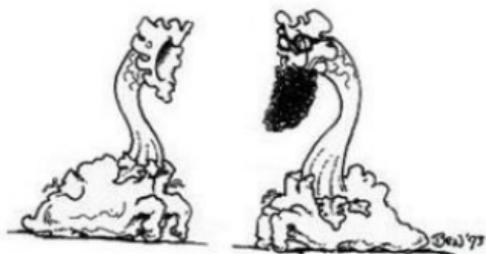


Triffid Tales Volume 3



Alan Robson

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Volume 3

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Alan Flies Undone

I arrived at the airport in good time for my flight. Some might say I was excessively early. Hah! Such people are not wise to the ways of the travelling world. There are no worms left at the feast when the late birds get there.

"Lo! Here am I," I said to the nice lady at the check in desk. "You can stop worrying now. I've arrived. Pray provide me with my boarding pass for flight NZ446 to Auckland."

The lady clicked keys on her keyboard and peered short-sightedly at

the screen.

"I'm sorry sir," she said gleefully, "but that flight has been cancelled due to engineering problems. Would you like me to rebook you on to the next flight?"

Cancelled? Could it be that the engine had fallen off the aeroplane and they'd run out of string and duct tape, and thus were unable to fasten it back on?

"Yes, please," I said.

She clicked more keys, frowned and then clicked them all again.

"I'm sorry sir," she said with a happy smile, "the next flight is fully booked. Would you like me to try the one after that?"

I heaved a deep sigh at her, but she dodged it skilfully and it bounced harmlessly off the wall behind her and fell on to the luggage conveyer belt.

"Yes, please."

Fortunately that flight still had seats available (though not many). I would fly to Auckland a mere three hours later than I had originally planned. I was glad that I had chosen to arrive at the airport excessively early (as some might say). Who knows how many flights would have filled themselves up if I had arrived fashionably late? Who knows how much longer I might have been delayed?

I took myself off to the Koru Club

Lounge so that I could indulge myself excessively in strange, grotesque and debilitating luxuries utterly unknown to the common herd milling below.

Unfortunately, when I arrived at the Lounge, eager for debauchery, I discovered that the majority of the place was blocked off and completely inaccessible to me. An enormous storm the previous week had ripped the roof away and saturated the carpet with tons of rain water. Presumably this was why my flight had been cancelled. It wasn't just an engine that had dropped off the aeroplane; the entire machine had disintegrated into tiny shards when the Koru Club Lounge roof fell upon it from the sky, driven by a mighty wind.

The amount of duct tape required to stick it back together again beggared the imagination. No wonder they hadn't finished the job yet. No wonder they wouldn't let anyone fly on it.

The Lounge was undergoing massive repairs, but until they were complete, it was reduced to less than half its normal size, and the luxuries were reduced to less than half their normal level of sinfulness.

Furthermore, the reduction in the lounge size meant that all the people were forced to sit much closer together than would otherwise have been the case. It is very hard to debauch yourself when everyone is crammed too close together to let the dancing

girls through.

The time passed slowly.

Aeons later I arrived in Auckland and I went in to the office to set up my classroom for the course I would be teaching the next day. It was a routine operation and it was soon successfully complete. I staggered off to my hotel feeling reassured that nothing else could possibly go wrong...

I arrived at the office for the first day of the course. It was a cloudy and drizzly day. I squelched in to the classroom and waited for my students to arrive, and then I began to teach. And as I taught, I made reference to slides that I was projecting on to the screen behind me. I began to suspect

that all was not well when one of the students asked:

"Where can we find these slides in our manuals?"

Before I could say anything, another student said, "They are right there in the first chapter. One on each page, just as Alan is projecting them."

"Not in my manual," said the first student.

Close examination revealed that some of my students had the same manual and slides that I was teaching from, but others had a later version of the manual and at first glance it seemed to be quite different from mine. However it soon became clear that the later version of the manual

contained all the same chapters that mine did – they were just in a different order. And when we found the chapters that corresponded to mine, they contained (almost) exactly the same information and the same slides but again they were arranged in a different order. There seemed to be no very good reason for this – the order of both sets of chapters and the information within them made perfect sense whichever way you presented them, so the shuffling that the material had been subjected to between the two versions of the manual seemed more than a little arbitrary. I suppose that this is the kind of change that you implement for the very best reason of all – because

you can!

I began to consider slicing both myself and the classroom up the middle so that I could present each set of students with the material that corresponded to their manual. Perhaps I could clone myself. Maybe I could address every alternate word to the opposite side of the room. I listened to myself carefully. This is what I heard myself say.

"For those of you with a manual like mine, this is chapter three. For those of you with the new manual, it's a combination of chapters five and eight and you haven't got this slide, but don't worry because it isn't a very important one and I think I'll ignore it anyway. I

usually do."

Some of the students looked a little twitchy at the extra complications I was introducing into their lives, but mostly it seemed to work. I spent the day teetering on tenterhooks, madly comparing the manuals one chapter ahead whenever I got a spare minute.

I finished the day quite exhausted, but triumphant. We'd got through everything I wanted to cover that day and the students seemed to be keeping up well. Crisis solved, nothing else could possibly go wrong...

It was raining again when I walked home to the hotel after the class. As I walked, I became conscious of a certain dampness seeping through my

left sock, and strange *squelching* noises made themselves heard.

When I got back to the hotel room, I examined my shoes closely. At some unknown moment during the day, the upper surface of my left shoe had split in two directions and there was a large flap of leather that bounced up and down as I walked, thus exposing a huge hole to the elements. Needless to say the water had eagerly poured in through this enormous gap, which explained my damp sock and my *squelching* sounds. My left shoe was ruined and completely unwearable – even the act of gently removing it from my foot widened the split.

I had no other shoes with me. Oh

gloom!

Close scrutiny of the yellow pages revealed that there were no late night emergency shoe shops anywhere close by. It seemed that I would have to wear my unwearable shoe until at least tomorrow lunchtime, when perhaps I would be able to find a shoe shop within walking distance of the office. I was not looking forward to this. The office is in a very posh part of town. Any shoe shop available to me would doubtless impose a huge posh surcharge on top of the basic price. Oh my aching credit card!

Fortunately I was having dinner with friends that night and when I explained my predicament, Sue had the

perfect solution.

"Come with me to The Warehouse," she says. "It is open late tonight, and you are certain to get a bargain.

Everyone does. All the adverts say so, and adverts never lie. It is against the law."

Sue took me to The Warehouse.

"Over there are the shoes," she said. "I'll go and look at the bargain books while you choose."

I glanced around. Shoes. Shelves full of shoes. I picked up a pair. Too large.

I picked up another pair. Too small.

I picked up another pair. Just right.

"Who's been trying on *my* shoes?" said baby bear inside my head.

I put one of them on to a foot.

Perfect.

"OK," I said to Sue. "These will do."

Sue looked a little flabbergasted. "Don't you think you should try them on?" she asked.

"I've done that," I said, puzzled. "They're fine."

"But you've been gone less than two minutes," said Sue. "You haven't had time to make an informed choice. Shopping with men is so frustrating! Don't you know that you are supposed to compare prices and styles and try on at least a dozen pairs before you finally settle on the first pair you tried?"

"No," I said. "I didn't know that."

Why do you have to do that?"

"In case you find a better bargain, or nicer shoes."

"Nicer shoes? Shoes are shoes.

They cover your feet and stop your toes from fraying at the edges. As long as they fit, what else matters?"

"Oooh!" said Sue. "Aaaahhh!" she explained. Then she hit me with a bargain book and took me back home and we ate dinner.

The Silence Of The Harpo - whistle, whistle, honk

It is five o'clock in the morning. Everything is muted and misty. I'm drowsy now and I'm seesaw sleeping, up and down. I'm almost awake, I'm almost asleep and I'm drifting in low, slow fluffy clouds of unconsciousness, warm and snug. And then:

"AAAARRRRGGGHHH!!!"

Suddenly I am wide awake, pain pulsing, my foot on fire, my eyes wide

with shock at the throbbing agony that has pulled me so rudely from sleep.

Harpo the Cat, desiring his breakfast, has crawled under the sheet and duvet at the bottom of the bed and has dug all his claws deep into my big toe. As my screams of agony ring through the house, nine kilogram Porgy races into the bedroom, leaps high into the air and thumps down heavily on my chest.

"OOOOOFFFFF!!!"

Every molecule of oxygen shoots out of my lungs and I am unable to draw any more in because Porgy is such a dead weight that my chest muscles do not have enough strength to move my diaphragm. Unable to inhale,

I begin to strangle while Porgy looks at me with deep and abiding love in his eyes. He purrs like a traction engine. He too wants his breakfast.

Bess, aware of sudden activity and wishing to attract my attention so as to ask me for her breakfast, leaps on Porgy and begins to fight him for possession of my chest. They scream and yowl and hurl each other up and down my torso; full body slam, sunset flip, Oklahoma roll, camel clutch, half-nelson and a Boston crab. I don't need a television set to watch WWF wrestling matches.

Harpo, having shredded my big toe, has moved on to the next one. Cats caterwaul, the bed threatens to

collapse. I snatch a quick breath as Bess knocks Porgy into the middle of next week with a particularly unsubtle karate chop. I let out another shriek as Harpo brings his teeth into play on my toes.

Robin grunts sleepily, turns over and continues to snore in deep contentment. No help there. I stagger bloodily into the kitchen and fill the cats' dishes with biscuits and I make sure their water bowl is topped up. It's been just another normal morning in the Robson household.

Harpo the Cat has lived with us for nearly three months now, and we all defer to his wishes. Like Edward Lear's pobble, I have no toes. Robin is getting

nervous about her shed.

Robin is currently deeply engaged in concreting the floor of her garden shed. Every so often she gets into the car, disappears for a couple of hours and comes back with a boot full of bags of cement and builder's mix. When we go shopping, she scours the shelves for interesting things to embed in her concrete.

"Plain concrete is dull," she said to me. "I want concrete that is vibrant and exciting; concrete that has a personality."

She is building the shed floor in small sections. Some sections have had glitter scattered upon them. Some have small stars twinkling, and one has a

pair of eyeballs. It is quite disconcerting to walk into the shed and feel the floor staring at you. You can't help wondering what it is thinking about.

She has a birthday coming soon.

"What would you like for your birthday present?" I asked her.

"Ooohh - builder's mix," she said dreamily. "Cement. Perhaps a collection of coloured pebbles to make a mosaic. Just to add a touch of class."

"Would you like the new DVD of the Star Wars Trilogy?" I asked.

She looked slightly affronted. "That would look silly embedded in concrete!"

Every time Robin digs out a section

in the shed and levels the dirt, Harpo poos in the nice, soft earth she has just exposed. Porgy, who hero-worships Harpo, immediately follows suit. The floor of Robin's shed is actually a nice layer of concrete perched on top of a thick layer of cat poo which is sitting directly on the soil. Judging by the corrosive effects of Harpo's poo on his dirt tray, both Robin and I are expecting the concrete floor to disintegrate any day now. Either that, or a small, fierce volcano will erupt as his poo eats through the Earth's crust and exposes the raw magma below.

Harpo is the smallest cat in the house but he has the largest personality. I've never seen anyone

take such an exuberant joy in simply being alive. His every waking moment appears to consist of pure pleasure. He leaps and gambols, he races and chases. Everything is a toy – butterflies, bumble bees, the cables that plug the units of my stereo system together, the mouse on Robin's computer and the large tennis balls that Porgy and Bess have long ago given up on because they are too heavy to control. Not a problem to Harpo. He bats them around as if they are feather light. He chases them across the room. He lies in wait for them and ambushes them when they aren't looking. He makes the games more challenging by attacking the toys around corners and from behind

curtains.

Last week our vet had an open day and was offering big discounts on items in the store. We bought a large climbing frame for the cats. It has columns that are scratching posts and platforms at the top of each column. It is three storeys high and the middle platform has a curtain around it which transforms it into a cave that is just wonderful to hide in. Things dangle on strings and jiggle enticingly, just asking to be chased and killed. All the cats love it and they perch at different levels and have boxing matches with each other.

Harpo hides in the cave and dangles his tail outside. He waits patiently – a

fisherman hunting for prey. Eventually the temptation becomes overwhelming and either Porgy or Bess (or both) will leap for the tail to attack it. Quick as a flash, Harpo takes his tail out of danger, whirls round and beats seven kinds of brick dust out of the intruder, grinning delightedly from ear to ear. What a game!

Porgy and Bess retreat to lick their wounds. A few minutes later, being rather dumb cats, they have completely forgotten what happened. Glancing idly round in the middle of an important wash, they notice a black fluffy thing dangling down from the cave in the middle of the climbing frame.

"That looks like something worth

attacking," says Porgy.

"Good idea," replies Bess.

"*Snigger*," says Harpo.

The other day the whole family was gathered together watching the television. Porgy found the programme less than enthralling and fell asleep. Bess felt the need to indulge in a practical critical evaluation of it and spent the duration of the programme licking her bottom. Harpo vanished.

The programme finished and Robin yawned.

"Coffee?" I suggested.

"Yes, please."

I went into the kitchen and did the coffee thing. While I was doing it, the cat flap flapped and Harpo came in.

There was a sort of a black *swish* across the kitchen as he headed for the lounge. I paid no attention. Just Harpo, oozing cute as normal.

Soon I heard *rattle, rattle, rattle*. Harpo playing with some toy or other. Nothing odd there. I took the coffee in to the lounge.

"Beware," said Robin. "I'm armed and dangerous!"

"?"

Robin brandished a blue tube at me.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Eye shadow," she said.

"What's dangerous about eye shadow?"

"I don't own any," said Robin.

We both looked at Harpo. Harpo

looked at us.

"Nice eye shadow," said Harpo.
"Great to play with. Just try chasing it
– it *rattles*. Really neat!"

"Where did you get that from?" I
asked.

"Dunno," said Harpo vaguely.
"Somewhere. Isn't it great?"

A lady walked past the house. One
eye was blue. One eye wasn't.

Things I Have Learned This Month

The first thing I learned this month is that if you are attached (in every sense of the word) to your feet, you should never come between a lady and her corpse. Especially if the corpse hasn't quite become one yet...

It was about 6.00am on a drowsy Saturday. Harpo the Cat was cuddled up close to me, purring like a power drill. Robin was curled up close to me as well, and she too appeared to be purring. I've learned that Robin never

snores. There is a subtle, though well defined, difference between purring and snoring. Robin is quite clear on this point and has explained it to me several times. With diagrams and gestures. And a rolling pin. I think I'm beginning to understand.

All ten kilos of Porgy were wrapped around my feet which were sinking deep into the mattress springs as a result. He too emitted an occasional purr. As a consequence of all this applied affection, I was wide awake and sweaty, but I didn't dare move. If the cats realised I was awake they would demand breakfast. I wasn't quite ready for that yet.

"Clatter, clatter," went the cat flap.

"Shriek!!!" yelled something that wasn't quite dead yet.

Robin, Harpo and Porgy all woke up, instantly alert.

"Sounds like Bess has brought breakfast home," said Robin.

We have a rule in the house. Robin is in charge of dead things and vomit. I'm in charge of everything else. Since it sounded like we might soon have a dead thing, she went to investigate. Harpo followed, full of curiosity.

"Shriek! Clatter, thud, shriek! Bang! Crash!"

"It's a bird," said Robin.

"So it is," said Harpo. "That looks as though it might be interesting. I wonder if it bounces? I wonder if it

rattles?"

"Well done, Bess," said Robin soothingly, trying to make the best of the situation. Perhaps the cat could be placated enough to rescue the bird that was yelling its head off in her mouth.

"mmglfff", said Bess.

"Can I have a bit?" asked Harpo, starting to edge forward.

Bess opened her mouth a little, presumably to say no you can't, but before she could say anything at all, the bird slipped away from her and raced towards Harpo, yelling and shrieking at the top of its voice and scattering feathers in a fine black cloud.

"Oh, oh," said Harpo. "That looks a bit scary – I think I'd better run away."

He drilled one claw deep into Robin's naked foot and used it as a pivot to swing himself round a hundred and eighty degrees. All his other claws were out as well, and as he pivoted on the embedded claw they dug a neat semi-circle of flesh out of Robin's foot.

"Aaaaahhh, you little bugger," yelled Robin, grabbing hold of her wounded foot.

"SHRIEK!" yelled the bird.

"Bye, bye," said Harpo over his shoulder as he fled.

"Come back, you bastard", called Bess as she made a mighty leap towards the bird. She missed, and the bird took refuge behind Robin. For a moment, cat and bird played peek-a-

boo through Robin's legs. Bess actually growled; a sound which is not normally part of her vocabulary.

"Get out of my way!" said Bess angrily, and she bit Robin firmly on the foot that Harpo hadn't shredded, in order to make her move aside. "Let me get at that bloody bird!"

"Aaaahhh!" yelled Robin one more time, grabbing hold of her other wounded foot. Both Robin's feet were now in mid-air as she tended to her injuries. With one foot in each hand, she was staying upright by sheer will power alone. She moved to the left a little. Bess shot through the gap so fast that the sonic boom stunned the bird into immobility.

"Ha! Got you!"

Bess picked the bird up and raced out of the cat flap into the garden.

There was a blessed silence, broken only by the splashing of blood from Robin's multiple cat-induced wounds. Black feathers swung gently down through the air and settled on the floor.

"Is it safe to come out yet?" asked Harpo, peering shyly round the door.

"Did something happen?" queried Porgy, who is definitely not the tastiest biscuit in the bowl. Events were taking place far too fast for him to keep up with them. He was still comfortably curled around my feet, pinning me immovably to the bed. "What have I missed? Is it breakfast time yet?"

The next thing I learned this month is: never tell the truth to a computer.

It all started when my AA membership came up for renewal. For the princely sum of \$78.35 I could renew my membership and Robin's membership for another year. What a reasonable fee – I was keen to proceed! All that remained was to sort out the practical details.

