. My

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

The exam itself was largely an IQ test,

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

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

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

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

studied nine subjects to O-level (the average was seven) and I passed them all.

After the generalisations of the O-levels, we were required to specialise for the A-Levels and the subjects were studied in much greater depth than before. I joined the science stream and studied maths, physics and chemistry. However to keep my hand in, I also took something called "General Studies" which was a hodge podge of art, science, history, philosophy, politics; you name it. I'd leave the rarefied world of thermodynamics or organic synthesis or celestial mechanics and read Camus and Sartre,

discuss renaissance art and trade union history. I also learned to sew and to cook (the girls were taught woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing – in many ways my school was a very enlightened one for its time).

My A-level exams opened up new worlds of discourse. Prior to this, exams had merely required me to regurgitate accepted wisdom on topics we had studied in class and the questions were straight down the middle of the road. However my A-levels began to push the envelope. I had to apply my knowledge in new situations and demonstrate understanding rather than rote learning.

I had to develop opinions and justify them. I had to explore implications. There was a certain exhilaration in that and while the exams were tough, they were also fun and enormously satisfying intellectually.

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

Intellectually the subject was incredibly stimulating. When I first

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

One of our maths lecturers was a

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

He gave us the first multi-choice exam that any of us had ever seen (at least since the 11-plus. IQ tests, by their very nature, are always multi-choice). We hated it and almost all of us failed. Our lecturer told us we had "flunked" it. Again, we had absolutely no idea what he meant. Out of a group of about 50 students, I think only ten passed. I was not one of them. Our lecturer was

quite shocked and surprised; he'd had high hopes for us.

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

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

Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.

To us that seemed self evident. You can find the detail whenever you need it, so it isn't in the least bit important. What mattered to us were ideas, principles, the broad picture, the structure. It was hard to descend to the mundane level that these "quizzes" demanded. (It was also annoying that

no credit was given for partial answers. It was all black and white; right and wrong. Yin and yang. Excessive attention to detail does that to you).

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

Twenty five years after I left university, multi-choice questions re-entered my life when I began to

struggle with the Microsoft exams.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with multi-choice questions. The Open University in England uses them almost exclusively. However their exams are carefully thought out, and carefully phrased. The "correct" answer cannot be chosen from the list until a huge amount of work has been done researching the question. Depth of understanding is required (and must be demonstrated). However this is the exception – most multi-choice exams are badly thought out, and ambiguously phrased. As a teacher, I am constantly amazed at the number of different ways my students find to misinterpret my

questions. No matter carefully I phrase them, no matter how clear I think I have been, there always seems to be room for manoeuvre, for misunderstanding. For a multi-choice exam to be fair, crystal clarity of expression is required but is all too seldom achieved. Their sole merit is that they are easy to mark – but that is a benefit to the examiner, not the examinee. Surely that is the wrong way round?

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

native language.

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

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

It wasn't entirely a joke though. Just as I failed to understand the bizarre vocabulary of my American maths

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

The Flaw Beneath My Feet

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

When you go to investigate the disturbing sound, you find that urine soaked carpet squishes interestingly beneath bare feet. If the carpet is sufficiently saturated, small squirts will gush between the toes as you walk.

However it is not advisable to walk over faeces. They disintegrate distressingly and lodge beneath the toe nails.

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

"Been cooking curry again, Alan?"

The incontinent cat in question is Ginger. She is fourteen years old and she has always been perfectly house trained in the past. Furthermore, she has a cat door which means that she

can come and go as she pleases (it just doesn't please her to come and go any more). For both of these reasons, I decided that a trip to the vet was called for in case these were the first symptoms of something more serious. The vet was non-committal.

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

"No," I said. "Quite the reverse. I've seen her chase a German Shepherd dog

off the property. There used to be a rottweiler called Fluffy who lived two doors down. It was scared stiff of her."

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

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

Ginger's brother Milo is a cat with only one binary brain cell. When it is on he eats; when it is off he sleeps.

Extra sources of food would merely turn his brain cell on a bit more often than usual.

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

Oh! The frustration!

We bought some more food bowls and put some biscuits and water beneath the stairs. Both cats enjoyed this and we would lie in bed at night soothed by intermittant crunching sounds and the occasional slurp. Ginger never peed

there again. She did it round the corner, out of sight of the food.