One mechanism for paying the fee required me to spend thirty seconds walking across the road to the AA office where I would have to stand in a queue for two minutes, after which I would wave a credit card at the nice lady behind the counter and sign a piece of paper. Total elapsed time,

approximately four minutes. It all seemed far too onerous to contemplate. Feeling indolent, I determined to see if technology would solve my problem. Why leave my seat if I didn't have to?

A few clicks of my mouse brought me to the AA web site where, I was pleased to observe, I could fill in an electronic form and renew my membership online. That'll do me! I clicked and typed and typed and clicked. The only fly in the ointment was that I had to tell the computer my credit card number so that it could take \$78.35 away from me. I'm always dubious about giving my credit card number to a web site, but the site assured me I had nothing to fear. It was

a secure web site, safe from prying eyes. Surely I could trust it?

Convinced, I filled in my credit card number and expiry date and I clicked the submit button. There was a short pause while the web page verified my card details and then it thanked me very much and told me my AA membership was renewed for another year. Easy!

The total elapsed time was approximately four minutes; about the same length of time it would have taken had I done it in person at the AA office. But this method had the substantial advantage that I didn't have to endure thirty seconds of exercise as I walked across the road to the AA

office, and I didn't have to suffer through a further debilitating thirty seconds as I walked back again. All in all I felt well pleased.

A few days later, I had occasion to do some internet banking, so I logged on to my bank account. My credit card details are also available at this same internet banking site and I glanced cursorily at the account balances as they displayed. Funny, I thought. Why is my Visa balance \$391.75? I don't recall spending that amount of money on anything. Perhaps I ought to look at the details. I clicked on the link that displayed my credit card transactions.

Much to my bewilderment, I discovered that I had renewed my AA

membership five times. There it was in front of my eyes. Five charges of \$78.35, making a grand total of \$391.75 which Visa was now insisting I pay them. Immediately. Or else!

Hmmm. That's not supposed to happen.

I printed out the transaction details and then spent thirty seconds walking across the road to the AA office where I stood in a queue for two minutes. Then I explained what had happened to the nice lady behind the desk and I showed her the printout of the credit card transactions.

"That's odd," she said. She called up my account on her computer. "It all looks normal here," she said. "It just

shows that you have renewed for the next year. I can't see any extra charges. I'd better talk to my manager."

Her manager happened to be passing as she said this so she grabbed him and explained. Being a manager, he was far too exalted to deal with mere mortals like customers and so he completely ignored my existence. He wouldn't look me in the eye and he refused to answer me when I directed a question at him. He spoke only to the lady behind the desk, and he spoke very rudely, because he was a manager and she was an underling.

"Ring Paula Upstairs," he said. "It's her department. She'll know what to do." He bustled away to do important

managerial things.

The lady rang Paula Upstairs and explained the problem. Paula Upstairs asked to speak directly to me.

"Did you notice anything odd when you renewed online?" she asked.

"No," I said. I explained what I'd done and what happened. "Everything was quite normal and I saw exactly what I expected to see."

"You didn't click the submit button five times, did you?" asked Paula Upstairs.

"No," I said. "I only clicked it once."

"Very peculiar," said Paula Upstairs. "I'll report it to our systems people and see if they can make

anything of it. Meanwhile I'll put through a credit of \$313.40 to your Visa account which will reverse four of the five transactions so you'll only have to pay Visa the \$78.35 of your actual membership fee."

"Thank you very much," I said.

"That should do nicely."

I returned to my office. Total elapsed time was approximately eight minutes, including one minute of exercise (thirty seconds each way). Plus the original four minutes I'd used on the web site. Twelve minutes in all. Perhaps I really should have renewed my membership the old fashioned way. It would have taken only a third of the time.

Truly it has been said that all the time you save by using a computer will need to be spent checking the computer to make sure it got everything right, and then fixing everything it got wrong.

Paula Upstairs was as good as her word. The credit came through straight away. Ten out of ten to the AA for sorting the mess out quickly, politely and efficiently as soon as the cock up was pointed out to them. Zero out of ten for letting it happen in the first place – if any of you renew your AA membership online this year, check your credit card statements very carefully. Who knows what you'll find...

I learned one more thing this month. I learned that econometrics is pedagogic play therapy. But that's so trite and obvious, that I'm a bit ashamed to even mention it at all.

Alan Goes Squelch

The lady at the check in desk handed me my boarding pass. Despite the fact that I had checked in at the Koru Club counter and identified myself with my Koru Club card, there was no mention of my membership on the boarding pass and I was not in my preferred seating position.

"I prefer an aisle seat near the front," I said.

"There aren't any," she snapped. She didn't even glance at the screen to check. She just naturally knew these things. She attached the flight tag to

my case and pushed it towards the carousel.

"Don't forget my priority tag," I said mildly.

She sneered at me and, with bad grace, attached a priority tag.

I made my way to the Koru Lounge and presented my boarding pass.

"Oh dear," said the lady. "They haven't put your details on the pass. Let me give you a new one."

"Thank you," I said.

"And they haven't given you your preferred seat," she said as she checked my details against the boarding pass.

"Would you like an aisle seat near the front? I can give you 4C."

"Yes please, that would be lovely."

She clattered keys. "Oops!" she said. "That one's just gone as we were talking. I'll give you 6C and block the middle seat so you won't have to sit next to anybody and you can stretch out a bit."

"Thank you." I felt bemused. Such friendliness. Such service. She must be a new recruit. They'd soon knock that out of her.

"My pleasure, sir," she said. "Enjoy the lounge."

The doors swished open and I splashed across Alph the sacred river, and entered a stately pleasure dome where luxuries beyond the dreams of mortal men awaited me.

I sipped a glass of lemonade and

nibbled a water biscuit. I checked my flight details on the monitor.

The flight was delayed.

I wasn't at all surprised that the flight was delayed. The only time I've ever been on an Air New Zealand flight that wasn't delayed was one glorious day when all the ground staff were on strike and had been replaced by emergency management volunteers. It was amazing! The counter staff were friendly, cheerful and helpful. The plane took off to the second and landed right on schedule. My luggage, festooned with priority stickers, came out of the hold first, within seconds of my arrival at the baggage carousel. Normally the baggage handlers ignore

the priority tags and my luggage comes out last. And often I have had to hang around the baggage area for almost as long as the flight itself took before any bags at all appeared. All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the day the Air New Zealand ground staff went on strike. I would suggest to the Air New Zealand management that they encourage their staff to go on strike more often. The airline would run far more efficiently.

But today the staff were all working as normal, and my flight was delayed.

"Bing, bong! Air New Zealand regret to announce that flight 465 to Auckland will be delayed for at least thirty minutes."

Let me guess, I thought to myself. It's delayed because of the late arrival of an inbound flight. That's the normal, vague excuse. That or the ubiquitous engineering concerns. The voice continued:

"This delay has been caused by the fact that flight 465 has no cabin crew, technical staff or pilot. They are all arriving on an inbound flight which itself is running late. We apologise for this delay."

Just as the microphone clicked off, I heard the beginning of a giggle. At least somebody at Air New Zealand still had a sense of humour. Must be a management volunteer. The ice-cold ab-humans who usually make the

announcements would never do anything but sound smugly satisfied at the inconvenience caused by the delay.

I returned to my book. Eventually, thirty minutes late, as advertised, we began to board. The flight crew looked exhausted. Perhaps they'd had to hand crank the propellers on the incoming flight.

The plane soared into the air and levelled off at its cruising altitude. The crew prepared to serve coffee and tea and water. They bustled down the aisle with the trolley, handing out plastic mugs and small, sealed containers of water. As the lady reached my row, she dropped one of the water containers. It landed with a thump, split itself in two,

and poured water all over my right foot. My sock absorbed the water gleefully. I wriggled my toes. They went *squelch*.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, embarrassed. We both mopped my sock with paper napkins. It made no discernible difference. She marched away with her trolley, determined to get as far away from me as possible.

I pushed my crew call button. Sirens screamed and red emergency beacons flared. The lady reappeared. "Yes?"

"You forgot to give me my plastic mug and small, sealed container of water." I said. She plonked them down in front of me and ran away again. I

drank my water quickly in case it caused sudden, unexpected turbulence. Every so often I flexed my toes experimentally. They continued to go *squelch*. A man with a coffee pot filled my plastic cup with something that might have been coffee. I drank that as well.

We began our descent into Auckland. I could feel the pressure building up in my head and I held my nose and popped my ears to relieve it. A small baby began to scream with pain. We thumped on to the runway.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Auckland. For your comfort and safety please remain seated until the captain has switched off the fasten seatbelts

sign."

We rolled slowly towards the gate. The plane came to a gentle stop, the engine noise dropped away. Bing, bong! The fasten seatbelts sign went off. There was the normal mad scramble to get bags down from the overhead lockers. We all stood in the narrow aisle, waiting for the door to open. Through the cabin window I could see the air bridge moving out towards the aeroplane. It stopped about six inches from the door, thought for a moment and then retreated. Then it tried again. And again. But no matter how hard it tried, it could not reach the plane door. It always stopped six inches away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologise for the delay, but there seems to be a fault with the air bridge. We've called engineering to come and take a look at it."

Several people sat down to wait. Through the cabin window, I could see men hitting the air bridge with hammers of gradually increasing size. It quivered under the onslaught, but remained stubbornly six inches away from the aeroplane. Eventually the men ran out of hammers and walked away scratching their heads.

"Sorry squire, can't find anything wrong. Looks perfectly normal to me. Perhaps you are doing something wrong?"

We waited a few more minutes and then the captain himself made an announcement.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but the engineers tell me that they can't do anything with the air bridge and so I shall have to move the plane six inches to the left. Can you all please sit down while I do this. You don't have to fasten your seat belts, but you must sit down."

We sat down, clutching our in flight baggage to our chests, eagerly anticipating our extra free ride. Slowly the plane reversed away from the air bridge.

"Left hand down a bit, co-pilot."

"Left hand down a bit it is sir."

Then we straightened up and edged our way in again.

"Anchors out, co-pilot. Handbrake on. Ignition off. Put the gear stick into neutral."

The air bridge gently kissed the side of the plane and the crew opened the door.

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen, you may now disembark. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us."

I squelched out of the plane. On the horizon, the setting sun was busy turning the clouds pink. The aeroplane, embarrassed at being driven by a pilot who landed six inches too far to the right, was blushing all the way down to its wheels and all the way out to the

tips of its wings.

I squelched over to the baggage claim area. My case, complete with priority tag, was the very last one to appear on the carousel. It had been a completely normal flight.

Them's The Breaks

"I think I want to be an actor when I grow up," said Porgy the Cat. "I'd be great at Puss in Boots. And I've been practicing Dick Whittington's cat. Do you want to hear me miaow in character?"

"Not just at the moment," I said. "I'm sure you do it wonderfully."

"Miaow, miaow," said Porgy anyway.

"Break a leg," I said.

And so, being an extremely literal cat, that's exactly what he did...

One Monday evening, after Porgy

had been unusually somnolent for a couple of days, even by his extremely loose standards, I picked him up to give him a cuddle. He screamed in agony.

I put him down gently and he cowered against the wall, refusing to put any weight on his right back leg. I phoned the extremely expensive after hours vet.

"Bring him in immediately," said the lady. "And bring three credit cards as well."

The vet examined Porgy carefully. She poked and prodded and gently moved his leg backwards and forwards. He wasn't happy about it, but he let her do it.

"He is presenting with two symptoms," she said eventually. "He has an extremely full bladder and he obviously doesn't want to put any weight on his leg at all. I'm more worried about the bladder. He might have a blocked urethra and that can be very serious – we often lose them when that happens. I'll take a urine sample."

She produced a huge syringe with a fearsome needle and thrust it deep into Porgy's body. She pulled back the plunger and it filled with urine. She took it over to the other side of the room and put a paper strip impregnated with sinister chemicals into it. After a few seconds, she took the paper strip out again and compared the colours on

it to a chart.

"Well there's no blood in the urine," she said, "which is a good sign. But the pH is a little abnormal. I'm very worried about his bladder. Have you seen any sign of him urinating?"

"He's been lying on a chair for two days," I said. "And he hasn't moved at all."

"I think we need to keep him in overnight," said the vet. "I'll give him an anaesthetic and relieve his bladder and at the same time we can take X-rays of the leg. It's going to be hugely expensive."

"Let's just do whatever is right for Porgy," I said.

She looked things up on pieces of

paper. "It will cost you somewhere in the region of your limit on two credit cards," she said happily. "Plus GST. And a tip."

We took Porgy into the back room and put him in a cage. He looked a little bewildered. He crossed his eyes and he crossed his legs and he looked pathetic. The vet put a dirt tray in the cage. Porgy blinked at it for a moment and his eyes uncrossed and he began to smile. He hobbled into the dirt tray and squatted and an expression of absolute bliss appeared on his face.

"About bloody time," he said.

The vet watched the dirt tray closely and stuck her thumb in the air gleefully.

"He was obviously just holding it all in until he found a socially acceptable place to pee!" she said. "Look at him – I don't think he's ever going to stop. OK – plans all changed. You take him home overnight. I'll send a fax to your vet and you take him in there for an X-ray tomorrow."

We took Porgy home.

"It hurts!" he said, and he just lay on a sheepskin rug in his travelling cage and refused to move.

The next day, we picked up a few more credit cards from the drawer and took Porgy back to the vet. They gave him an anaesthetic so that he was immobile while they X-rayed him, though given the fact that he did not

appear to have moved a muscle for at least the last twelve hours, other than to twitch an occasional eyebrow, I felt that perhaps this was unnecessary.

The verdict was not long in coming.

"Porgy has broken his right rear leg just at the place where the bone attaches to the ball and socket joint in the hip. He will have to have surgery on the hip. The ball in the hip joint is now isolated from the blood supply in the body and will simply die. So we have to remove the ball completely. He should make a full recovery. He's a young, strong cat and the bone will form a callous round the joint. The muscles in the thigh are very dense and will also hold the bone in place. In a

few weeks, he'll be right as ninepence."

"Good," we said.

"Have you got ninepence?" asked the vet.

"I might have to apply for another mortgage on the house."

"We'll send him off to our surgery on the Kapiti coast," said the vet. "Sea air and lovely views. It will do him the world of good. You can pick him up in a couple of days."

The next two days passed very slowly. The house seemed empty without Porgy in it, even though, when he was around, all he ever seemed to do was sleep. We rang the vet.

"He's still out in Kapiti," said the vet. "He's making a remarkable

recovery; quite the best patient they've ever had. They've all fallen in love with him. Are you sure you want him back?"

"Of course we do!"

"Well you can pick him up from us tomorrow," the vet explained, "or you can drive out to Kapiti and pick him up yourself."

"We'll drive out to Kapiti."

And so we did.

Porgy was in a cage. He stood up as we came in and moved to the front of the cage and gave a little chirrup.

"Just look at him," said the vet who had done the operation. "He's walking on the leg already! Usually it's at least a couple of weeks before they put any weight on it at all. But he's walking

already! He really is a remarkable cat. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I think I'll write a paper for *Vet Surgery Monthly*."

It was hard to tell whether the vet was more pleased with himself for having done an extra specially skilful operation, or with Porgy for having done an extra specially unusual recovery. Either way, he was pleased as punch. Pride oozed out of every pore.

Porgy had been shaved from the middle of his body, all across his side and down his leg almost to the ankle. A wound about five inches long stretched across his thigh, the edges held together with a dozen or so stitches.

"I usually do horses," said the lady

who assisted the vet. "But I just pretended that he was a small horse while I shaved him. He didn't seem to mind."

We all looked at the vast areas of naked skin that Porgy was exposing to the world. He blushed a little and shuffled his feet.

"We charge extra to make them look like a poodle," said the lady, in a hopeful tone of voice.

"I don't think we need to go to those lengths," I said. "He'd only get a swollen head when he realised how handsome he was."

"Woof!" said Porgy. "Woof, woof."

"Stop messing about," I said.

"Nobody is gong to fall for that."

The lady put her clippers away and looked disappointed. Porgy drooped noticeably.

"These are the X-rays," said the vet, and he showed us where the bone had broken. "And this is the bit I took out of him."

He handed me a small plastic jar with the ball joint from Porgy's hip rattling round inside it. It was smaller than I had expected. And redder. There was a jagged edge where the bone had fractured. Something small and squishy was hanging off it.

"Can I keep it as a souvenir?"

"Oh yes," said the vet. "You've paid several fortunes for it, after all."

"When I was at university," I said,

"I had a friend who took his tape recorder apart to service it. When he put it all back together again, he had a ball bearing left over. He never found out what it was for, but the tape recorder ran quite happily for years without it." I shook the jar with Porgy's ball joint in it. "I suppose cats are a bit like tape recorders really, aren't they?"

"That's right!" said the vet. "In a couple of months time he'll be bounding about as if nothing had happened."

"That will be interesting," I said. "I've never seen him bound about before. Will he be able to play the violin as well?"

"I imagine so," said the vet. "He

really is a most extraordinary cat. Look! He's putting all his weight on it. Unbelievable!"

"How do you think he broke his leg in the first place?" I asked.

"Probably he jumped down from a place that was a little bit too high. It's not uncommon."

"What do we do now?"

"Keep him inside for the next three days. Encourage him to exercise the leg. The more use it gets, the faster it will heal. Bring him back in ten days to have the stitches out."

We took Porgy home. As soon as we let him out of the cage, he walked around a bit, just to make sure that he really was home, and then he went into

Robin's room and hid himself in the darkest corner of the deepest closet he could find. He stayed there for two days and made the world go away. He poked his head out only for the occasional drink, the occasional nibble and the occasional visit to the dirt box.

After two days, he decided that he didn't need to hide any more. Perhaps the world wasn't so bad after all. As I write, he is asleep on his favourite chair, shaved side down so that nobody can tell he was ever injured at all.

A Purple Box For Alan And Robin

For several months now, whenever anybody has asked me what I want for a wedding present, I've answered: "Toasters, please."

I feel that you can never have too many toasters, and a wedding seems to me to be an ideal opportunity to stock up for a rainy (and toastless) day. However Robin has firmly forbidden me from saying the word anymore on the grounds that somebody with an impaired sense of humour might take

me seriously and fill our house with toasters.

Personally I feel it is far more likely that our more sadistically inclined friends will fully realise that I am not in the least bit serious in my expressed desire for toasters.

Nevertheless they will take me at my supposed word and gleefully immerse me in toasters, chuckling furiously the while.

Either way, I suspect that Robin is correct in her feeling that this is not an outcome to be desired (though a toaster each might be nice in case we ever split up).

However, long before Robin laid her edict down, I sent an email to my

friend Ian in Holland. A toaster, I implied, would be nice. And Robin likes boxes, I said. And her favourite colour is purple. The rest I left to his imagination.

I was late home from work on the day that the present from Holland arrived and when I got home, Robin was positively hopping up and down with frustration.

"Where've you been? " she demanded. "Ian's present has arrived. Open it NOW!"

I took off my hat and hung it on the hook.

"Hurry up!" said Robin, stamping her foot.

I took off my jacket and hung it on

the hook.

"The present is just over there," said Robin, pointing at a large brown parcel. "I really think it should be opened IMMEDIATELY, don't you?"

I took off my trousers and folded them carefully and hung them in the wardrobe and then I put on a pair of casual trousers.

"AAAAAGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!!" explained Robin.

I took out my swiss army knife and opened the sharpest blade.

"At last!" Robin heaved a deep sigh of relief and picked up the camera to record the moment for posterity and for Ian.

I cut carefully at the tape on the

large brown parcel and slowly removed the top layer. Somewhat to my surprise, another layer of cardboard was revealed. I cut carefully through this as well and pulled it away from the parcel. I peered inside the box.

"Hmmm," I said. "Robin - I think you ought to carry on with the unwrapping now. I'll take the rest of the photographs."

We swapped places and Robin looked inside the box. A smile spread across the whole of her face.

"Purple!" she said.

She reached carefully into the cardboard and pulled out a large purple box. It had an angular lid with a twirly handle on top and there were wooden

studs set around the lid. There was a drawer at the bottom.

"Purple!" said Robin in tones of deep satisfaction.

The lid opened easily, though close examination revealed that it shouldn't have. Inside, a rod extended out from the back of the box across to the front and hooked in to a catch that should have been attached to the box lid, but wasn't. One of the studs around the outside of the box was attached to the rod and could be used to pull the rod out, thereby releasing the lid. However the catch had come unglued, thus invalidating the mechanism. (I later reattached the catch with a dab of wood glue and then everything worked

properly again).

The box turned out to be a jewellery box with two cushioned trays and a cushioned drawer. Robin was ecstatic.

"What a beautiful box," she enthused. "And it's purple! Isn't that just perfect?"

"Indeed it is," I said, and I took a photograph.

"Purple," said Robin and started to take out the trays.

"Ooooh look!" she exclaimed. She was holding a small parcel. On it was written:

THIS IS THE **REAL PRESENT**

She unwrapped it carefully and her

eyes lit up.

"It's a TOASTER," she shouted gleefully. "Just what you always wanted."

The toy toaster was about an inch long and half an inch wide. It gleamed and sparkled, dazzling us both with reflected sunlight.

Robin played with the toaster for a while. "And it's got real toast!" she enthused as she hit a hidden spring and two tiny pieces of white plastic bread shot across the room, to the great bewilderment of the eagerly watching cats who weren't sure whether or not to chase and kill them as they flew through the air.

Robin put the toaster reverently

into the new purple box, and carried the box into the bedroom. She went over to where I strongly suspected the dressing table was (I hadn't seen it for several years because of the clutter surrounding it, and I was no longer sure we still possessed it) and she cleared a space by throwing a whole pile of stuff off onto where the floor would have been if it too hadn't been covered in clutter. I wasn't completely certain that we still had a bedroom floor either - memory of these things tends to fade with the passing years when you don't get the constant reinforcement of seeing them every day.

Having cleared a space, she put the box down carefully and adjusted its

position so that she would have a good view of it while she was lying in bed. That night she lay there with her back to me so that the box would be the last thing that she saw as she drifted off to sleep.

"Purple," I heard her murmur.

Shortly after that she began to snore.

I hastened to inform Ian of the safe arrival of the box and toaster and I sent him the photographs of the ceremonial opening. He sent me a letter describing its provenance:

Dear Robin and Alan,

So glad the box arrived safely. It was made by my partner-in-crime and apprentice bowyer Daniël Kamp. You

can see that he is a talented cabinet maker, too.

The timber for the panels comes from the beams of a concealed Catholic church that was discovered when a farmhouse in Brabant was demolished. The timber, we guess, is more than 300 years old. It was most probably imported from the Baltic into Zaandam, where it lay in the Zaan river to season before going on to its temporary destination. On returning to the Zaan, it was stored waiting for a good purpose, sawn into panels and made up into your box.

The twirly bits are yew wood, made from one of my own English longbows. The yew grew on the Veluwe National

Park, on a royal estate. It was more than 500 years old when the tree was felled, laid for 5 years to season, and made up into a longbow.

There is only one box of its kind, naturally, as Daniël made it on commission for you-all. It's unique.

The purple colouring is a mineral-based wax made to Daniël's own special formula, using materials obtained from the dye and colour mill The Cat, run by my brother-in-law Piet. The solvent used in the wax, by the way, is citrus turpentine, which will account for any smell of citrus fruit that may waft around the box.

The satin lining and beading are of course all hand stitched.

The toaster is of course fully functional, but runs only on Gnome Stroom, available from the windmills in Holland.

A toaster packed in a purple box is what I promised. So that's what you get.

Daniël suggests that you re-wax the outside about once a year. I shall send you a small tub of magic purple wax later on. Given Holland's reputation in your part of the world, maybe I should mark the tub "Lebanese Purple" or something, just to amuse the Customs officers.

The timber will colour up over the years. The acquired patina is part of the aesthetic. It should mellow through

time. Don't we all?

Alan And Robin Catch A Train

In theory it was very simple.

"I'll get home from work about 6.00pm on Friday," I explained to Robin. "We'll have a leisurely tea and then pack our cases."

"What time do we have to leave?" she asked.

"We'll go to bed early," I said, cleverly avoiding the question. "I'll set the alarm."

"What time will it go off?" she asked suspiciously. She knows me of

old and was determined to add at least half an hour to whatever time I suggested.

"3.30am," I said. "That will let us get to the airport in good time to check in for our 7.40am flight to Sydney."

However the man in charge of the fog machine at the Meteorological Office had a secret agenda and on Friday morning he superglued the switch into the 'On' position. Then he went home and took the phone off the hook.

Wellington airport was fog-bound and closed all day Friday. There was little or no chance that we'd be able to fly to Sydney the next morning. Indeed, towards the end of the afternoon, our

flight was officially cancelled.

A lot of frantic rushing around revealed spare seats to Sydney on flights leaving from Auckland. There was much hurried rearranging of tickets. Now all we had to do was pack in a tearing rush and drive through the night to the other end of the country. Easy!

I slept in the back of the car. Robin snored, so presumably she slept as well. Ross drove and Simon sat in the front passenger seat and talked to him to keep him awake. The fog thinned out and vanished as soon as we reached the outskirts of Wellington and apart from a small patch around Huntley we saw it no more. We reached Auckland about

5.30am, in plenty of time to check in for our flight and we breakfasted on black coffee in the Koru Club lounge so as not to fall asleep in the comfy chairs and miss the last call for our flight.

We boarded the plane. The pilot was obviously going for a world record because we took off on time. Even more surprisingly, we arrived in Sydney on schedule as well. We took a taxi to Sydney's Central Station where we were due to board the Indian Pacific train for three days of sybaritic luxury across the Nullarbor to Perth.

The platform was empty, not an Indian Pacific to be seen.

"It's late," said the man at the

enquiry desk. "It's got a flat tyre."

"What time is it due?" I asked.

"It'll probably be here in a couple of hours, but it will have to be cleaned before they'll let you on. You won't be able to get on for ages yet. Hours and hours." He shook his head, taking a gloomy pleasure in his news. "Hours and hours and hours."

We sat in the less than salubrious station bar/café and ate cholesterol and chips. I have sat in railway station cafes all over the world – St. Pancras in London, Nottingham Midland, Beijing Central and the Finland Station in Moscow. Railway cafes are all assembled in a factory in Redditch, to an original design by Bloody Stupid

Johnson, and then they are exported to stations worldwide. The one in Sydney is a typical example of the type.

"Pass the heart attack on a stick, please," said Robin. I passed it over and she took a big bite.

The Indian Pacific pulled in on platforms 2 and 3 simultaneously.

"Stand in the middle," said Robin, flourishing a camera. I felt very Harry Potterish as I stood (it seemed) at platform 2" to have my photograph taken.

There were eight of us in our group, and we had hired our own private carriage; the Chairman's Carriage. It was equipped with easy chairs in which we could lounge luxuriously and sip

complimentary champagne. We were all exhausted – some of us hadn't slept for 48 hours. My underpants were making themselves known to the world. Everybody else was just as uncomfortable. We all had a shower and then we went to the lounge car for the reception for Gold Kangaroo passengers. Gold Kangaroo service is available to many, but only we had our own private carriage in as well. We sipped vividly blue champagne cocktails designed to represent the colour of the two oceans that are linked by the train. We indulged in fairly zombie-like conversations with our fellow Gold Kangaroo companions and then we were summoned to the dining

car. I dined on trout and Robin had steak. And then, at last, to bed.

The train rattled and rambled and shook its way across Australia and I kept waking up scared, convinced that we were experiencing an earthquake. Nevertheless, I slept refreshingly well and I awoke for the day just before dawn. I could see the stars of the Milky Way smeared across the sky. I don't remember ever seeing so many stars before.

And somewhere in there the day turned in to Sunday. We were safely on the train, we were fully rested and all we had to do was allow ourselves to be waited on hand and foot for three days. It seemed like a minor miracle that we

had made it at all.

Our first stop was at Broken Hill. It was supposed to be quite a long stop with a chance to explore, but the train never made up the lost time from being late out of Sydney and so we only had ten minutes – just enough time to take photos of the station and to browse through the items for sale from the tables of the local entrepreneurs who just *knew* that the passengers were all eager to buy a tatty paperback to read on the train, or to purchase lumps of the broken hill itself masquerading as jewellery. Simon bought a pack of cards in case he got bored.

Back to the train and we stared through the windows in air conditioned

luxury at never ending scrubby red soil. Some wallabies wallabied and once we saw a wedge-tailed eagle soaring majestically.

Next stop Adelaide and we took a coach trip around the city with the most boring tour guide in the world. He told us lots of local scandals involving road building and corrupt politicians. He hated anybody who wasn't from South Australia and he reserved a special hatred for people from New South Wales.

"Don Bradman is the only New South Welshman who ever had any sense," said the tour guide loudly. "He came to live in South Australia."

The train stayed in Adelaide for

about two hours. It felt like two days. They were supposed to put the train through the equivalent of a car wash, but in an attempt to make up lost time, they decided to leave it grimy. We left Adelaide only an hour behind schedule.

We had to adjust our watches and clocks as strange Australian time zones caught up with us and then passed us by. Moving from South Australia to the West required the watches to be put back two hours. However the train crew decided this was too big a change to do all at once so we did one hour on Sunday to be followed later on Monday by another hour. And so for almost a day we lived on train time – a mobile time zone different from everywhere

else in the world. I felt very Einsteinian for a moment and I began to realise why all the explanations of relativity in the physics text books began with an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman getting on a train.

Monday morning, and the scrubby red soil sprouted spindly trees. Interspersed between them lurked glum, blue-tinged bushes. Perhaps they were blue with cold? Relatively speaking, of course. The soil was red and rusty and the engineering works from the railroad had gouged great gashes in the lumpy landscape. Every so often isolated patches of solar panels sucked greedily at the blazing, pitiless sunshine. It was not

immediately obvious what they were powering. Possibly a great, but unknown, underground city?

Suddenly, within half a kilometre or so, the landscape changed dramatically. It became perfectly flat and much less red. The trees disappeared completely and only the scrubby blue bush remained all across the face of the earth from one horizon to the other. This was the Nullarbor, God's ironing board, the flattest, dullest, most unchanging place upon the planet. There is a certain hypnotic fascination to the never ending sameness of it. We saw a herd of feral camels sneering and swearing at the train as it invaded their territory. And

always, stretching on forever, the unchanging Nullarbor; brown, sere and washed out.

Cook is quite literally in the middle of nowhere. The Nullarbor stretches as far as the eye can see in every direction, flat and empty. Ramshackle buildings huddle together for protection. Cook has a permanent population of two people and fifty million friendly flies. The train re-waters at Cook and swaps drivers. The retiring drivers wait for the Indian Pacific coming in the opposite direction and return to Adelaide on it. While they wait, they count flies. There isn't anything else to do in Cook.

I had a pee in the station toilet and

got back on the train. I couldn't help feeling that I'd just passed more water than Cook had seen in a decade. Except for the train water in the holding tanks, of course.

The water we took on at Cook had obviously been sitting in holding tanks exposed to the full glare of the sun. For the next day or so the water that flowed out of the taps marked 'Cold' was almost the same temperature as that which flowed from the taps marked 'Hot'.

And always the flat and dreary landscape baked unchangingly across the whole of the visible world.

A signpost flashed past the train. Blink and you'll miss it. 'Prisoner of

War Camp' it declared. There was no evidence of any buildings, no indication that anything had ever been here. It was unclear whether the site was reserved for future implementation or simply a relic of the past. Either way, this would be a terrible place to be incarcerated.

The desert stretched on endlessly. God bless air conditioning.

Kalgoorlie was the next stop. It is a mining town with a fearsome reputation. "We lock all the carriage doors in Kalgoorlie," said the lady in charge of our carriage, "to stop undesirable elements from looting the train."

Kalgoorlie sounded like fun. A pub

crawl was obviously called for,

The town was almost deserted. It was Monday evening and everybody was at home watching television. We found an empty pub which had Swan beer on tap. When in doubt, always drink the local beer. We ordered a Swan and discovered why the pub was empty. Swan beer has a putrid aftertaste and a rancid duringtaste. After one sip, the evil anticipation involved in the beforetaste is overwhelmingly off-putting. We went back to the train.

"Are you an undesirable element intent on looting the train?"

"No!"

"What's the password?"

"Swordfish."

"Enter friend."

And so to bed.

The following day we had breakfast and then packed our bags. Next stop Perth and the end of the journey. We arrived at 9.15am almost exactly on time. It was the end of a great adventure.

Alan And Robin Get Married

Wednesday 23rd March 2005

dawned bright and hot in Perth. The sun was a yellow furnace in a bright blue sky and the maximum recorded temperature that day was 42 degrees. I was glad I was getting married indoors at the Hillcrest Restaurant; a place with very efficient air conditioning.

Robin spent the morning being equipped with wedding hair, wedding fingernails, wedding toenails and a wedding face. When all was finished to

her satisfaction, she climbed into her wedding dress. She tried very hard not to smile in case the make up cracked and fell off, but she couldn't help herself and she grinned widely at her reflection in the mirror. Fortunately everything stayed in place – a great tribute to the skills of Kylie the make up specialist who had been summoned with frantic last minute phone calls the night before.

I arrived at the Hillcrest about 3.00pm. People drifted in slowly.

"You look very calm," said Phyllis, my soon to be mother-in-law.

"Only on the outside," I said.

At about 3.45pm Robin arrived. Unfortunately, her brother Ian, her

sister Wendy and her niece Alex had not yet appeared. But nobody told Robin. The bridal music blared and Robin walked in on her father's arm. She looked around, puzzled.

"Where's Ian? Where's Alex? Where's Wendy? She's got the video camera. We can't get married without a video camera."

"Sorry," said Carol, the celebrant, "but you'll have to go out again and wait. The guests aren't all here yet."

Robin and her father backed out and the wedding music faded away.

"I've been marrying people for thirty-one years," said Carol, "and this is the very first time I've had to send the bride away."

"The only wedding in the world," I said, "where the bride is on time and the guests are late. It could only happen to us."

Eventually Ian, Wendy and Alex arrived. Alex and Wendy were festooned with musical paraphernalia: a flute, a music stand, the occasional cello. They bustled in a corner as they put everything together. Eventually they were ready. The video camera was switched on and we began again.

The Beatles *All You Need Is Love* blared out. Robin walked in on her father's arm to the trumpet fanfare and John Lennon's nasal voice assured us all that we could do anything. All you need is love.

Carol introduced herself and went through the preliminaries. Then she asked: "Who brings this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," said Tim. I shook his hand. "Good luck with her," he said. "You'll need it." He had both a twinkle and a tear in his eye as he went to sit down. He really does love his daughters.

Then it was time to make our vows. We turned to each other and held hands as we repeated the words that Carol read to us. It was the first time I had looked directly (and closely) at Robin since she arrived and I had an almost irresistible urge to giggle for somehow her make up had slipped and there was a thin, white half-moon arc of cream

decorating the bottom of each lens of her glasses. She blinked owlishly at me across the top of the cream. Fortunately I managed to contain my giggles and we both declared our love for each other and held that love up for all the world to see. It was our moment, our magical moment. We exchanged rings (miraculously they had not been lost).

And we were married.

As we signed the register, Wendy and Alex played Bach in the background. It was a perfect moment.

We milled around for a while. Photos were taken, champagne was drunk, canapés were nibbled. The children played with the wedding balloons, chasing each other around the

room. Someone had bottle of bubble mix and soon lots of people were blowing bubbles. Alex's brother opened his mouth to eat a canapé and Alex blew bubbles into it. He remonstrated mildly with her. After we cleaned up the blood, we went into the restaurant. Food!

But first, after we were seated, my best man Laurie sang *The Sparrow And The Gentle Dove* by Henry Purcell to a flute arrangement by Geoffrey Coker. He was accompanied by Wendy on flute and Alex on cello. It was sublime.

Then Wendy's five year old daughter Ella danced to *Grow* by Hi-Five. I've never seen someone so young dance so well. She is stunningly

talented.