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

Perhaps the internet would provide some help. I felt rather odd typing "carpet cat urine" into google.com. There were a depressingly large

number of hits. I was obviously not alone in the world. One document spoke of the delights of a house filled with *eau de pussy* which is quite a clever multi-lingual pun. But one and all they agreed that there was no cure. When cats pee on carpets it is forever.

"So what's under the carpet?" asked Robin, thinking outside the square.

"Why can't we just take it up and live on bare boards? It's a horrible carpet anyway."

Cautious investigation revealed that the carpet was stapled to a wooden floor. Lifting the edges showed nicely polished planks of unidentifiable wood.

There was, of course, no guarantee that this continued all the way across the floor. Many misdemeanours could be concealed beneath the vast expanses of carpet covering the rest of the room and the hallway.

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

So we did.

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

"Let's start over here," said Robin.

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

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

Robin didn't think much of that idea.

"You are wrong!" she explained convincingly.

I couldn't argue with the logic and so we began in the front half of the lounge. We ripped up the carpet. Clouds of dust arose and covered us

from head to toe. We rolled up the carpet and the underlay and carried it into the laundry out of the way.

Stretching half way across the lounge were beautifully varnished, though very dirty, wooden planks. We brushed up the worst of the dust. Much of the detritus consisted of an inordinately large number of insect parts – mandibles, legs etc. All the chitin-covered, inedible sections. I knew my cats had caught a lot of insects over the years, but only now was I starting to realise just how many!

On hands and knees, I crawled across the floor armed only with a pair of pincers. I pulled out hundreds of

staples. In some sections the person with the staple gun had gone completely berserk and there were staples every quarter of an inch or so. Then we washed and scrubbed the boards. They positively glowed. It was a satisfying moment.

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

For many years, a mysterious lump in the carpet had puzzled me. This was now revealed to be an unsanded, unvarnished piece of tatty wood about three feet long and an inch wide nailed, for no readily apparent reason, to the

middle of the floor. Removing the wood revealed the only piece of floor in poor condition. There was no varnish on the planks and several half inch diameter holes gave a lovely view beneath the house. Either Avondale has very large borer to go with its very large spiders, or some long-forgotten project had once required half inch holes. Being an SF fan, I am reluctant to discard the idea of woodworms that can chew out half inch holes. Doubtless the cats will soon hunt one down and bring it home for me to admire.

We covered this manky bit with a rug so that nobody will know it is there and retired to bed tired, dusty but very

pleased with the beautiful floor in the lounge. Tomorrow the hallway!

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

I repeated my staple removing

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

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

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

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

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

Alan And The Vein Attempt

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

"We don't know."

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

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

And thus began an adventure...

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

"I wonder what it says?" she mused. She adjusted the angle so that the sunshine coming in through the window illuminated it more clearly, and she squinted hard. But it did no

good. My doctor's squiggles remained illegible.

The nurse phoned my doctor's surgery and explained her predicament. I could feel the blushes travelling down the telephone lines. I'll swear the handset turned red. The nurse printed the details carefully and legibly on the form and sniffed audibly. She hung up the phone.

"They ought to send all the doctors back to school," she muttered. "Teach them to write properly. My three year old daughter writes more clearly than most doctors, and she uses an unsharpened crayon and hasn't been taught her alphabet yet."

She looked closely at what she had

written on the form. "I wonder what these tests are?" she mused. "I wonder what kind of blood sample I have to take, what tubes to store it in?

Hmmm..."

She bustled about with various reference books and master lists of tests correlated with columns of data about exactly what kind of chemical needed to be mixed with the blood in order to present it properly to the master technicians for them to perform their arcane rites and rituals upon it. She found two of the tests documented, but could find no trace of the third anywhere. "One hep, one plain," she muttered. "But what on earth do they need in order to test your dibucaine

number?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I've never heard of a dibucaine number."

She returned to the phone and rang the testing centre itself. She engaged in a muttered dialogue with the person at the other end. There were long silences as various reference works were consulted at both ends. Eventually she rang off.

"They've never heard of a dibucaine number test either," she said. "They're going to ask the chief pathologist when he comes in. Do you want a cup of coffee while we wait?"

I had a cup of coffee, and then another and we chatted about this and that. Every so often she'd break off the

conversation to go and take blood from a new customer. These were all straightforward bread and butter stuff – liver enzymes, ESR, cholesterol. She emptied their arms of blood with brisk efficiency and squirted it into the appropriate tubes.