Then food. And drink. Yummy stuff! And Robin and I got it first. Boy! This marriage lark is a good idea. Plates groaning beneath a heavy load, we chomped.

Then it was time for speeches. Tim officially welcomed me to the family and I got huge hugs from a seemingly never ending queue of utterly gorgeous sisters in law and nieces.

"Can we get married again?" I asked Robin. "I want to go round and hug them all a second time."

The best man gave a speech which it turned out I'd written. Laurie nicked some of my more vividly described autobiographical writings and strung

them together to present a word picture of me. It seemed to go down well, though I couldn't help feeling that he shared rather too much information about my underpants with my gorgeous new sisters and my stunning new nieces. Sometimes one needs to retain an air of mystery about these things.

Then the master of ceremonies called on me to speak. I rose to the occasion and took a deep breath. But Robin was having none of it. She forced me to sit down again before I had said a word. She stood up regally and surveyed the crowd with an icy optic:

"My husband and I..."

There was more music from Wendy

and Alex. Then Robin's other sister Jenny accompanied her daughter Moana on guitar and together they sang for us, finishing with a rousing rendering of *Rockin' Robin*. Go girl!

And then by special request (from me), Jenny and Wendy took to their flutes and played a most wonderful arrangement of J. S. Bach's *Bourée*.

What a perfect way to finish.

Alan Stays At Home

I am a gentleman of semi-leisure.

For the last month or so I have been working part time. I turn up to the office for two weeks and then I stay at home for two weeks. Then back to the office for two more weeks. Lather, rinse, and repeat.

When I announced this, everybody got very worried.

"What will you do? How will you occupy your time? You'll get bored."

Well actually, no I won't. There's been heaps going on...

The first Monday of my first

fortnight off dawned wet and miserable, just like every day in Wellington for the last six months. I snuggled and luxuriated in the warmth and comfort of my bed and thought about all the people who were going off to work, out in the cold, wet weather.

Eventually, once the streets were nicely aired, I got up and staggered off to the bathroom, yawning and scratching the while. A day of idleness beckoned. I showered and decided not to shave, a decision I have made every day for the last thirty years. I cleaned my teeth. A filling fell out and went *clatter* into the wash basin.

Bugger!

Sharp edges of broken tooth rasped

across the inside of my cheek. There was absolutely no doubt how I would be spending my day. I looked up "Dentists" in the yellow pages and sat down with the phone.

"We can fit you in next week."

"Sorry – we don't have any free appointments for the next month."

"There might be a free appointment in December 2010."

"We aren't taking new patients at the moment."

"You want what? An appointment for treatment? Ha, ha, ha, he, he, he. Oh dear, I haven't heard anything so funny for years!"

Considering how expensive dental treatment is, I was amazed at the

number of people who seemed to have nothing better to do than visit the dentist. Most of Wellington, it appeared was over-supplied with money and couldn't think of anything better to do with it than to donate it to a dentist in return for several hours of extreme unpleasantness.

"We've just had a cancellation. Can you get here by 11.15?"

"Indeed I can, " I said, and headed for the bus.

The waiting room was empty. I reported to the lady behind the desk. She gave me a form to fill in. "The dentist won't be long," she said.

There was a computer in the waiting room. FREE JETSTREAM

FOR DENTAL PATIENTS proclaimed a nicely printed notice on the monitor. I checked my email. I hadn't got any. I looked at the list of recently visited sites in case any of the other patients had been whiling away the time with pornography. No such luck.

"The dentist will see you now."

I gave the lady my completed form and went into the torture chamber.

Several subjective hours later I staggered home with a numb jaw and a light wallet. I also had an appointment for a check up on the first day of my next fortnight off and the gloomy possibility of more fillings on the horizon. Two weeks on, two weeks off was starting to seem much less

attractive than once it had. Never mind – today was only Monday, I had lots of free days left before I would have to go back to work.

The next day dawned wet and miserable again. My bed was warm and snug and shaving seemed far too much of an effort. I resolved not to bother. Nobody would ever notice. Anyway – I don't own any shaving equipment and nobody had seen fit to give me any for a wedding present. Wedding present. The phrase reminded of something. Oh yes...

Robin and I, having got married in foreign parts (well, Australia) decided that we would hold a wedding reception in New Zealand for all our

friends who couldn't make it to Australia. Annette, our Best Woman, went hunting for venues.

"The Dog and Bone," she said. "It's a pub on Lambton Quay. They'll let us have the downstairs bar. It's got a huge plasma screen and it has English beers on tap. And more whiskeys than you can shake a distillery at. Talk to Preston."

I rang Preston who proved to be eager to help and quite thrilled at the romantic notion of having a wedding reception to celebrate an Australian wedding. We arranged to meet.

"Can I bring a DVD player with me?" I asked. "So we can test out the plasma screen. We want to play a DVD

of the wedding ceremony."

"Of course," he said. And so I did.

We plugged cables into the plasma screen and the DVD player. The screen remained embarrassingly blank. We pushed buttons and plugged more cables into other orifices. The two devices refused point blank to talk to each other and continued to live smugly separate lives.

"I'll talk to the people we bought the screen from," said Preston. "Can I keep the DVD player for a while?"

"Of course," I said and went home.

Over the next few days Preston spoke to many people about his plasma screen. Experts came and scratched their heads at it.

"Should be quite straightforward squire," they said, one and all. And one and all they were wrong. Complex manuals were consulted. Wiring diagrams were downloaded from Japanese web sites. Video engineers were flown in at vast expense from all over the globe. Many cups of tea were drunk and a goat was sacrificed.

Eventually a special set of cables was obtained. Success! We had a DVD player and our New Zealand wedding reception went ahead as planned.

I spent the rest of my fortnight at home alternating between visiting Preston to swear at the plasma screen and visiting my sick cat to encourage him to get better. There was scarcely

time to shave. So I didn't.

You may recall that a few months ago Porgy The Cat broke his back leg and had to have the ball removed from his hip joint. He never really recovered from that operation and remained extremely reluctant to walk. He also became very antisocial, refusing to be picked up and cuddled. All he wanted to do was hide under cupboards. He didn't want to walk and when I tried to force him to, he hissed at me and once he tried to bite me. This was most unlike Porgy who has always been a placid, good natured cat.

I took him back to the vet. A thorough examination revealed that his other back leg was also broken and the

operation to remove his ball joint had to be done all over again. It is unclear as to whether or not he broke both legs at the same time (and we only spotted the first, worst break at the time) or if he broke the other leg at a later stage. Either way it was clear that the second break had been there for quite some considerable time. The poor animal must have been in horrible pain for weeks, or possibly months. No wonder he wanted to hide himself away.

"Look on the bright side," said the vet. "He's run out of back legs now. It can't happen again."

After this second operation Porgy was very fragile and very sick. I didn't really know how to look after him.

Harpo The Fluff Monster, our other extraordinarily bouncy cat, would pay no attention to Porgy's fragile state. He would only want to play. The thought of the damage he could do to Porgy by trying to play bouncy games with him gave me nightmares.

So Porgy went to Purrville to recuperate.

Purrville is the cattery just up the road and Porgy has had holidays there before. The owners, Dianne and Robert, are old friends of his and for the last month Porgy has been slowly recovering in the safe environment there.

At the beginning, he could barely walk. He limped slowly from his bed to

his food bowl and then limped slowly back to his bed again. His hindquarters looked thin and fragile and the newly operated upon leg hung at an unnatural angle, occasionally crossing over the other, stronger leg as he limped along.

Slowly he grew in strength and gained more control over his leg. He walked a little further every day. He started to take an interest in things again. When Robin and I visited him he would sit up in his bed and ask for a pat and he would purr and rub his face over our hands. Eventually there came a day when he heard our voices at the door, and he got up and limped towards us to say hello. That was a good day.

Then there was the day that I saw

him chase a moth. The moth ran away, and it ran faster than Porgy. Oh dear! Porgy still had a long way to go.

After a month, at the beginning of my second fortnight off work, Porgy came home.

"Hello," said Harpo, bouncing up to him. "Want to play a game?"

"Not just now," said Porgy. "Maybe later."

"I've got a catnip mouse and a stuffed snake that crackles and a blue rat!"

"No thanks," said Porgy. "Not just now."

Harpo lost interest and went to chase a ping pong ball.

Bess, Porgy's sister, sniffed him all

over from head to tail. She paid particular attention to his weak leg. Then they touched noses and Bess went outside.

We made Porgy comfortable, locked Harpo out of the room, and went to bed. The next day, Porgy was still asleep in his box – he hadn't changed position all night. But sitting close to him, where he could easily see it when he woke up, was a dead rat. Bess had brought him a welcome home present; a get well soon rat.

Last night, as I write this, Porgy voluntarily went outside for the first time in nearly five months. He sat and looked at the back door. He tried to get out of the cat flap, but he could quite

make it. He sat down and looked at the door again.

"Maiow," he said. "Mwaaa!"

I opened the door. He looked out at the world for a couple of minutes. Then he limped outside and, keeping very close to the house, walked slowly round the corner. Then he sat down to rest for a while. Then he walked a little further and sat down again. He progressed slowly, exploring as he went, smelling the night smells and giving every evidence of enjoying himself. Eventually he reached the front door and asked for it to be opened. I let him back into the house and he walked to his bed and flopped down, exhausted. He went to sleep with

a little smile on his face.

And so did Robin and I.

Alan At The Charge

The other week I had occasion to visit Auckland. I got to the airport with plenty of time to spare. I indulged myself with a glass of wine and a snack, and then an announcement rang through the lounge:

"Air New Zealand flight 475 to Auckland is now boarding through gate lounge 16."

We all went to the boarding gate. A nice lady confirmed the flight number on our boarding passes and we walked down the air bridge to the plane. The air bridge walls were painted black

with large white words written on them exhorting the All Blacks Rugby Team to victory. The black walls made the air bridge feel very gloomy and claustrophobic.

Rather surprisingly, the plane at the end of the air bridge was painted bright yellow and it had the words "Freedom Air" written on the side of it. Where was the Air New Zealand flight to Auckland? A smiling lady welcomed us on board.

"This *is* the plane to Auckland, isn't it?" asked the person in front of me, thereby removing from me the embarrassing necessity of asking the same question.

"Indeed it is," said the nice lady.

"Don't worry – we aren't flying to Brisbane."

I was pleased to hear it. I'd left my passport at home.

When we were all comfortably seated, and as the plane taxied to the runway, the nice lady made an announcement.

"Welcome aboard Air New Zealand Flight 475 to Auckland. Yes – we *are* going to Auckland, but we are going in disguise! Won't that be fun?"

So we had a stealth flight in camouflage colours. It must have worked, because we landed precisely on time and my luggage appeared within a few seconds of my arrival at the conveyor belt. Both these events

are absolutely unprecedented on real Air New Zealand flights. I wholeheartedly recommend disguised flights.

However because the flight had been so trouble free, I just *knew* that I was building up trouble for myself in the future. There's always some sort of catastrophe lurking malevolently whenever I travel away from home. I began to dread the week ahead of me.

The problems began when I plugged my mobile phone into its charger. Nothing happened. Not a volt, not even an amp made its way from the charger to the phone. Bugger! I plugged the charger into another socket. It didn't work; all the electrons

were on strike. I examined the charger closely. The end that plugged in to the phone only had one terminal on it. The other one had fallen off, never to be seen again.

Fortunately there is a mobile phone shop just up the road from our office. I went there the next day and explained my predicament to the lady behind the counter.

"Here's my phone," I said. She took it and plugged it in to a charger that was lurking beneath a table. Electrons raced eagerly down the wire.

"Well, the phone's OK," she said. "Have you got the charger itself?"

I showed her the charger and she scrutinized it with an intense scroot.

"There's the problem," she said triumphantly. "One of the terminals has broken away."

"Have you got a new charger I could buy?" I asked.

"No – we don't have any in stock. But I'll ring round and see if anybody else does."

She spent the next twenty minutes or so on the phone to various branches throughout Auckland.

"Have you got an Ericsson charger?" she asked.

"No," they said, one and all.

"Nobody has one," she said. She dived into a desk drawer and produced a copy of the yellow pages. "I'll try our competitors now."

She rang her shop's largest business opponent.

"Have you got an Ericsson charger?"

"Yes we have."

Rather glumly, she asked them to reserve it for me.

"You'll have to go and pick it up yourself," she said. "Because they are the competition, I can't really get the charger delivered here for you."

She gave me the address. All I had to do was get to the Downtown Shopping Centre before 6.00pm which was when the shop closed...

One of Auckland's more interesting features is the link bus. This bus travels on a circular route around the city. It

has a fixed fare (\$1.30) and passengers can get on or off at any of the stops along the way. At peak times, the link buses are scheduled to run every 10 minutes.

It is not always completely clear which point on its route any given bus has actually reached, or which direction it is travelling in, and it is not unheard of for people to spend more than an hour getting to a destination that is only five minutes from the stop at which they boarded the bus because they got on a bus going the wrong way. However once you have a degree of familiarity with the route, this problem generally disappears.

Recently, a high technology gismo

has appeared at the link bus stops. It is an electronic display which tells the eager hordes of prospective passengers how many minutes they will have to wait before the bus actually arrives. The display is updated at one minute intervals and absolute accuracy is assured, because each bus is fitted with a GPS device so that its position is always known and its speed of travel may easily be calculated.

I went to the nearest link bus stop and examined the gismo. The next link bus was 4 minutes away. I leaned against the bus stop to wait. Soon the display updated itself and I was horrified to learn that my bus was now 12 minutes away. Since a bus was

supposed to appear every 10 minutes, I found this less than reassuring. Glumly I watched the display count itself down at one minute intervals. Soon I had only 5 minutes to wait and I began to tingle with anticipation. But then the display shot up again to 15 minutes. My anticipation subsided. Obviously the driver kept getting his gears in a knot and the bus was travelling backwards. Either that, or it was trapped in Auckland's hideous rush hour traffic. I could be in for a long wait. I wondered if I would make it to the Downtown Shopping Centre before the shop closed.

Slowly the display counted down again. Eventually, after 15 agonising

minutes, the display claimed that the bus was now due. No sooner had the magic word **Due** appeared on the board than the bus swung round the corner and screeched to a halt in front of me. I got on and paid my \$1.30 and then I endured an excruciatingly slow journey into the city. Every traffic light was red, necessitating a long wait.

Sometimes the queue at the lights was so immense that we actually had to wait through two or three cycles as we slowly inched our way forwards. I imagined link bus displays all through the city displaying ever-increasing wait times, to the despair of chilly commuters queuing impatiently in the cold winter evening.

I looked anxiously at my watch. Would I make it in time? It was getting ominously close to 6.00pm.

At long, long last, after what felt like geological ages, the bus stopped by the Downtown Shopping Centre and I alighted. It was 5.55pm. The shop would close in five minutes. I hastened towards the automatic doors of the shopping centre, but they refused to open for me and I banged right into them and bruised my nose. I stepped back and waved at the sensor. It glowed a sullen red and refused to take any notice of me. Then I noticed the opening and closing times for the shopping centre displayed on a helpful sign attached to the door. The shopping

centre closed at 5.30pm.

But the people at the mobile phone shop had assured me that they were open until 6.00pm. What was going on? I got my phone out and turned it on with a small prayer to the Gods of Communication to allow me enough of a charge on the battery to make one phone call. The charge meter barely registered anything. Nervously I dialled the number of the shop.

"Hello?"

"Hi. You have an Ericsson charger reserved for me. I'm outside the shopping centre, but I can't get in because the doors are locked."

"No problem," said the cheerful voice. "I'll open them for you."

With a star-trek like *whoosh* the doors opened and I walked in. As I crossed the threshold, my cell phone turned itself off with smug finality. The battery was now utterly flat.

The charger cost me \$40. But it came complete with both its terminals and when I got back to the hotel and plugged it in, it worked perfectly.

Alan In The Pink

There are times when you wish with all your heart that you could melt into a puddle, ooze between the cracks in the floorboards, and trickle down deep into the bowels of the earth never to be seen again. You have said or done something so exquisitely embarrassing that you just **know** that people all over the world will be talking about it for years to come, and every time you walk down the street people will point at you and giggle.

When I was three years old I approached my grandmother, a

dinosaur lady with extraordinarily advanced wrinkles, and I asked her, "Nana – how old are you?"

"I'm 42," she said proudly.

I was aghast! I'd realised she was old. But I hadn't realised she was quite as ancient as that.

"Nana," I said, somewhat diffidently, "if you are that old, why aren't you dead yet?"

After a start like that, the rest of life can only be an anti-climax. Fortunately I'm not alone in my suffering. Sometimes I have watched my friends open their mouths and insert both feet up to the ankles. That's always fun.

For instance, every so often, when

the mood takes me, I go ten pin bowling. I'm not very good at it and apparently I have a somewhat unique style as I race up to the line and release the ball. My friends in England used to refer to me as the Sugar Plum Fairy which I am sure was a reference to the balletic grace and style that I brought to the game.

When we had finished bowling, it was our custom to retire to the pub, compare score cards, and analyse every roll of every ball to death. As the levels of Guinness dropped in the glasses, the volume of the conversation tended to rise.

My friend Jennifer was a lady with a screeching voice that cut right

through every conversation even at the best of times. After she'd soaked up a couple of pints, you could etch glass with her.

"Look how good my husband is," she declared, waving his scorecard in the air. "Look how well he did tonight."

We agreed that he had done very well indeed, rolling his ball and knocking down the pins like an automaton. Strike after strike. Classy stuff.

"He owes it all to me," howled Jennifer. "I taught him everything he knows. Before he met me he didn't even know which holes to put his fingers in!"

Every single conversation in the

pub came to an abrupt halt as Jennifer's words vibrated across every eardrum in the building. A cone of silence descended and every male face assumed the same thoughtful look.

Shortly before I left England to come and live in New Zealand, I visited the family home for the last time to say goodbye to family and friends. The village was all of a twitter – my parents had told everybody that I was off to the other side of the world and every single person in the village was amazed that I could even conceive of such a plan, let alone carry it out. Most of them didn't believe that there was any such place as New Zealand. Mind you, many of them weren't too

sure that far away, exotic places like London or Redditch existed either. And Wigan just had to be the product of someone's fevered imagination...