Eventually the chief pathologist rang back and the nurse went into a huddle with the telephone. She came back to me smiling.

"Right," she said. "One hep, two plain."

She sat me down in the chair and tied a pressure strap around my upper arm. "Just clench your fist for me, please," she requested.

I clenched my fist. "Oooh! What

lovely veins you've got," she said, which has to be one of the oddest compliments I have ever received. She collected the blood and prepared the tubes. One hep, two plain; it sounded like a knitting pattern.

The blood was sent to the appropriate testing centre and a week later they delivered their verdict on my scoline allergy.

"We don't know."

My doctor was hopping mad.

"What do they mean they don't know?" she raved. "They only did two of the tests anyway. They completely omitted the dibucaine number. And that's the most important one."

She rang the laboratory and tore

them off a strip. Paint flaked from the walls. "Why didn't you do the dibucaine number test?"

She listened closely to the reply. "You didn't notice it on the form," she said flatly. She looked at me. "They didn't notice it written down on the form," she explained to me. She raised her eyes eloquently to heaven as she hung up the phone.

"Reading lessons," she said. "They all need reading lessons. My three year old daughter reads better than they do at that place. And she can only read her own secret squiggles that she draws with an unsharpened crayon because she hasn't been taught her alphabet yet."

She fixed me with a gimlet glare.

"I'm sorry Alan," she said, "but you are going to have to have the test done again."

She filled out the medical laboratory form for me. She wrote the tests down very carefully and slowly and legibly. Then she numbered them; one, two, three. On the last line of the form she printed **THREE TESTS IN TOTAL**. She looked closely at it for a moment then she inserted a couple of exclamation marks and underlined it for good measure. "Now let's see them ignore the dibucaine number test," she muttered triumphantly.

I took the form and went to give blood again. It was a different nurse

this time. "Gosh," she said, somewhat predictably, "I've never taken samples for these tests before. I wonder what tubes they need?"

"One hep, two plain," I told her. "Purl one". She was not convinced and bustled off to her reference books. This was followed by the usual phone call to the chief pathologist and the usual long wait. She offered me coffee and conversation.

"Have you got a three year old daughter?" I enquired.

"As a matter of fact, I have," she said. "A most unusually talented child..."

Eventually it was decided that the tests did indeed require one hep and

two plain and she took the blood from my arm. It disappeared off to the medical laboratory and a week later they delivered their final, definitive verdict on my scoline allergy.

"We don't know."

My doctor glared fiercely at the dibucaine number result. "It doesn't prove anything one way or the other," she admitted. "You're right on the borderline."

Since three separate tests have now come back with inconclusive results we decided that enough was enough and we will err on the side of caution. The next time you see me I will be wearing a nifty piece of jewellery on my wrist. The Medic-Alert bracelet will be

engraved with the words *scoline allergy* and on my file it says *not to be given scoline as an anaesthetic*.

My next door neighbour's three year old daughter thinks it's neat.

Tales of a Travelling Man

This all started with what I thought at the time was an incredible piece of good luck. I really should have known better.

I was booked to fly on the 6.30pm flight from Wellington to Auckland. However I finished my business in Wellington remarkably early and so I headed straight out to the airport. I arrived there about 12.45pm and approached the man at the check in

desk.

"Is there any chance of an earlier flight?"

He clattered on his keyboard for a while and stared gloomily at the result on the screen. "Well the 1.30pm flight is full," he said. "But I can get you on the 3.00pm one. Will that be OK?"

"Perfect," I said. "Let's do it." And so it was done.

He printed out my boarding pass and attached baggage tags to my luggage. "Is it OK to check the bags in now?" I asked. "The 1.30 flight hasn't gone yet."

"Oh yes," he reassured me. "There's a separate trolley for each flight and yours will go on the 3.00pm trolley. We won't send it on the 1.30 flight because it is a security risk to send unaccompanied baggage on the flight and it's against regulations. After all – it could be a bomb!"

I saw the wisdom of this. "OK, thanks for that."

He attached priority stickers to the bags and I watched them vanish down the conveyor belt. I went up to the lounge and indulged in all manner of hedonistic luxuries until, jaded and exhausted, I was called to board my 3.00pm flight to Auckland.