It was decreed that I had to have a haircut. It was not possible to visit other countries when you had untidy hair. What would people think? And so my mother made an appointment for me to visit her hairdresser. I turned up at the appropriate time and sat myself down in the chair. The lady whose job it was to do me up nicely approached and wrapped several bedsheets around me and then set to with the scissors and shampoo.

"Why are you going to New Zealand?" she asked. "It's such a long

way away."

I muttered something innocuous.

"We were so thrilled when your mother told us all about it," she said. "It's so exciting."

I muttered something else innocuous.

"I recognised you as soon as you walked into the salon," she said. "You look exactly like your mother."

"It's the beard," I said loudly. "It fools everybody."

There was a horrified silence. Everyone in the salon stared at me.

Fortunately I was 12,500 miles away when the story finally got back to my mother. I heard her shrieks of outrage as clear as a bell.

I soon settled down in New Zealand and began to make friends. I got invited to parties. Life was good. One of my friends was an extremely well endowed young lady who I will refer to as Sue, for that is indeed her name.

Sue arrived at the party wearing her new T-shirt. She was very proud of it, having only just bought it, and this was the first time she had worn it. The slogan on the front was quite witty, though the letters were somewhat distorted by her very shapely bosom.

"Isn't it great?" she said happily. "Isn't it just the cleverest thing you ever saw on a T-shirt?"

"Indeed it is," I said. "I wish I was blind so I could read the Braille

version."

Slow circles of silence spread around the room as people turned towards us. There were whispers as those who had heard what I said told the people who had missed it. The story quickly reached the furthest corner, and a whole room full of people stared in shock and horror at me and at Sue. It was a silence of the jaw-dropping variety and everybody was dropping jaws. The absence of noise was deafening.

Sue and I looked at each other and held a blushing competition. Sue won on points – even her toenails blushed.

She never wore the T-shirt again.
In the fullness of time I got a job

that required me to teach people how to look after their computers. One of my more boring courses involved running mysterious unix programs with names like *iostat* and *vmstat* and *netstat*. They gather performance statistics about the computer and when you analyse the figures you should be able to work out just where you are going wrong, and then you can tweak various system configurations and the computer's performance suddenly goes through the roof and everybody says:

"Wow! I've never seen a computer run as fast and as efficiently as this one is running!"

Your boss gives you a huge pay rise and for the first time in your life you

have so much money that you don't know what to do with it. You can't think of a single thing to buy. You've bought a home theatre and a plasma screen TV. You've bought an ipod and you've bought a cell phone with a built in video camera and a gadget for taking stones out of a boy scout's feet. You've bought everything you can plug into a USB port, including a USB memory stick in the shape of a barbie doll, and a USB vibrator with a built in french tickler. You've completely run out of ideas.

At least that's the theory. In practice, you gather the figures together, analyse them, tweak lots and lots of system configurations, and

absolutely nothing happens at all. The system continues to run like a dog, only now it's a Rhodesian Ridgeback instead of the Jack Russell Terrier it was last week and everyone is after your blood, and it doesn't look like you'll *ever* be able to afford the USB vibrator with a built in french tickler that you've got your heart set on, and even if you *could* afford it you'll never have time to play with it because you are too busy working 24 hours a day trying to keep the computer running at all, let alone running more efficiently. Oh God, I'm so depressed.

Anyway, the course was designed to teach people how to gather the figures together and, more importantly,

how to interpret them. We also deliberately set the computers up in, shall we say, slightly sub-optimal ways, so that we could see the kinds of figures that corresponded to a three-legged Rotweiler with mange.

One student, David by name, had been working with computers for almost as long as I had. He was old with knowledge, grey-haired and stooped with experience.

"Let's try this," I said to the class, and I instructed David to modify certain parameters and to compare the results he got with the unmodified machines belonging to the other students. I was aiming to have his computer slowly get worse and worse

as a backlog built up. The differences should be quite obvious.

"David," I said in ringing tones, "as time passes, does your performance degrade?"

Alan And The Empty Money Box

I've had a financial crisis every November since I was nine years old.

It all began the day my father took me to one side and said, "It's your mum's birthday soon. Don't you think you are old enough now to buy her a present?"

I hadn't realised that grown ups had birthdays. I thought that only children had birthdays. I knew that birthdays meant that you got presents (I got lots of presents on my birthday), but

children and adults were quite different beings and I thought of them in completely separate compartments in my head. I was sure that different rules applied. How could adults possibly have birthdays? I hadn't yet made the connection between birthdays and growing up. I didn't know that the more birthdays you had, the older you got. Indeed, I hadn't even realised that one day I would be a grown up. I thought that my parents were adults and I was a child and that's just the way it would always be.

So everything my father said in that little speech was very puzzling indeed.

"When's her birthday?" I asked tentatively.

"November 11th," said my dad.

"November 11th?"

"Yes," said my dad. "That's the day that everybody in the country wears a poppy. It's the day that all the towns in England have a celebration at dawn, and the Queen lays a wreath at the Cenotaph in London. You've seen it on the television."

"Gosh," I said, impressed beyond measure. "My mum must be really special if they do all that on her birthday."

"Yes she is," said my dad. "She's very special indeed."

My pocket money was only threepence a week. Even in 1950s England, you couldn't get anything

very elaborate for threepence. Mum would have to have a small present. I was sure she wouldn't mind. Perhaps I could afford a penny. That would still leave me twopence to pay my regular bills. Frozen jubblies and a potato for my potato gun, the occasional Lucky Bag.

A few days later, my mother took me to one side. "Your dad's birthday is coming up soon," she said. "Don't you think you are old enough now to buy him a present?"

Gosh! My father had birthdays just like my mum did. Was there no end to the wonders of the world?

"When is it?" I asked.

"November 13th," said my mum.

"Just two days after my birthday. That's why I find it so easy to remember."

Things weren't looking good. Two birthdays in the same week! Oh, no!

Perhaps I could manage one penny for mum, and one penny for dad, which would mean I had one penny left over to see me through the week. I wasn't sure my money box could cope with that degree of financial pressure though. It was starting to look like it would be a very lean week.

"And it's Christmas soon after that," said mum thoughtfully. "You'll need to start saving up for Christmas. Christmas presents are always bigger and better than birthday presents."

Christmas presents? What did that

have to do with me? Didn't Father Christmas take care of all that? I asked my mum how that worked.

"Father Christmas doesn't come for grown ups," she explained. "And so children have to buy presents for their parents to make up for it."

I was horrified! I'd never have any money of my own again if I had to make it stretch that far.

"But I only get threepence a week," I howled in anguish.

"Well, I suppose you could borrow against your future earnings," said my mum doubtfully. "But you might find the interest payments hard to manage on only threepence a week. Compound interest, of course"

"What's compound interest?" I asked. It sounded as if it might be, er, um, interesting.

"Einstein called it the greatest mathematical discovery of all time."

"What's an Einstein?"

I really didn't know very much at all when I was nine years old.

My teenage years passed in a haze of beer, exams and sexual frustration. All three things may well have been connected. Compound interest soon revealed its mysteries to me and I learned that if you divide 72 by the interest rate, the answer is the number of years it takes for your investment (or, more likely, your debt) to double itself. If you borrow \$2000 at 6% and

never make any repayments, after $72 / 6 = 12$ years, you will owe \$4000. It was all very depressing and not at all interesting. My parents continued to have birthdays far too close together for comfort and Christmas remained irritatingly close to the birthdays – bad planning on someone's part, I always thought.

University seemed like a great way of putting off the evil day of having to get a job. Students are notoriously poor. Surely to goodness I could be allowed to forget birthdays and Christmases?

"Buy a poppy for armistice day, guv?"

"No thank you."

"Your mum will never forgive you if you don't buy one. It **is** her birthday, after all."

"Oh all right then." I dug my beer money out of my pocket and clanked it into the collecting tin. The sacrifices I had to make! Being a student was very hard sometimes.

Eventually I couldn't put the decision off any longer. I had to get a job, and so I did. November rolled round with its normal irritating precision and I went to see the boss.

"I'm having my annual financial crisis," I explained. "Can you do anything for me?"

"As it happens I can, young Robson," he declaimed. "Walk this

way."

He lurched out of the office and I lurched after him. We both pretended that we had one leg shorter than the other and that we were hunchbacks. The old jokes are the best ones. We cackled as we lurched.

He took me to the computer room. "One of the operators is on holiday," he said. "If you stand in for him on the night shift, we'll pay you a miserable pittance and it will be much cheaper for us than getting in a contractor."

"It's a deal," I said, and for the next few weeks I worked my normal 9.00am to 5.00pm job and then I did the 5.00pm to 1.00am shift in the computer room. After a month of 16 hour days I

was a zombie – but a zombie who could once again afford birthdays and Christmas. I did this every November for eight years until I'd had enough and so I moved to New Zealand to escape from it.

When I arrived in New Zealand, I made an interesting discovery. Mum's birthday was on April 25th here. I never really worked out how they calculated that, but sure enough, every April the poppies went on sale and the dawn ceremony took place. I told mum and she was horrified.

"But that means I'll be seven months older than I really am!" she declared and nothing would shift her from this idea.

I hadn't been in New Zealand very long when my parents died. It was a sad time, but it proved to have hidden benefits. November ceased to be as financially frightening as once it was. This would never do – I was at a complete loss! Financial habits are hard to give up. I immediately arranged for my house insurance, house contents insurance and car insurance to fall due half way through November, thereby guaranteeing me my usual impoverished Christmas. As an added attraction, I got the AA to demand their membership fee in November as well. I paid all these bills with my credit card and then I spent the next twelve months carefully not paying the credit card

bills, so that I could be absolutely certain that when November rolled around again I wouldn't have paid for last November yet.

At last I could relax. Things were back to normal. Then I met Robin. "It's my birthday soon," she hinted one day.

"When?" I asked her.

"November 17th," said Robin.

"Perfect!" I cried. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," said Robin.

Alan And The Toaster

When Robin and I announced that we were getting married, everybody asked us what we wanted for a wedding present.

"Toasters!" I said long and loud.

And not one person took me at my word, except my mate Ian who gave us an ornamental, and therefore somewhat impractical, toaster.

Then, one recent morning, I put some breakfast bread in my reliable old toaster, the one that Noah gave me after the Ark came to a halt and the animals got off. He didn't need it any

more 'cos he'd taken the opportunity to pop down to the Ararat Market and buy a new one.

I turned the toaster on.

Have you ever noticed that toasters don't toast if you don't turn them on? Every morning I have to say "Toaster, I love you, you hot, sexy brute." If I don't say that, it just sulks and refuses to turn the bread brown.

But this morning, things were different. I turned the toaster on, and it exploded and burst into flames and that was the end of my breakfast. The explosion was loud, and it made me jump. The flames went out all by themselves after a couple of seconds. There was never any danger. But

morning starvation seemed imminent. Fortunately Robin had some spare cereal and the milk wasn't *too* rancid. I coped.

But now I've had to buy a new toaster.

My new toaster has deep slots for large bread and dynamic braces to hold the bread firmly in the optimum toasting position, no matter what its thickness. My new toaster has stay cool sides which are shiny silver so that I can stare into them and watch my reflection trim its moustache while the bread toasts itself perfectly deep inside the machine. My new toaster even has a stay cool bottom, exactly like my own. It has a button specially for

crumpets and another one for frozen bread. It is a prince among toasters.

I walked straight to a shop and five minutes later I walked out of the shop with my toaster neatly wrapped and a receipt stored safely in my wallet. It wasn't hard to do and it took almost no time at all. Why couldn't any of my friends do that? Could it be, perchance, that my subtle hints were not understood?

"Toasters!"

In future I shall eschew subtlety and employ only direct instruction.

"Toasters NOW!"

Alan And His Laughter

One day I was sitting in the classroom while my students worked their way through some exercises. Because it was getting close to the middle of the day, I suggested to them that once they had finished the exercises, they should probably go straight off for lunch. I reminded them of the time that the class would start again in the afternoon, and left them to it. I've always found this to be a successful tactic because it gives the

students an incentive to finish the tasks ahead of them. Their reward is an extra long lunch hour.

And so, in dribs and drabs, off they went for lunch.

By the time the official lunch time arrived, only two students were left. By coincidence, both were of Chinese descent.

At that moment an email arrived in my in tray. Naturally I read it. It contained a joke, and so I laughed out loud.

The two students looked up and for a moment I felt embarrassed. Teachers aren't supposed to do that sort of thing.

And then I realised that both of the students were looking at me with very

puzzled expressions on their faces. The penny dropped. I'd been laughing in English, with a Yorkshire accent, and they hadn't understood me.

Alan And His Windows

The cats and I often sit in our nice warm lounge watching Robin working outside in the cold, cold garden.

Sometimes she will notice us and she will say something to us in a normal conversational tone of voice and at a normal volume. We have no trouble at all hearing and understanding her. The words penetrate the glass in the window as if it was not there. So we say something back, the cats and I.

Robin stares at us in a bewildered way.

"?" she says.

We try again.

"Can't hear you," she says, and goes back to her weeding.

It would seem that the glass in the window is preventing our voices from reaching Robin. Sound travels *in* from the outside but does not travel *out* from the inside. Obviously all the windows in my house have had the glass installed the wrong way round.

I now intend to go round to each window and reverse its polarity by turning it through 180 degrees in its frame. That way all the sounds inside my house will go outside, and all the

outside sounds (including noisy cars and aeroplanes) will fail to enter the house, thus ensuring peace and tranquillity in all the rooms.

I will then sue the original glazier for failing to fit the glass the proper way round in the first place.

Harpo On The Roof

I was standing idly at the bus stop across the road from my house. I noticed something moving out of the corner of my eye. I glanced up and saw Harpo, my fluffy black cat, wander casually across the roof of the house. Then he sat down and looked smug. After a few moments, he got bored with this and he stood up and strode purposefully down to the gutter. Since the guttering is only thin plastic, it bowed under his not inconsiderable weight. That didn't seem to bother him though. He scratched underneath the

roof - there was obviously something very fascinating down there. He kept stretching hard in an attempt to reach whatever it was. The guttering shook. Then he crawled back up on to the roof, trotted a little bit further along and resumed his investigations.

I started to get a bit worried. He was right at the place where the electric power lines entered the house. The wires were very close to his head, and it wasn't long before he glanced around and noticed them. Oh dear...

I left the bus stop and went back to the house. I opened up the shed and got a ladder out. I anchored it firmly, well away from the power lines, and I clambered up it.

"Harpo, come over here you little ratbag."

"Oh hello," said Harpo. "Have you ever noticed these long thin things attached to the roof? I bet they go *twang* really nicely. Shall I give it a go?"

"I'd rather you didn't," I said. "How about coming over here so we can get down off the roof?"

"I don't think so," said Harpo. "That doesn't sound like much of an idea to me. I think there might be a dead bird just under here. I really ought to investigate more closely."

A big green bus sailed by.
Everybody in it stared at me.

I got down from the ladder and

went in to the house. I picked up a handful of cat treats and then went back up the ladder. Harpo was still playing by the power lines. I threw a cat treat towards him, hoping to entice him away from the power lines and closer to me.

Plink!

Harpo looked up at the noise.

"Oooh! A cat treat! I like cat treats." He trotted up to it and inhaled it. "Yummy!"

I threw another one.

Plink!

He trotted up again and delicately

licked the treat from the roof. "Oh gosh, that's good," he said. "Got any more?"

Plink!

He came closer, and I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

"Oy! Gerroff! Bastard!"

He disapproved, but all his kittenish instincts kicked in and he simply couldn't stop himself from relaxing and going limp. Unfortunately he's far too heavy to pick up solely by the scruff. I needed another hand underneath him in order to lift him up and hold him steady. Supporting myself firmly on the ladder with my third hand, I hauled him up off the roof

with my other two. He struggled and kicked a bit but I held on tight. I knew that if I let him go, I'd never get another chance. He'd be too wary.

Another bus went past. All the people in it were laughing their socks off.

I started down the ladder. Harpo wriggled and writhed and slashed at me with his claws. About half way down the ladder I lost my grip on him and he dropped with a thud into the garden. He picked himself up and had a brief wash.

"Don't think that's going to stop me," he sneered. Then he stalked off into the undergrowth and waited for me to leave so that he could go back to playing with the power cables.

I put the ladder away and locked the shed. There was a bus due. I left him to his own devices.

Warrant Of Fitness

It's that time of the year again, the time when the cats go to the vet for their annual Warrant of Fitness, colloquially known as a WOF. First problem, find the cats. Porgy was easy. It's been at least a year since he was last outside for more than five minutes. Two broken legs makes you appreciate the comforts of home. Harpo was easy too – I'd had a box of books delivered from Amazon that morning and Harpo spent the entire day asleep in the empty box. Like all cats, he cannot resist a box. No box ever remains unslept in.

Bess was the problem. She had taken a constitutional just after breakfast and there hadn't been any sign of her all day long.

We hunted high, we hunted low. Upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber. No Bess. So only two cats went to the vet. They howled in chorus all the way there.

The vet kicked their tyres and checked their oil pressure. Harpo was so fluffy that it took the vet about five minutes to find his exhaust pipe so that she could check that his thermostat was OK and he hadn't blown a gasket.

"I know it's here somewhere," she muttered, poking blindly under his tail with her thermometer. "Aha! There it

is!"

She gave them both a lube and a shot of antifreeze and pronounced them perfect.

We made another appointment for Bess.

"When would you like to bring her in?"

"Saturday morning is the only free time," I said.

"We've just introduced a \$5 surcharge for weekend visits."

"BLOODY CATS!"

When we got home, Bess was waiting patiently for us.

"Where's my tea?"

Alan And Robin And Their Car

Just before Christmas, our car got written off in an accident. Nobody was hurt, but the back of the car was caved in where the hoon ran into it, and the front was caved in where it hit the median barrier. The whole thing was a terrible mess.