The flight was uneventful, and after it landed I trotted off to the baggage claim area. I watched the bags circle round on the conveyor. Mine were noticeably absent. I consoled myself with the thought that perhaps the priority sticker had come off and since they were first on, they were bound to be last off. I waited a while longer and watched the bags circulate. It was almost hypnotic. After about 40 minutes there was only one bag remaining and it wasn't mine. There is **always** one lonely bag remaining after everyone collects their luggage. It never belongs to anyone. I think the baggage handlers use it to seed the

conveyor belt.

The baggage enquiry office is just to the left of the conveyor. The door was locked. I banged frantically on it for a while but nobody came. I went over to the check in desk and managed to catch the eye of one of the staff. I explained my predicament.

She was deeply sympathetic. "I'm not allowed to leave the desk," she said. "But I'll phone my manager." She phoned. Nobody answered. She chewed her lip. "I'll try somebody else." She dialled another number. Nobody answered. "I'll call the airport manager." She dialled again. Still nobody answered. She cast her eyes

around wildly, searching for inspiration. "Oh," she said. "There's my manager." She pointed to a distinguished looking gentleman who had just appeared from behind a screen. She waved and whistled and he gave her a horrified look and vanished behind his screen again.

I went back and kicked the door of the baggage enquiry office. It was still locked, but a man with a badge noticed me banging on it and materialised by my side.

"Can I help you sir?" he enquired snootily. I explained again what had happened. "Let's take a look in the

baggage collection section, shall we?" he said.

We went through into the area where the luggage is unloaded on to the conveyor. My bags were lying forgotten in a corner. "There they are!" I cried and hurried to collect them.

"Oh THOSE bags," said the man. "I remember those. They came on the 1.30 flight and nobody claimed them, so we left them here."

I pointed to the flight number on the baggage label. "That's not the flight number of the 1.30 plane is it?" I asked.

"Er, no. No it isn't."

"So my bags were loaded on the wrong plane, they travelled all the way here unaccompanied, thereby breaking every security regulation in the book?"

"Er, yes. If you want to put it like that."

"How do you know there wasn't a bomb in the bags?" I demanded. "How do you know that the passenger who checked them in wasn't a terrorist intent on mayhem? Do you realise that if you continue to ignore your own security regulations, sooner or later you will end up with a lot of dead people? Why do you make it so easy for the bad guys? Are you deliberately

asking to have your planes bombed?"

"Oh, that kind of thing never happens in New Zealand." He looked smug, and terribly complacent.

I took my bags and left him to it. You can't talk to people who have nothing but empty space in their skull. Anyway, after that incident, nothing else could possibly go wrong...

A day and a half later I was back at the airport to catch a plane to Rotorua. I was booked on the 4.30pm flight. I generally arrive early for my flights so that I can indulge in enormous libertine excesses in the luxury lounge. I got to the airport at about 3.00pm. I looked at

the departures board.

Yes, there it was. Rotorua; 4.30pm. As I watched, the board twitched, shuddered and refreshed itself. Now it said: Rotorua; 4.30pm. Cancelled.

Cancelled? I went to the check in desk.

"Engineering requirements, sir. The flight has been cancelled and you have been rebooked on the 6.30pm flight. Sorry for the inconvenience."

I have never heard a man sound less sorry. The luxury lounge with its free food, drink, sex, drugs and even rock and roll couldn't quite make up for this. Fortunately I had lots of good

books to read. I arrived very late in Rotorua, a raddled, dissipated shadow of my former self, decadent fluids dripping from every pore. The thermal areas steamed, the geysers geysed, the mud pools went *glup* in unison as they played complicated baroque music. Nothing worse could happen to me now...

I took a taxi to my hotel. We drove past the Rotorua golf course. Most golf courses have sandy bunkers. Not the Rotorua golf course. It has fenced off areas that bubble and steam. Golf balls that land in them simply melt. It adds a whole new meaning to the word hazard.

I was staying in a very luxurious hotel.

Every room had a private spa. Such opulence! I could soak my weary body in hot perfumed foam. I could sip champagne and dream erotic dreams of well endowed dusky maidens shaking their charms to the rhythms of haunting music played in a minor key. Wow!

I turned on the tap. Freezing cold water gushed into the spa. It was so cold I could almost see ice cubes forming as it flowed. I waited but it didn't get any warmer. I went down to the reception desk.

"I think there's something wrong with the water supply to my room. There isn't any hot water in the spa."

"Ah yes," said the nice lady behind the desk. "That's right. It's the whole hotel actually. We haven't any hot water at all."

"The whole hotel?"

"Yes, that's right. There was a new geyser erupted in the park last week and it's taken all the heat from our bore. We've got someone working on it, but at the moment, the whole hotel is cold."

Glumly I retired to bed. The next morning I began the day with a cold shower and made my shivering way to work where I discovered that of the five people attending my course, three

had just been made redundant and one was expecting to be made redundant at any moment. An atmosphere of deep gloom prevailed and they didn't laugh at any of my jokes.

Fortunately when I got back to the hotel I found that the hot water was back on. I filled the spa and settled back to soak. Scarcely had I relaxed, however, when what seemed to be every mosquito in Rotorua flew through the open window and committed dramatic kamikaze suicide by diving into the spa pool with me. I peeled the thick crust of insects from the top of the water, spat out a few lumpy bits, and closed the window. But

the mood was spoiled. Never mind. Nothing else could possibly go wrong...

On Friday afternoon, I got to Rotorua airport in plenty of time to catch the 5.25pm flight home to Auckland. I went up to the check in desk and made myself known.

"I'm sorry sir," said the lady. "We've had terrible weather conditions all day and the flight is delayed by three hours."

I must have looked as if I was going to cry because she leaned close and whispered "I'll tell you what. Leave it with me and I'll have words with the

other airline and see if I can transfer you to their flight."

My heart leaped. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all. She duly had her word, and the lady at the rival airline check in counter consulted her computer.

"There's one free seat," she announced.

The plane was tiny. A dozen passengers in all. The entire crew consisted of simply a pilot and copilot, both of whom looked barely old enough to be weaned. The in-flight catering was a ham sandwich in a red paper bag that was lying on the seat. A voice from the seat behind me said: "I recognise the toothmarks in this sandwich – it's the one I didn't eat on the flight up this

morning."

I had a wonderful view of one of the engines through the cabin window. There was a rivet missing from the engine cowling and when the propeller wound its way up to full speed the section with the missing rivet raised up slightly as if it was about to tear off.

We took off into thick cloud and driving rain. The wind threw the little plane violently all over the sky and the engine cowling flapped back and forth. The entire journey to Auckland was flown with zero visibility; we never left the cloud cover. Every so often the captain made an announcement over

the PA system but I have no idea what he said because the volume was turned down so low that all I could hear was a faint "scritch, scritch" as he spoke.

Eventually we bounced down onto the tarmac at Auckland. I was home; it was over. Nothing else could go wrong now...

A day and a half later I arrived at Auckland airport to catch the 3.30pm flight to Wellington. I went straight to the counter to check in.

"I'm sorry sir, but the 3.30pm flight has been cancelled."

"Cancelled?"

"Yes, sir. Bad weather at Norfolk Island."

"Norfolk Island?" I was bewildered.

"What's Norfolk Island got to do with it?"

"The plane flies from Norfolk Island to Wellington and then from Wellington to Auckland where it becomes the 3.30 flight back to Wellington. But it can't take off from Norfolk Island so the flight is cancelled. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Would you like me to re-book you on the 4.30 flight?"

"Yes please."

After that, nothing else could possibly

go wr

Roads

I have long been a fan of **The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy** and therefore when I found out that Transit New Zealand were extending the Auckland motorway system across the bottom of my street, I double-checked the position of my towel and began to watch for yellow bulldozers.

There was a knock on my door.

"Hello," said one of the people standing there. "We are from Transit New Zealand and we need to purchase 5.18 metres of your front garden in order to widen the road."

"Just a minute," I said and fetched a tape measure.

"Are you aware," I pointed out, "that my entire front garden comprises only 5.2 metres of somewhat crabby grass? After you take your lump away, I'll be able to mow my lawn with nail clippers."

"Ah, yes," they said. "That is true. But think of the benefits! You will have an unparalleled opportunity to observe the world as it races past at 70 kph mere inches from your window. You will be able to see the New Zealand hoon in his natural state protected only by a thin sheet of glass."

"I feel that this is less than desirable," I said.

"How about we buy the whole house instead?" asked the other one.

"OK."