After the excitement died down, I went to the tow yard to get all our personal belongings from the car. The usual polite and helpful towie was sitting behind the reception desk.

"You haven't got any tools with you, have you?" he asked suspiciously. "No ripping the radio out or any clever tricks like that. You can only take personal things that aren't nailed down."

"No," I said, "I haven't got any tools with me."

"Oi, Derek!" yelled the towie.

"What?" growled Derek.

"Go with him and show him where the car is. Make sure he doesn't nick anything he shouldn't."

Derek took me out to the car. It looked quite forlorn and I felt very sorry for it. I collected a rather pathetic pile of things. A torch, a book of maps, a tyre pressure gauge.

"There's a blanket in the boot," I said. Derek and I pushed and pulled, but the boot was too distorted and we simply couldn't get it open.

"Wait here," said Derek. "I'll get a crowbar."

He jammed the crowbar under the boot and heaved hard on it. With a shriek of tortured metal the boot opened up. It sounded like the car was crying. I collected the blanket and wrapped all the other things up in it and then I went home. I could feel the car staring after me as I walked away.

"Don't leave me! Please don't leave me. I'm hurt and I'm frightened."

It was worse than taking the cats to the vet!

To cheer ourselves up, we went shopping for a newish car. I began with a nostalgic visit to the outskirts of Wellington, to the car yard from which I bought my very first car after arriving here in New Zealand twenty five years ago. The car yard has gone through several ownership changes and name changes since then, but it still exists.

"That's a nice blue car," said Robin.

"Ah yes," said the sales thingy.

"The Norwegian Blue. Beautiful plumage!" The sun was hot and the sales thingy was oozing grease.

"Handles like a dream. You should see it drive through the pine trees around the fjords."

"I don't want a car that is pining for

the fjords," I said.

We moved on and outwards in ever increasing circles.

In the Hutt Valley we found a car yard with a human being in charge. Either that or he was just extremely good at his job.

"Take a look at this," he said. "It's got a spoiler!"

And it had.

"It's got an aerial that goes up all by itself when you turn the radio on."

And it had.

"And the aerial retracts when you turn the radio off."

And it did.

"It's got a cup holder."

It did too.

"Did I tell you it's got a spoiler? It's got a spoiler."

"I'll buy it!"

And I did.

It's an eight year old Nissan Primera. Sort of silvery. With a spoiler. Vroom! Vroom!

The Flight Of The Humble Me

I always arrive at the airport sufficiently early to allow plenty of time to catch my plane. I have to – if I didn't, events would conspire to prevent me from ever completing my journey.

Every time I walk through the sliding doors into the check-in area, I find that I have to stand in a vast and slowly moving queue that is wending its way towards the only premium check in window that is open. The

premium person currently checking in appears to have lost his Koru Club card. He has forgotten his name, and he didn't remember to put his underpants on this morning. The person in charge of the counter is being very patient – she fires powerful X-ray beams at his skull in case his name is engraved on the inside. The X-rays shoot through the vast, empty, echoing caverns inside his head and bounce around for a while. His eyebrows fall off and wriggle like demented caterpillars all over the desk. Men in white coats hold him upside down and shake him. Small coins, fingernail clippings, peanuts, hot wireless sets, aspirin tablets, the sandpaper sides of used matchboxes

and something that might have been castor oil fall out of his pockets.

Aha! A Koru Club card appears! It is picked up and examined closely and the premium person's name and number are punched into the computer which goes down immediately and is counted out.

The computer thinks carefully for a while and then tells the premium person that he does not exist. With an agonised scream, he melts into a greasy puddle and oozes into the carpet. The next person in the queue steps up to the counter and the whole rigmarole is repeated.

After several geological ages I finally arrive at the desk. I proffer my

Koru Club card. The lady examines it carefully.

"Did you remember to put your underpants on this morning?"

"Yes of course." They aren't going to catch me out that way!

"Did you pack them yourself? Do they contain any forbidden substances, sharp objects or weapons of mass destruction?"

I consider the contents of my underpants carefully. "Yes," I say. "No," I continue.

She taps my number into the computer and issues me with a boarding pass for the wrong seat. I politely point out that my preferred seat is a front aisle and that this

information is recorded in my Koru Club details.

"Sorry," says the lady. "Our check in computer system, isn't attached to our Koru Club computer system and it can't look those kinds of details up. Seats are assigned by a random number generator."

"Then why did I have to provide the information in the first place?"

"That's in case we ever manage to get the two computer systems to talk to each other. We haven't been able to make it work yet. But we've only been trying for twenty years. These things take time."

"Can I have my preferred seat please?"

"Of course you can."

She tears up my boarding pass and taps a few more keys. A new boarding pass is disgorged and a luggage receipt is issued. A luggage sticker and a priority tag are attached to my bag. I wend my way to the Koru Club lounge, where I indulge myself in hideous dissipations until my flight is called. I stagger bleary-eyed, weary and sore to my seat, and I strap myself in.

The plane takes off at least three quarters of an hour late. There are two passengers somewhere in the terminal who are ignoring all boarding calls. Eventually muscle bound security men track them down, club them into submission, bind them hand and foot

with rusty manacles and carry them on board the plane to the accompaniment of rousing cheers.

The safety demonstration is performed as we taxi to the runway. I pay careful attention to everything that is said. My closest exit is behind me. The bag on my oxygen mask may not inflate. There is a life jacket in a pocket under my seat. Should the plane crash and kill me, I must put on the jacket and I will come back to life. Makes sense.

We lumber into the air and bump and grind across the sky. For my reading pleasure there is a copy of the Air New Zealand magazine in the pocket of the seat in front of me. I read

it. It gives me no pleasure.

I drink lukewarm black sludge that pretends to be coffee. I refuse a sweetie. The plane lands and I make my way to the baggage claim carousel which whirrs and clicks as it spasms on its infinite journey.

Bags appear on the carousel, none of them mine. The first thousand or so bags that pass me on the carousel have no priority tags on them. The only function of a priority tag is to ensure that any bags adorned with one will be the very last ones off the plane. Koru Club members pay an annual fee of umpteen hundred dollars to enjoy the benefits of this service.

Eventually, after most of the people

have collected their bags and vanished in the direction of surface transport, I spot the distinctive yellow and green striped handles of my case. It sits forlornly with the rest of the priority luggage, coming off last. I pick my case up and head off to get a taxi. There aren't any taxis. The passengers who didn't have priority luggage have used them all up.

I always arrive at the airport sufficiently early to allow plenty of time to catch my plane. For my latest flight, I left home while the dawn chorus was still having a cough and a spit, prior to bursting into song. The plane was scheduled to take off shortly after dusk.

However this time it proved to be an unnecessary precaution. To my enormous surprise, I was checked in faultlessly within thirty seconds of arriving at the terminal. I was even assigned my correct seat without having to ask. And the secret sins available in the Koru Club were the most sensual and decadent that I have ever indulged myself with.

The plane took off on time and arrived at its destination on time. My luggage, positively festooned with priority tags, was the *very first bag to appear on the carousel*. There were so many taxis waiting for passengers that I had to fight the taxi-touts off with a stick.

Things *always* go wrong when I fly. This journey was no exception to that rule. What went wrong was that everything went right. It completely upset all my plans.

And so, as always, I arrived at my motel tired, and fed up with the inefficiencies of Air New Zealand.

3G Alan

Suffering from terminal technolust, I went to the Vodafone shop and said, "I want to buy a mobile phone with so many bells and whistles that I can't even pick it up without falling over."

"Fortunately," said the Vodafone man, "you've come to the right place. By a strange coincidence, that is exactly what we sell here. Our phone designers have all been recruited from the secret school that trains the designers of Swiss Army Knives. Have you any other, more specific, criteria?"

"Yes I have," I said. "It must be a

beam me up Scotty model, and it must have a keyboard I can actually see and use, as opposed to my current phone whose key caps are so minuscule as to be all but invisible, and whose keys cannot be pressed with the ball of the thumb. Only my thumb nail can reach the tiny, tiny keys and so I am obliged to maintain my right thumb nail in such a state and at such a length that I am in danger of being arrested for the possession of an offensive weapon."

I brandished my thumb at him and he recoiled from the nail in shock and horror. "You could use that for slashing throats!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed," I said. "I killed a mugger with it last Saturday, and it still had

such an edge left on it that I was able to use it to sharpen the pencil with which I wrote my statement to the police."

"What an inspiring tale!" said the Vodafone man.

"Show me some phones," I said, "and rescue me from my current horror."

There were several beam me up Scotty phones, most of which combined the functions of a phone with the ability to take photographs, and movies. Some were MP3 players and Organisers as well. One had a built-in electron microscope, an infra-red spectrometer and a gas-chromatograph, all suitable for performing DNA analysis. And as an added bonus it had

a coffee percolator, a gadget for opening wine bottles and a device for removing stones from the feet of Boy Scouts.

"I'll have *that* one!" I declared.

"A very wise choice, if I may say so sir," said the Vodafone man. "That model comes with a free trolley for pushing your phone from place to place as you walk around with it. The trolley fits nicely in a shirt pocket. It's a marvel of precision engineering!"

"Show me the details," I said, "and let me play a while."

"if u do this u cn snd txt msgs," he said. "& this btn wll add pxt of yr bum"

"!" I said. "I hve 1000s of uses 4 tht. xqs me I " 2 p"

"thru dor & 1st lft. rmbtr 2 flsh"

When I returned, we continued our exploration of the phone.

"It's a 3G phone," said the Vodafone man. "That means you get access to Vodafone Live!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a sort of cell phone version of the internet with a trimmed down web browser built in to your handset. It's major purpose is to let you download enormous quantities of soft porn, music and ringtones."

"What's the difference between music and ringtones?"

"Nothing at all!"

He pressed buttons with his thumb. The nail was trimmed close to the flesh

and there was no dirt at all underneath it. I was jealous.

Soon Vodafone Live! sprang into view. He pressed more buttons and Maxim TV asked me to confirm that I was over sixteen. Once I'd done that, it asked me to wait while my video downloaded. I waited, and soon scantily clad ladies with enormous boobs were to be seen leaping around my phone as they played tennis, volleyball and basketball. I think one of the basketball players threw her left breast into the net thereby scoring the winning goal.

"How about *that!*" said the Vodafone man.

The Vodafone Live! front page

seems to have been designed by a male chauvinist pig who speaks in txt. Under the heading **Pics & Images** I am offered the opportunity to view *Babes, Celebs, Cards....* Under the heading **News & More** I have access to *Weather, biz, Lotto...*

"What age group makes most use of cell phones?" I asked.

"Probably teenage girls," said the man. "They appear to have the phones permanently fixed to their fingers with superglue. Have you ever noticed them walking down the street, completely oblivious to their surroundings, flashing their thumbs for all to see and crashing into lampposts, telegraph poles, post boxes and passing

pedestrians? Have they no shame?"

"Why would teenage girls be interested in pictures of *Babes*? Why would they want to watch massively endowed mammals playing basketball?"

"Why not use Vodafone Live! to check your email?" asked the Vodafone man, subtly changing the subject.

"That's a wonderful feature."

"How do I do that?"

"You press these buttons 513 times in this sequence and then you walk across the room and lose the signal and have to start again."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "I've always wanted to do that." And so I gave the Vodafone man lots of money

and took my new phone home.

It's an extremely Shiny! phone and I'm overcome with happiness at owning it. But let's face it -- the thing is nothing but a toy. Virtually everything it does is something I neither want nor need. Doubtless I will make use of all its features at some point, simply because they are there. That's what technolust is all about, of course. We all want to live in a Dick Tracy comic at least once in our lives. I have two friends who make video phone calls to each other across their lounge because they don't know anybody else who has a phone capable of doing video calls, and they really, really, *really* want to play with video calls.

The phone came with Windows (spit!) software for connecting it to a computer. I do actually have a Windows (spit!) computer sitting in a dusty, neglected corner of my study. So I installed the software and clicked on its icon.

"Hello," it said. "Where's your phone?"

"Here," I said.

"No it isn't," said the software, rather annoyed. "Stop messing about. Where's your phone?"

"It's here," I said. "Look!"

"No it *isn't*," said the software emphatically. "Come on, you can't fool me. You haven't actually got a cell phone at all, have you?"

"Yes I have," I insisted. "Here it is." I held the phone up and showed the software that the phone was plugged in to the right socket and was switched on, ready and eager to communicate.

"Rubbish," said the software, sneeringly. "I know you haven't got a phone. Go away and don't bother me again until you actually get yourself a phone."

Then it performed an illegal operation and vanished up its own protocol port.

So much for that. I immediately connected myself to that there intraweb thingy, and went looking for Linux software that would talk to my phone.

"I'll give it a go," said one program.

"Actually I'm designed to talk to Nokia phones, but I'm sure your Motorola phone will do just as well. They're all the same really, you know."

I connected my phone to my Linux laptop and turned the phone on.

"Oh look," said the software. "A cell phone! Hello."

"Hello," said the phone, shyly.

"How about you give me your contact list?" asked the software, seductively.

"No problem," said the phone and promptly dumped its guts all over the disk drive.

The file the phone gave me was in a very odd format indeed. For a moment I thought there was no data in it at all

and that I was back to square one. But closer investigation showed that there really was information in there, it was just hiding. For those who care, the file was UTF-16 with 0xFEFF in the first sixteen bits.

Once I got that sussed, it was all completely straightforward, of course.

I soon realised that the data in the file was quite unsuitable for easy modification on the computer – the layout was rigid and complex, full of auto incrementing numbers used as keys by the phone and arcane text strings that defined whether the number was to be stored in the phone's memory or on its SIM card. Fiddling with it directly was far too awkward.

Never mind, it was nothing that two small C programs and three shell scripts couldn't fix, and it wasn't very long before I had my contact list in an easily editable file that I could quickly reformat into the idiosyncratic layout that the phone demanded. Now I could upload the data back into the phone any time I felt like it, at the touch of a button. No sweat. Problem over.

I opened up my new phone and I said, "Beam me up, Scotty."

And he did.

Alan And The White House

"Knock, knock!" said the front door.

"OK – I'll play your silly game," I said. "Who's there?"

"A little old lady," said the door.

"A little old lady who?" I asked.

"I didn't know you could yodel," said the door, smugly.

Annoyed with the door, I yanked it open, just to aggravate it, and to shut it up. Standing there in the entrance way was a little old lady, cunningly

disguised as a man with a clipboard.

"Hello," he said, "my name's Tim and I couldn't help noticing just how amazingly dirty the outside of your house is."

"Dirty?" I asked, puzzled.

"Dirty," he confirmed.

"Astoundingly so. But fortunately I have the perfect solution. In exchange for a brutally large sum of money and the soul of your first born child, I will clean all the dirt away."

"Show me this mythical dirt," I commanded him in regal tones.

"Observe this mould," said Tim, pointing at swathes of green stuff hanging from the guttering.

"You must have put that there

before you knocked on the door," I accused him. "It wasn't there last time I looked."

"When was the last time you looked?"

"Five hundred years ago, when I bought the house. The previous owner was extremely proud of how mould free his guttering was and he took particular care to point it out to me."

Tim poked at a singularly virulent looking sheet of mould. It swayed sickeningly back and forth, and then a rather annoyed looking BBC camera team under the direction of David Attenborough poked their heads out from behind the green curtain.

"Stop that immediately," said

Attenborough, rather peeved. "You're frightening the wood lice. And the spiders are none too happy either, not to mention the snails!"

"OK," I said, "I'm willing to concede that there is a bit of mould here and there. But surely the rest of the house isn't all that dirty?"

"Walk this way," said Tim, lurching in a hunchback manner towards the front garden. I lurched after him. Tim waited for me to catch him up and then pointed to the large expanse of somewhat dingy grey wood that made up the front of the house. "Shouldn't that be a clear, blinding white colour?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose it should," I

admitted.

Tim took out a small pickaxe and chopped fiercely at the grey grit. Lumps fell off and Tim picked one up. "Been building up for donkey's years, that has," he said. "Look here!" He pointed at something in the lump of grime that he was holding. "That's a fossil. I think it's an ammonite. It's beautifully formed. When did you say the house was last cleaned?"

"I think it was some time in the late Cretaceous," I said. "All right. You've convinced me. My house really does need washing. I suppose you'd better get on with it."

"Sign here," said Tim, proffering a piece of paper. "And here, and here and

here. And here as well. And if you sign here, I'll do your garage and the concrete paths at no extra charge. And if I'm in a good mood I'll do the garden fence."

I signed there, there, there and there. And there as well.

"See you Saturday," said Tim. And it was agreed.

Saturday dawned warm and sunny and semi-tropical. Layers of humidity caused gushing faucets to open in my armpits. I bribed the cats with dead rodents and in return they lashed their tails backwards and forwards, fanning cool air over my greasy body. Then they got bored and ran off with their rats. Crunching sounds could be heard

from beneath the sofa.

"Knock, knock!" said the door.

"Who's there?"

"Doctor!" said the door.

"Doctor Who?"

The door began to make noises like the BBC Radiophonic workshop.

"Shut it!" I yelled and then opened it. The door, now being open, stayed shut.

Tim was standing in the entrance way dressed from head to foot in rubber, leather and PVC. He was a fetishist's dry dream, though given the humidity and the hosepipe he was brandishing I suspected he would soon be a wet dream.

"Okay to start?" he asked.

"Go for it," I said.

He unpacked a compressor, attached things to it and turned it on. It roared into gleeful life and Tim started spraying high pressure water all over my house, my garden and himself. Enormous layers of steaming grot flew everywhere and it soon became blindingly obvious that my house had been dirtier than even Tim had realised. It also became clear to me that my windows and door were not waterproof. Niagras of filthy water streamed in; and for the next few hours, as Tim sprayed the outside of the house, I followed him around to corresponding positions inside the house armed with ever diminishing

piles of increasingly soggy towels as I vainly tried to cope with the influx.