In order to agree on a fair purchase price for the house, I had to get a valuer's report. They too commissioned a valuer and the final price would be based on both reports. The valuers came and measured and inspected. They poked the walls, sucked their breath through clenched teeth, shook their heads (each had two), made copious notes, and charged me \$300.

"Before I make my report," said one, "is there anything you want to tell me that I don't know about?" I was somewhat taken aback.

"What don't you know?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"Do you know anything about Java programming?"

"No."

"Java is a write once run anywhere programming language that compiles to p-codes rather than native object code," I began.

"I think I'd better be going now," he said. "I've got everything I need. I'll have the report ready in about a week."

Each valuer gave an estimate of a fair price for the house. Unfortunately the two estimates were \$20,000 apart. It must be easy to be a valuer. All you need is a built in random number generator.

Transit New Zealand put them together in a locked room and refused to let them out until they compromised. After several days of conflict, one raised his estimate by \$13,000 and one lowered his by \$7,000. The final result was in my favour, but it still wasn't as much as I would have liked. The alternative, however, was even worse. I accepted the offer.

I intend to move to Wellington where I will live in a quiet street in a quiet suburb a long way away from any hint of a motorway. Doubtless my house will then fall victim to a passing earthquake instead.

Trash

Every week I bundle up my rubbish and place it carefully in a big green plastic wheelie bin. The bin is positioned precisely on a special spot on the pavement and in the small hours of the next morning I am awoken from blissful slumber as a roaring behemoth of the night picks up the bin and empties the contents into its grinding maw. This is the way the world has always been, but it is not the way the world will be in the future.

Everyone in Auckland is talking

about rubbish. Commuters from Waiheke Island have come out from behind their morning papers to discuss it on the ferry. Buses full of complete strangers hum with conversation as the merits of recycling are debated.

All over the city, residents are waking to find that a new wheelie bin has entered their lives. This one is smaller than that previously used, and it has a pretty red lid. The council, in their wisdom, have decided that the older, larger bins are aesthetically displeasing (for they are green all over) and, more importantly, they are far too big thereby encouraging people to produce too much waste. Auckland, they claim, is drowning in rubbish. The

new, sleek, slimline, half-size bins with the pretty red lids will address this problem directly by forcing people cut down on their rubbish production.

No more the secret midnight thrill of heaving your extra trash into somebody else's wheelie bin. Now theirs too will be crammed full of their own junk. Recycle it, compost it, is the encouraging cry. This is all well and good, but much of the rubbish I generate is neither biodegradable nor recyclable for it is the wrong grade of plastic and won't be collected. Bugger.

All Auckland houses can now use up to three recycling bins. Previously only one was allowed. These cute blue bins are enormously popular. People

use them to equip the family picnic in the park. Fisherman find them wonderful, for they have a hole in the bottom making it particularly easy to drain their daily catch. Sometimes people use them for holding goods to be recycled. How unimaginative.

It is instructive to wander the street and make deductions about the lifestyles of the inhabitants from the contents of the recycling bins and the cardboard boxes and papers that are dumped beside the bins for the Paper Tiger to collect. This household lives on pizza and coke, that one on beer. This house has cats, that one dogs, the other one small children. These people have just bought an expensive sound

system, those have taken delivery of a computer. Burglars walk the streets taking notes and have been seen, on occasion, to run away with wheelie bins and paper piles in order to go through them at their leisure hunting for credit card numbers and bank account details. People are often very careless with their discards. It may be rubbish to you, but it is treasure to someone else.

One new red-topped wheelie bin is allowed per title holder. At first glance it sounds quite sensible, but it does lead to some anomalies. A very large, luxurious multi-bedroomed hotel in the city is owned by a single person. This enormous building must therefore now

dispose of the rubbish generated by its staff and its hundreds of guests in a single 120-litre wheelie bin.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a much smaller, much less luxurious hotel has, through some curious quirk of corporate ownership, 389 names on its title deed. Its manager is now faced with the problem of finding storage space for the 389 wheelie bins that were delivered last week. Perhaps he needs another, larger bin in which he can toss the surplus red-topped bins – a meta-rubbish bin as it were.

Court cases are pending against Auckland City Council because of the new, small wheelie bin policy. A lady from Epsom believes that the

introduction of the bins is a breach of the Human Rights Act and she has lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission. "It struck me as so unfair," she is quoted as saying. "There are six units next door and each will have the same size bin as we have for a family of five!" She claims that the uniform reduction in bin size across the board will put unfair pressure on larger households. A council spokesman does not agree with her.

"We have 'waste doctors' who will be able to assist those who have any difficulty."

Waste doctors?

"Put two aspirin in the rubbish bin twice a day for a week. If it doesn't get

better come back and see me again and we'll arrange for a trashectomy operation."

It has been suggested that the rubbish collection vehicles be fitted with video cameras. Each bin will be videotaped as it is emptied. Anyone found disposing of inappropriate rubbish will be visited at dead of night by the rubbish police. The waste doctors will prepare psychiatric reports and the rubbish criminals will have to attend waste management workshops. Repeat offences will carry a mandatory sentence of biodegradation.

Each bin is delivered with a leaflet sellotaped to it which says in big, bold, friendly letters that the new bin cannot

be used until the week beginning July 2nd. Despite this, for the three weeks prior to July 2nd, red lidded wheelie bins full of rubbish have lined the streets. When the rubbish was not collected, aggrieved residents inundated the Council with complaints. A man on the radio said through gritted teeth:

"We are very pleased that people are embracing the new collection system so enthusiastically, but we would encourage them to restrain their enthusiasm until after July 2nd."

He didn't say that the rubbish police had been informed, but the implication was clear.

The delivery of the bins to each city

household has not been without its problems. A monster road train (multiply articulated vehicle) shuffles and roars down the street. Every so often, men hop off and wheel the bins to the front of each house. This is generally the most exciting (and noisiest) thing that happens on the street all day. Those who are at home to witness it usually pop out and join in the fun. Impromptu street parties eventuate. Cups of tea and gossip are swapped.

One such party was astonished to observe one of the bin delivery men steal a pedigree dog from the house to which he was delivering his bin. The dog, not unnaturally, objected to being

stolen and added his voice to the general din. The street party, and the bin man's colleagues, were collectively gobsmacked.

The man himself was quite astonished when a police car turned up. Who could have seen him? How had they found out?

"Just taking it for a walk, Officer."

He must have left his gorm at home that morning...

Milo and the Lump

For the last six months, Milo the Cat has had a lump in his side about the size and shape of an acorn. When it first appeared I took him to the vet.

"It's a lump," diagnosed the vet proudly.

"What kind of a lump?" I asked.

He stuck a hypodermic syringe into it and pulled the plunger. Nothing happened. "Well," he said, "it isn't an abscess. If it was an abscess it would have been full of lovely custardy pus. But there's no pus. It isn't an abscess."

He poked it with his finger. "It

might be an acorn," he said doubtfully, "though I've never heard of it happening before."

"So what can we do about it?" I asked.

"Keep an eye on it," he said. "It doesn't seem to be bothering him at the moment. If it changes size, or begins to distress him, or starts to grow into an oak tree, bring him back and we'll operate."

The lump stayed static for a while. It didn't seem to be affecting Milo at all. He didn't mind if you stroked it and poked it, but he got a bit upset if you squeezed it. Mind you, he gets a bit upset if you squeeze any part of him, not just his lump. Most people do. He

was a little lop-sided to the touch, but nothing too drastic and he continued to Hoover up his food like there was no tomorrow. All seemed well in his world, so I stopped worrying.

After a time, the lump grew slightly larger and he was, perhaps, slightly more sensitive about it. Whether this was vanity or whether it was actually painful was a little hard to tell.

And then one day, quite suddenly, everything changed.

I picked Milo up and turned him upside down (so that the dribble went back inside him instead of all over me) and I tickled his tummy as is my wont. He purred and wriggled with pleasure, as is his. My fingers passed lightly

over the lump and it felt different, quite rough (it had been smooth before) and even though I touched it very lightly, he made his displeasure known. Milo is the most placid of cats. He never gets upset about anything and so I knew that there was something seriously wrong. I looked closely at the lump. It was scabby, as if it had been bleeding recently and there was an ugly looking dark slit in it that seemed to vanish into the depths of his body.

I put him down on the floor and he began to lick the lump and then to chew at it. Blood began flow and it dripped on to the floor and also into Milo's mouth as he desperately massaged his lump.