Eventually Tim reached the extractor fan in the kitchen window. An extractor fan is simply a hole in the window with fan blades that screw all the kitchen fumes out into the wide world so that your neighbours always know what you are cooking for tea. A small roof sticks out over the top of the hole to protect it from the rain. This setup was no match at all for Tim's super high pressure portable storm, and a huge torrent of water erupted through it into the kitchen. Even though it wasn't turned on, the fan decided that it didn't like the situation at all.

"BANG!" said the fan, and let all

it's magic smoke out in a smelly cloud.

It is a well known truism that electronic equipment works by passing magic smoke down its wires. The plugs in the wall are a never ending supply of all the smoke necessary to keep the equipment going. When a gadget has used up all the smoke inside itself, it simply gets more from the supply in the plug. It's a completely closed system with one fatal flaw. If you ever let the smoke out, the equipment stops working immediately. My fan had lost all of its smoke because the thousands of gallons of high pressure water flowing through it had joggled two wet bits that weren't supposed to be touching into a loving embrace. The

excitement was all too much to bear; the fan died in mid-orgasm and the smoke blew everywhere. The neighbours complained immediately.

"Now we can't tell what Alan is cooking for tea. Our lives are ruined!"

"Sorry," said Tim, and he began to spray the security sensor lights which started to flash on and off in a very worried fashion. I immediately turned off the power to the lights in case they too decided to let their smoke out. Everybody knows that during the hours of darkness, security lights surround the entire house with an impermeable force field. If the lights ever stop working, the force field goes down and all the burglars that have been vainly

beating their swag bags against it slither in through the cat flap and steal your ornaments. I definitely didn't want that to happen!

Eventually the house was completely clean.

"Knock, knock!" said the door. It sounded grumpy.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Tim."

"Tim who?"

"Tim, the man who's been cleaning the outside of the house all day long," snarled the door. "Which other bloody Tim could it possibly be?"

"My, my," I said. "You do sound pissed off at something. What's wrong?"

"I'm soaking wet," said the door petulantly. "That's what's wrong. And the water's got into my joints and they're all swollen and painful. Humph!"

"But at least you are clean," I pointed out. "I could eat my dinner off you."

"Don't you bloody dare," said the door. "Come on, open me up and get rid of the soggy bastard."

I opened the door.

"Come and have a look," said an extremely moist Tim, and so I did.

He had done a magnificent job. The house gleamed as white as an Antarctic iceberg. It reflected the sunlight in a dazzling glare. The

concrete had stopped being muddy grey and was now pale and interesting. The brick path, small but beautifully formed, had lost all the weeds that had been growing up in the gaps. The garage looked piebald where chunks of old paint had fallen off under the pressure from the water blasting. I was very pleased indeed with the final result.

"What happened to David Attenborough and the BBC film crew?" I asked.

"Oh, they went next door," said Tim. "Have you noticed how incredibly dirty the house next door is?"

"Now you come to mention it," I said, "I have."

Alan Has An Adventure

"Let's go for an adventure," said Ross.

"What a good idea," I said. It was Thursday and neither of us was working that day. The thought of all our friends slaving away over a hot desk at their 9-5 labour made the idea of an adventure irresistible. They'd all be so jealous. So we got into Ross's car and drove off to the Wairarapa, an area that is largely *terra incognita* to me, though not to Ross.

It soon became abundantly clear to me that New Zealand road engineers have learned nothing whatsoever from the Romans. Roman roads start at point A and go straight to point B. The operative word here is *straight*. The Romans simply moved any lumps of inconvenient geography out of the way. New Zealand road engineers have a different approach. It would seem that they are paid by the corner, and the road to the Wairarapa must have made very rich men of all of them. It has almost no straight parts on it at all as it winds its way up the mountains and encircles every rocky outcrop.

"Bendy bits for the next 3 kilometres" announced a road sign, and

it wasn't lying. Three kilometres later, another road sign said: "More bendy bits for another 3 kilometres. Ha, ha, fooled you!"

The road is only a two lane highway. Woe betide you if you get stuck behind an overburdened and very slow logging truck. Overtaking is hard. There are occasional passing lanes, but they are very, very short; cunningly designed to disappear from beneath your tyres when you are less than half way past the lumbering leviathan. You stare helplessly at the oncoming traffic (which has no intention whatsoever of slowing down so as to allow you time to get safely back into your own lane). Massive acceleration and tight

sphincters are an advantage here. Fortunately Ross has a very powerful car, and both he and I were wearing brown trousers.

Once we reached the top, we stopped at the café for a look at the view. It is truly spectacular. You feel as though you are perched on the roof of the world, and the lands spread themselves out all around you, green and welcoming.

We got back into the car and began to wend and wind our merry way down towards the vineyards of Martinborough.

"There's a brewery somewhere in Martinborough," said Ross. "It might be worth stopping there and picking up

a few bottles. It's a very hard beer to find outside Martinborough itself."

"That sounds like a good idea," I said.

"It's on New York Street," said Ross. "Oh look – by a strange coincidence, here is New York Street!"

We stopped at the cross roads. New York Street stretched both left and right of us. There was no immediately obvious brewery to be seen.

"Hmmm," said Ross. "Let's try right."

We went right. There being no intervening geography now that we were out of the mountains, the road stretched infinitely straight and Roman-like in front of us. We drove

and drove and drove some more. Lots of vineyards, no breweries.

"Odd," said Ross. "Perhaps we should have gone left. Never mind. If we turn here, here and here we'll go round in a circle and we can try again."

About half an hour later, after passing several hundred vineyards, we arrived back at the crossroads again. This time we turned left.

"There's the brewery," said Ross triumphantly, and he turned into the suspiciously empty parking area. "I think it's closed."

"There's a sign in the doorway," I said. "I'll hop out and have a look."

The brewery was open to the public on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday

afternoons only. Today being Thursday, it would seem that beer was out of the question.

I carried this sad news back to Ross. Fortunately he is not the kind of person who shoots the messenger. "Looks like it's wine, then," he said phlegmatically and drove off down New York Street once again. "Here's a nice sounding road," he said and turned left into Princess Street. Left had been a good direction all day, so I was cautiously optimistic.

We chose a vineyard by the pragmatic method. That is to say Martinborough Vineyards was literally opening its gates to visitors just as we drove past them. So we screeched to a

halt, and then drove in.

The wine tasting room had large lists of wines for sale with the depressing words *Sold Out* against most of them. We were right at the end of the season (or, for those who see the glass as half full rather than half empty, right at the beginning of the current season, and the wine hadn't been made yet).

There were two *Pinot Noir* wines on offer. One was cheap and one wasn't.

"They're both from the same grapes," said the lady, "and both the same vintage. But they come from different barrels and they have quite a different taste as a result."

She was right – the wines were obviously closely related, but easily distinguishable by taste. She pointed at the one that wasn't cheap.

"That will be wonderful in about ten years time, and absolutely brilliant in fifteen, though it is quite acceptable now."

She pointed at the cheap one.

"That's a good quaffing wine and it's probably at its best now. It isn't really suitable for keeping and is unlikely to improve."

Being a man who requires instant gratification, I bought two bottles of the cheap one. If it turns your teeth pink and makes you fall over, it's a good wine in my book. I'm a philistine.

Ross bought two bottles of a dessert sticky. He didn't taste it because he'd had it before and so he knew just what he was buying. I had a taste, and it was like drinking liquid gold; sweet, fulfilling and head-blasting. I was sorely tempted to follow his example and buy some of my own, but I had no money left.

The hour being still somewhat pre-prandial, Ross and I decided to walk around the town of Martinborough. This takes approximately five minutes, but it is not without interest. There is a small, beautifully maintained park in the town centre which has a war memorial in it. Nothing strange about that – but what *is* strange is that it

memorialises the Boer War and the men of Martinborough who died in it. I don't recall seeing a memorial to that sad little skirmish in any other New Zealand town. Indeed I would have assumed that the Boer War really had no part to play in the history of this country and I would not have expected that any New Zealand town would have sent its men off to fight and die there. But nevertheless, Martinborough had. It was a strangely sad and sobering thought.

The town has an art house cinema which shows films I've never heard of that (presumably) have writing on the bottom of them. This is the very last place that I would have expected to

find such an establishment and I have no idea how it manages to survive, but it is housed in a smart building so it must be paying its way. Perhaps TV reception is bad in Martinborough. And maybe all the vintners are French and Czechoslovakian.

Lunch! My companion and I decided upon a smart looking restaurant. I ordered squid and my companion ordered sausages. Wise choices, both of them. We also found that the restaurant had a selection of locally produced beers, so the day was not as wasted as we had at first thought it might be. I drank something light and frothy and my companion drank something dark and frothy. Both were

toothsome and refreshing.

My squid was lightly fried in several spices (I think I identified cinnamon, not a spice I would have expected, but it worked very well). It was served with a green salad and a caterpillar – though I was unaware of this extra gustatory treat to begin with, for it was not mentioned on the menu. Obviously an oversight.

It came to my attention towards the end of the meal. I poked at something which I thought might be a small piece of rolled up lettuce. I attempted to unroll it, but it refused to unroll. I pushed it to the side of the plate, and noticed that it appeared to have lots of feet. And a head. With eyes in it.

Unblinking.

"I think that might be a caterpillar," I said.

My companion inspected it cursorily. "Added protein," was his expert judgement. He speared a sausage. It wasn't green. I found that strangely soothing.

"Protein," I agreed, "but not in a form that I care for."

I vaguely recalled other small pieces of rolled up lettuce that I had examined with a much less jaundiced eye earlier on in my meal. Could that emphatic hint of bitter sweetness in one mouthful have been caused by something other than a chef with rather too heavy a hand on the spice spoon?

Hmmmm.

I took my plate back to the counter and showed the lady the caterpillar. She turned pale and dashed into the kitchen with my plate. Almost instantly a grovelling chef appeared.

"Sorry. So sorry. It should never have happened. So sorry. We'll refund your money, of course. So sorry."

Pink and peeved, he returned to the kitchen. Faint roars emerged in which the words: "...and examine every single salad green with a microscope before you put it on a plate..." could be distinguished.

Meanwhile the lady behind the counter had a problem. The till was computer controlled and while it was

more than willing to open up in order to receive money, it stubbornly refused to open up in order to dispense it. That was against the natural order of things. The lady desperately pushed buttons and pleaded with the computer, but the till remained firmly closed. Eventually she had to call the manager who poked at special managerial keys. The computer was unimpressed and paid no attention. The till drawer remained closed. The manager gave up.

"We'll enter it as another meal," she said. "At least that way the drawer will open for me! I'll make a manual adjustment in the accounts when we cash up tonight."

She rang up another squid and

caterpillar. "Ping!" said the computer, and opened the drawer. The manager took my money out and returned it to me.

"Time to go home," said Ross.
So we did.

Alan Goes Out For Dinner

It has been swithening (*sic*) for what seems like considerably longer than the traditional forty days and forty nights. The ground is saturated and squelchy and, in many low lying places, under several feet of water. Chimneys poke pathetically through the waves. Large parts of Wellington have fallen off the cliffs onto other large parts of Wellington; generally on to the roads that wind alongside the sheer cliff faces. Traffic inches slowly

past the blocked lanes. Tempers are frayed and journeys that usually take minutes start to take hours or even days. Drivers die of hunger and thirst, trapped in never ending queues.

Desiccated driver corpses festoon the sides of the roads.

"Come for dinner," suggested Ross.

"What a good idea," I replied. Since I intended to drink a smidgeon, I called a taxi. The taxi turned up in good time, and I climbed in to it, clutching my smidgeon. We set off on our journey.

Then we hit the queues and began to crawl along. I telephoned Ross.

"There's been another slip on State Highway Two," I said, "and I'm stuck in the queue. Expect me when you see

me. I might be some time."

"Ah," said Ross. "That might explain why Laurie and Annette haven't turned up yet either."

"Indeed it might," I said. "I'll give them a ring."

No sooner said than done.

"Hello," I said. "I'm stuck in a queue."

"Funny that," said Annette. "So are we! I think there must have been another slip."

"Oh well. I'll see you at Ross's place sometime or other."

I settled back and gloomily watched the meter ticking over far too rapidly for comfort. Dollar after dollar added itself to the already frighteningly

large total.

The taxi was in the right hand lane, working on the theory that when we reached the slip, it would be the left hand lane that was blocked since the left hand lane was closest to the cliff face. For a while the cars in the right hand lane did indeed move faster than the cars in the left hand lane and I experienced the giddy thrill overtaking, even though we were only moving at 3 kph. One of the cars just ahead started to look vaguely familiar and once we got alongside it I rang Laurie and Annette again.

"If you glance to your right," I said. "You will observe me sitting in a taxi that is about to overtake you."

They both glanced to their right, and we waved enthusiastically to each other for a while. Then boredom set in and we stopped.

For no immediately apparent reason, the traffic in the left hand lane suddenly speeded up and Laurie and Annette pulled ahead of my taxi. I watched their rear lights vanish into the murky rain. The only amusement left to me now was to return to watching the enormously large number on the taxi meter get even larger. It reached a number that approximated New Zealand's national debt and we were still stuck in the traffic. I began to wonder just how large the taxi fare would eventually become. Perhaps it

was time to sip a smidgeon...

We arrived at the slip and, as expected, the road reduced itself to a single lane. The left hand lane was completely blocked by what appeared to be an entire pulverized mountain. Seven maids with seven mops were slowly sweeping it away. I was absolutely certain that half a year would not be nearly enough time to clear it away. I shed a bitter tear. I am the walrus. Coo coo ca choo.

The number on the taxi meter was now so large that the entire contents of Fort Knox could not have paid the fare. And anyway, the taxi driver's pockets weren't deep enough to store that number of dollars. The figure

asymptotically approached infinity and the taxi driver began to giggle like a maniac as we slowly edged past the vast broken bit of Wellington.

The sides of the meter were visibly expanding now as the display area got larger and larger in order to accommodate the increasingly ridiculous total. The meter was occupying most of the front of the taxi and there was scarcely any room for me and the driver any more. The display indicated that my debt was now a googolplex dollars. Next stop infinity plus one. Then something went *sproing!* deep inside the mechanism and the meter instantly shrank back to its usual size as the total

wrapped round and the numbers started counting up again from one dollar. I was reprieved!

Once we got past the slip, progress was fairly rapid and we soon arrived at Ross's house. The taxi pulled up behind Laurie's parked car and the driver and I looked at the meter. The final total was \$65.

"Give me \$45, and we'll call it quits," said the taxi driver.

"Sir, you are a scholar and a gentleman," I told him, for indeed he was. And I still had a smidgeon left!

Weird Topologies

Every week I go to Woolworths to do the grocery shopping. Most weeks I wander up to the delicatessen counter and purchase a few hundred grams of this and a few hundred grams of that. Sometimes a few hundred grams of the other. All relatively fat free, of course.

The nice lady behind the counter weighs my choices accurately, presses a magic button and prints out a price tag. She picks up the plastic bag with the goodies in it, twirls it, twiddles it, makes a magic gesture and sticks the price label to it. I take the bag from her

and place it in my trolley. In the fullness of time I pay for it and take it home.

Round about lunchtime, fancying a sandwich, I take the bag of goodies out of the fridge. And every week I discover that the simple plastic bag with the turkey pastrami (or whatever) in it has turned into a Klein Bottle. I can see the turkey pastrami. I can feel the turkey pastrami through the convoluted folds of the bag. What I can't do is remove the turkey pastrami from the bag. No matter how I twist and turn the plastic, no matter which orifice I stick my hand into, the turkey pastrami remains just out of reach on the other side of the plastic. I follow

every fold of the bag with my fingers and there is no doubt at all that the bag has become a three dimensional mobius strip. It only has one side and one edge and one surface. And the turkey pastrami isn't on any of them. It's hiding in plain view on the side that doesn't exist. And as I do every week, I have no alternative but to rip the bag to shreds. This collapses some sort of wave function, and it forces the bag to re-enter the same space-time continuum that I inhabit. Once more the bag has an inside and an outside; dimensions that previously were sorely lacking. The turkey pastrami is now available for my sandwich, but I'm too exhausted to eat it.

It's extremely frustrating!

Last week I was in Woolworths again. They had a vacancy in the delicatessen. There was an advert sellotaped to the glass:

Wanted -- someone to serve on the delicatessen counter. Must have an in depth knowledge of exotic meats and a passion for pork. Must be turned on by turkey, and must cherish chicken. Must be good with people. Must have an advanced degree in topology.

AIDS *Memoires*

We've had the cats vaccinated against feline AIDS. It's a relatively new vaccine which was developed in America. It's an offshoot of research into human HIV/AIDS. Perhaps one day there will be a human vaccine as well...

Anyway, feline AIDS is endemic in New Zealand and about 20% of the feline population has it. It is passed on through bites and scratches. Since my cats are constantly fighting with each other, as well as with any other moggy that wanders into view, it seemed a

wise precaution to have them vaccinated. Harpo is particularly prone to fighting. Sometimes when you stroke him, you can't feel anything except half-healed scabs! We were told that the AIDS vaccine is only about 80% successful, but nevertheless we decided that any protection was better than no protection at all.

The initial treatment involves 3 injections given at 3-weekly intervals. After that, there's an annual booster. Since we've got three cats, we've spent a grand total of about \$500 on the first three injections for each of them. Cats really are very expensive animals sometimes.

Each time we've taken them in for

an injection, the vet has given them a general checkup, just to make sure they are in good health. He put Harpo up on his bench and poked and prodded a bit. Then he stuffed a thermometer up Harpo's bum and waited a few minutes. While he waited, he made casual conversation with me.

"Should be an exciting week, next week," he said. "The World cup final."

I made non-committal noises, being less than interested in football. The vet took the thermometer out of Harpo and examined it closely.

"And there's tennis as well," he said. "In fact, it's the Wimbledon final today."

"How did you figure that out just by

reading a thermometer?" I asked him,
greatly impressed.

Is This A Record?

When I was a small child I had a wind up gramophone and three records. They had been given to me by my parents who seemed to feel that I lacked music in my life. I quickly developed enormously large biceps in my right arm as I enthusiastically wound up the gramophone and played my three records hour after hour after endless hour. Looking back, I marvel at the patience of my parents – they must have been so sick of hearing those same three songs all day long. But I never tired of them.