He paused and sat there for a moment with a thoughtful look on his face. He licked his lips and pondered the taste. Hmmm. Nice! He went back for seconds. And then for dessert. It became obvious that much of the blood in his body was going to end up on the floor or in his tummy. Despite the fact that it was quite late, I rang the vet.

Fortunately there was still someone at the surgery. I explained the situation.

"Bring him round here straight away!"

No sooner said than done. I got the cage out and Milo went and hid under a chair. I moved the chair, picked Milo up and dropped him into the cage.

Ginger looked on in horror! What was I

doing with her brother? Then she ran outside in case I did the same thing to her. I put the cage in the car and drove off to the vet. Ginger peeked out from under the house and watched me go.

The trauma of being incarcerated was too much for Milo. He cried pathetically all the way to the vet (as is also his wont) and completely forgot to take reviving sips from the wound in his side.

Milo and I arrived at the vets to find him in the middle of a computer crisis. His system had crashed earlier that day and he was currently unable to issue invoices or receipts or to record the treatments he had given that day. He was surrounded with scraps of

paper covered with indecipherable notes all of which would have to be transcribed once he managed to fix the computer. A badly bleeding cat was a welcome relief.

"Hmmm. Quite a lump. Definitely not an acorn. I was wrong about that. Not surprising really. It looks like a cyst and it's breaking through the skin and bleeding round the edges. I'll give him a painkiller and an antibiotic and I'll operate on Monday. You can pick him up on Monday evening."

"OK".

"Just as well, really," mused the vet. "I can't give you a bill at the moment. Much better to keep him here until Monday when I will be able to

give you a bill."

He picked Milo up and plonked him in a cage. Milo stared in horror. What was happening? As I left the room without him he wailed piteously. I felt terrible.

When I got home, Ginger was very suspicious indeed. Where was her brother? She stalked around looking for him and seemed a little upset not to find him. However it soon became clear that there were distinct advantages to not having him around. Like most cats, Ginger prefers to take her meals in small doses. She is a snacker, returning again and again to her bowl during the day and taking dainty mouthfuls. This simply cannot

be done when Milo is there because he immediately sucks up every scrap of food in sight (Ginger's food as well as his own) and then asks for more. For the next few days Ginger was in cat heaven. She could snack properly for the first time in her life. She made the most of it, eating her meals in small, ladylike portions at genteelly spaced intervals throughout most of the day. She began to express her approval. Why hadn't I got rid of Milo years ago?

As I drove to the vet on Monday evening I felt quite apprehensive. Milo is nearly fifteen years old and the operation was not a minor one. Would he survive it? Also I was worried about

the lump. What would the vet find when he opened Milo up?

I smiled at the nurse. "I've come for Milo."

"Ah yes – I'll just go and fetch him." An enormous feeling of relief washed over me. Obviously it had all been routine.

"He's been talking to me all day," said the nurse. "He came out of the anaesthetic really fast, and every time I walk past his cage he calls to me and we have a long conversation."

She brought Milo out and he chirruped hello, obviously pleased to see me. There was a huge naked patch on his side where he had been shaved for the operation and an enormous

wound with eight crude stitches in it.

"It was quite a straightforward operation," said the nurse, "and the lump wasn't malignant. We didn't even bother to send it to the lab."

"How do I look after him for the next few days?" I asked.

"These are antibiotics," she said, giving me some hideous blue pills. "Half a tablet twice a day for the next five days. Don't let him chew at the wound. Don't give him much to eat tonight, he might vomit after the anaesthetic. Bring him back in a fortnight to have the stitches taken off. That will be \$177."

Milo howled all the way home. He really doesn't like car journeys and he

makes sure that I know about it. I spoke soothingly to him and, when traffic lights permitted, I stroked the pathetic paw that he stretched through the bars of the travelling cage, but it made no difference. He was miserable, and he wanted the world to know. I got home and I lifted him gently out of his cage.

Ginger went straight to his wound and sniffed it. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. She didn't approve, and she departed in high dudgeon. There was some food left in Ginger's bowl; she was saving it for later. Milo inhaled the food in nothing flat.

"Where's the rest of it then?"

Milo's expression was eloquent. But I was hard-hearted and didn't put any

more food out. He sniffed around the bowl for a while and then curled up and went philosophically to sleep. Ginger returned and went for a snack. There was nothing left.

"What did you want to bring him back home for?" she said, and went outside to find a rat to eat.

The End