My three records were; *The Ballad of Robin Hood*, *The Swiss Canton Polka*, and *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*. The Disney movie of *Davy Crockett* starring Fess Parker was very big that year and you could buy imitation coonskin hats and plastic smooth bore muskets in the toy shops. The records played at 78rpm and each song lasted about two minutes. The records were made of a very brittle plastic (probably bakelite or some close relative). You had to be careful not to drop them or they would shatter into unplayable fragments.

Logic suggests that there must have been songs on the other sides of these records, but for the life of me I cannot

recall what they were. I only ever played the real songs on the front of the records.

I would remove the record from its paper jacket and place it on the turntable. Then I carefully put a steel needle into the pickup and tightened the screw that held it in place. I cranked the handle, started the turntable and placed the needle gently on to the lead-in grooves. Music would pour from the cabinet. There were two little doors in the cabinet. When you opened them, the music played louder. I always played my records at maximum volume with the cabinet doors wide open.

I had to change the needle after

every couple of plays – they soon became blunt and the quality of the reproduction suffered. Because I played my three songs so frequently, I was always running out of needles and I had to go to the shop to buy more. They came in tiny tins which my father used for keeping small screws and tacks in after I'd used up all the needles.

Eventually it dawned on me that my three records were not the only records in the world. If I saved up my pocket money I could buy others. The shop where I bought my needles had a huge rack that covered the back wall and the shelves were jammed tightly with paper-jacketed 78s. All I had to do

was ask the shopkeeper for the record I wanted...

I bought *I'm Not A Juvenile Delinquent*, by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. I recall that the song opened with the inspiring lyrics:

woh woh woh woh
woh woh woh woh
woh woh woh woh woh
woh woh woh
woh woh woh I'm not a
juvenile delinquent

When pocket money was tight, I could go to Woolworths. They had their own record brand called Embassy which sold for about half the price of real records from a real record shop.

Anonymous singers who sounded almost but not quite unlike the real thing sang cover versions of currently popular songs.

Shortly before I became a teenager (though not a juvenile delinquent) records shrank, became much less brittle and had to be played at 45rpm instead of 78rpm. My gramophone could not play these new fangled things. I needed a record player – a fantastic electronic gadget which meant I'd never have to crank the gramophone handle ever again! And it had a stylus! No more needles; which was just as well because they were getting harder and harder to find. The shops weren't stocking them any more.

Perhaps the needles weren't even being manufactured any more. Certainly 78s weren't being made now. You couldn't buy them for love nor money. The record shop moved its shelves closer together to make room to jam more of the smaller records in.

The record player had a very Heath-Robinson contraption that you could attach to the turntable. It allowed you to stack records on top of each other. As the current record finished playing, the pick up arm would move aside, a new record would crash noisily down from the stack and the pick up arm would automatically move over and play it. Luxury! You could lie back and listen to the music for at least twenty

minutes without having to get up and change the records.

My record player was able to revolve its turntable at 78rpm, but that was not recommended. Though sometimes it was fun to play my 45s at the faster speed. It added a whole new dimension to the sound of the songs. But the stacking gadget wasn't good for the brittle 78s themselves so if I really wanted to listen to *The Swiss Canton Polka* I had to disengage it and return to the old fashioned one-record-at-a-time method. Naturally I sneered at this old-fangled approach to music and it wasn't long before I completely stopped listening to my 78s. They gathered dust in a cupboard along with

the gramophone. Eventually they disappeared from the house, never to be seen again.

Today I rather regret that, though at the time I didn't give it a second thought.

No more Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers! Now I could listen to Tommy Steele singing *Little White Bull* In retrospect, I'm not sure that was an improvement, though Tommy Steele did seem to know a lot more words than Frankie Lymon did..

Soon another technological marvel manifested itself. They managed to squeeze extra songs onto the 45s. For a small increase in the price, you could buy an extended play record (EP) with

two, sometimes three, songs on each side. Ordinary 45s, with a mere one song per side, were now called singles.

I began to notice some big records in the record shop where I bought my singles and my EPs. They were much larger even than the old 78s. They were called Long Players (usually abbreviated to LPs) and they had lots of songs on them. They also moved very slowly, only $33^{1/3}$ rpm. You could easily move your head around in time with the record and read the words on the label as it revolved; though if you did too much of it, your neck unscrewed and your head fell off. I bought *The Shadows Greatest Hits* and I still possess it today, the only record

that has survived from my early childhood.

When I was twelve the world changed forever. The number one song on the hit parade was *Please, Please Me* by the Beatles. It was the only topic of conversation at the dinner table that lunchtime at school. I still remember the electric excitement of it. Nothing was ever the same again. Popular music stopped being trivial and it turned into art.

We had a record player in our school common room. We only had one permanent record, though others came and went as we brought in our newest acquisitions and then took them home again. The one constant in our

lives was Otis Redding *Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay*. To this day, I remember every word and every note.

By my late teens, I had become aware that things called stereos existed. For some time, the small print on the covers of the LPs (we called them albums now) had been proclaiming that:

This stereo record can be played on mono reproducers provided either a compatible or stereo cartridge wired for mono is fitted. Recent equipment may already be fitted with a suitable cartridge. If in doubt consult your dealer.

Nobody I knew had a stereo. They

were far too expensive and we regarded them as unattainable luxuries. Then my Uncle bought one. I think he probably had to re-mortgage his house to afford it. It had a separate amplifier with far too many knobs, and red lights that glowed malevolently. My uncle sat in a strategically placed chair that nobody else was allowed to sit in so that he could get the full benefit of the stereo effect. He had a record of two people playing tennis and he would sit for hours listening to the ball bounce between the speakers. He also had an album of steam trains with pretentious sleeve notes assuring you that if you listened carefully you could hear the wind on the left side of the carriage as

the train passed through a culvert. He would sit with a great big grin all over his face as the *Flying Scotsman* chuffed through his living room. He bought frighteningly technical magazines full of impenetrable articles about sound spectrums that warned of dire consequences if you mis-matched your impedances. The articles had graphs and tables. And sine waves. His conversations consisted entirely of woofers, tweeters and flutter.

I bought a reel-to-reel tape recorder. I borrowed records from my friends and made tapes that I could listen to. Initially I recorded the tapes by simply putting a microphone in front of the speaker of my record

player. My early tapes had music overlaid with the doorbell ringing and the dog barking at it. Sometimes you could hear my mother vacuuming the lounge.

"You need a cable to connect the tape recorder to the record player," advised my Uncle. "That'll block out all the extraneous sounds that the microphone picks up. Make sure the impedances match."

I found this advice puzzling. Partly because I'd never heard anyone say "extraneous" before, and partly because the record player had nowhere to plug a cable in. I informed my Uncle of this and he turned up with a soldering iron, a socket and a magazine with a circuit

diagram in it. He cut a hole in my record player and dripped solder into it. He plugged one end of the cable into the record player and the other end into the tape recorder. Then he departed in triumph.

I made more recordings. They all had a deeply irritating mains hum behind the music. I asked my physics teacher about it.

"Sounds like the impedances don't match," he said. "The symptoms are typical."

At university I met someone who had build his own stereo from the ground up on the theory that was the only way he'd ever be able to afford one. When he finished, he had a button

left over that he couldn't think what to do with, so he wired it up so that it swapped the channels when you pushed it once and put them back to normal when you pushed it again. He claimed that this added a fine level of unpredictability to the stereo effect, particularly if he got someone else to press the button when he wasn't expecting it.

I saw him once, with stereo headphones clamped to his head, listening to something terribly avant garde. I pushed the button to swap the channels and his eyes crossed. I pushed it again and they went back to normal.

One day I went out to buy a tape for my reel to reel recorder. Somewhat to

my surprise, the shop where I usually bought them didn't have any.

"I can order them specially for you," said the man. "But we don't get much demand for reel to reel any more so we don't carry any stock. Everybody uses cassettes these days."

"What's a cassette?"

He showed me one and I was overwhelmed by the cleverness of it. Such a tiny thing, a self-contained unit of tape that you just clicked into a suitable gadget. It was obviously far superior to my old fashioned reel to reel tapes, which now looked clunky and badly designed to my suddenly more modern, more sophisticated eyes. The recorder was soon confined to a

cupboard along with all its tapes. I never saw it (or the tapes) again.

I bought a small cassette deck which appeared to be happy with the impedances of my very cheap stereo (they'd come down in price a lot by then) and I listened to my new hi-tech miracle. Every so often the motor in the deck would grab hold of the exposed tape in the cassette and suck it deep inside itself, wrapping the tape tightly around its capstans and slowly grinding to a halt. Sometimes it would emit a puff of smoke. When this happened I had to dismantle the deck, remove the tape, throw it away, remantle the deck and then go out and buy a new tape to replace the one the

deck had eaten.

The cassette deck seemed to have a special hatred of Freddy Mercury. It ate three copies of Queen's *A Night At The Opera* before I gave up and bought the LP instead. That proved to be a good thing in the end, for the LP was not the usual boring black groovy thing, it was brilliant white. What a clever idea! It remains the only non-black record in my collection.

Cassette tapes were very irritating things to record on to. They were invariably too long or too short for the LP you were recording, which meant that either you couldn't fit the LP on to the tape or else you had far too much tape left over and you had to listen to

lots of empty silence at the end of each side. Furthermore they deteriorated over time and began to sound quite muddy. They left flakes of themselves over the playback heads and no matter how much isopropyl alcohol you scrubbed on the heads, the brown shit-stains never came off. This too contributed heavily to the muddy sound.

One of my cassettes grew a fine multi-coloured mould inside itself, which seemed a suitable accompaniment to the psychedelia recorded on it (*At The Mars Hotel* by the Grateful Dead). Perhaps I should have smoked the mould. Cassettes were very convenient, but flawed and I

began to regret the loss of my old reel to reel. LPs continued to be the medium of choice for the connoisseur...

By now I too was reading magazines with articles that had sine wave diagrams in them. There was much talk about balancing the turntable arm correctly, particularly after replacing the stylus. The counterweight had to be adjusted so that the stylus barely kissed the surface of the record. Too much weight on the stylus would damage the surface and degrade the sound. You could buy special scales and microgram weights to get it just right. Real enthusiasts had stroboscopes to check the wobble on

their turntables and microscopes to check the wear on the stylus. I'd had many of my LPs for decades and when I played them on my increasingly more sophisticated equipment, they gave the impression that they'd spent their lives being played with six inch nails on a series of cheap groove-straighteners. People sneered at the sound quality. I considered downgrading my speakers, but I couldn't bear the social shame of it.

One day I went out to buy a record. Much to my surprise, the display space for records in the shop was a mere fraction of its former size. The bulk of the shop was taken up with small, round silver things about half the size

of a 45rpm single. They were compact disks. In the fine old tradition of EPs and LPs, they quickly became known as CDs, though most shops advertised them as CD's, a practice which has cost them dear over the years since I never, ever under any circumstances buy CD's. I only buy CDs.

It was the kiss of death for the record. It had a good run for its money but it couldn't survive the sheer convenience of the CD which required much less storage space than a record, and didn't need cosseting and cleaning like a record. Furthermore a CD player didn't need a new laser every year like a turntable needed a new stylus. Hi-fidelity weenies who listened far more

to the sound than they listened to the music complained that the sound quality of a CD was inferior to that of the LP, but nobody paid any attention to them and they took their stroboscopes, microscopes and scales home in a huff. They continued to write erudite articles about impedances and draw pictures of sine waves, but nobody read the articles anymore. Except for small, speciality labels, nobody made records any more either..

As time passed, it became harder and harder to find a replacement stylus for my turntable. They vanished, just like the needles that had preceded them. Speciality shops charged grotesque sums of money for the styli

their idiosyncratic owners secreted in hidden drawers. Soon even that hidden supply dried up. Like everybody else, I gave up and bought a CD player.

Nowadays I play my records only at rare intervals, only on special occasions. When my one remaining stylus deteriorates beyond bearing, it will be the end of an era. I look forward to that day with dread.

The arrival of home computers in my life gave me an interesting challenge. Wouldn't it be a good idea to catalogue my library and my record collection? Rising to the challenge, I have done just that. I find that I have 218 LPs and 128 CDs. Only half a dozen cassettes have survived and most

of them are unplayable for one reason or another. Cassettes have not aged well. These are not large numbers, compared to some other collections that I know. But they are respectable numbers nonetheless.

At least half my CDs are duplicates of my LPs. Since I so rarely play the LPs, and since so much of my favourite music is to be found in my LP collection, I have spent far too much money buying the records over again in their new format. When CDs are replaced by whatever technological innovation comes next, I will probably have to do it yet again. I find that I bitterly resent this.

Furthermore many of my LPs have

never been re-issued on CD and probably never will be, given the plethora of new material. So they cannot be replaced and when I no longer have the equipment to play them, they will vanish from my world.

I also find it annoying that CDs, whose production costs are fractions of a cent, are sold in the shops for many tens of dollars. The mark up is gratuitously huge; and only a tiny percentage of it is made up of royalty costs. I don't begrudge the royalties to the artists, but I do begrudge the obscene profit taking by the production companies.

I've seen several generations of music players come and go. And every

time one of them is superseded, some of the music dies. I've lost *The Swiss Canton Polka* and Frankie Lymon and whatever was on my reel to reel tapes. Soon I'm going to lose Country Joe and the Fish and John Renbourn.

Of course, the arrival of home computers has made it trivially easy to convert old media into new media. It would be very simple indeed to turn my surviving records into mp3 files and CDs.

But that's illegal. So I can't.

The Haul Of The Mountain King

Porgy the Cat has a cold, wet nose. Every morning at 6.00am he thrusts it in my ear and snorts loudly. I ignore the slimy trail of cat snot trickling moistly over my earlobe and pretend that I am still asleep. Porgy burrows down in the bedclothes and pushes his nose up my left nostril. Companionably we share bodily fluids for a short while and Porgy purrs like a train, perhaps with happiness, perhaps with hunger. It's hard to tell.

"Where's my breakfast then, you lazy sod?"

Ah. Hunger it is then.

Bess sits at the foot of the bed, far too ladylike to bully me. But when she sees that Porgy has succeeded in arousing me she politely asks:

"Breakfast for me too? Now!"

Hearing lots of activity in the bedroom, Harpo swaggers in on all four feet, his tail to attention. He catches sight of my shoes and is distracted by the laces. He chases them for a while, then he kills them. He thrusts his head deep inside my right shoe and inhales luxuriously. His head emerges with a great silly grin from ear to ear.

"Aaaaahhhh!" he sighs luxuriously.

"That really sets me up for the day. All I need now, to make a perfect day absolutely pluperfect, is breakfast. How about it?"

Bess growls deep in her throat. She regards Harpo as a threat and doesn't even like him to be in the same room as her.

"Go away!" she says forcefully. But she's only a girl, and Harpo pays no attention.

I crawl out of bed and the cats dash ahead of me. Harpo waits in ambush just outside the bedroom door and as I stagger sleepily past he swipes at my leg. There may or may not be claws. It depends how long I've kept him waiting. I scratch his scabs to

encourage him. Harpo is mostly scabs; his hobby is fighting.

There is chaos in the kitchen. Cats intertwine between my legs. Cats sit beside their bowls telling me to hurry up. I pick up the feeding bowls and get the biscuits. Normal biscuits for Harpo and Bess, special diet biscuits for Porgy because he sleeps all day and all night (except for mealtimes) and is mildly spherical as a result.

Heads down, tails up. Silence descends except for the sound of chomping. Porgy watches the other two carefully. Perhaps they'll leave some biscuits and he will get a forbidden treat. I set off towards the shower, and Harpo raises his head.

"Hey," he says, "You've studied chemistry haven't you?"

"Yes," I admit warily.

"How many atoms are there in a guacamole?" asks Harpo

I think about it.

"I don't know. How many atoms *are* there in a guacamole?"

"Avocado's number," says Harpo smugly, and goes back to his breakfast.

After my shower, I have breakfast. There are no cats to be seen, for which I am grateful. I have my own breakfast. Toast and marmalade. I like marmalade. Alan's psychedelic breakfast. Then I go and wait for a bus.

I stand shivering at the bus stop. A wind from the antarctic blows up my

trouser legs and freezes my naughty bits. I wonder if the lady standing next to me will massage them so as to prevent frostbite. Unfortunately I suspect she will not. Wind ripples are running hither and yon across the long grass on the verge as the wave front curls and shifts. The timetable insists that the bus should have been here ten minutes ago, but buses are always late in cold weather. The wind makes their tyres sluggish.

The lady standing next to me has icicles dangling from her nostrils.

"How do you keep your hat on in such a strong wind?" she asks me.

"Clean living," I tell her. "And extremely strong follicles."

A bus appears. It stumbles slowly to the bus stop and I get on.

"I don't think the bus before this one ever came," I complain to the driver. "I've been waiting for ages."

"This *is* the bus before this one," the driver tells me gloomily. "I'm running a bit late. Too much frost on the fetlocks."

I spend a cold day teaching. When I get home in the evening, Robin shows me the solar lights that are growing in our garden. They soak up sunshine during the day, charging their batteries. During the night they glow, lighting up the whole garden. Planes *en route* to the wide, wide world take diversions and fly low over our garden so that the

passengers can enjoy the view. Robin waters the solar lights assiduously and feeds them solar light food. She's obviously doing something right, for they are thriving – nothing else in our garden grows quite so well. The gnomes are thrilled.

Yes – we have gnomes living in our garden. I'm not quite sure when they moved in (Robin is in charge of the garden; I seldom go there). They seem quite happy; presumably we have provided them with all the comforts of home. They can fish, chase frogs, and bathe each evening in the glow of the solar lights. They are getting quite tanned. We call them the garden gnomes of Zurich.

Robin has a new toy for the garden. It's a big noisy device. You put trees in the top of it and wood chips fall out of the bottom. Very useful. Fortunately Robin has access to a lot of trees, so now we are awash with wood chips. A gnome drowned in them last night.

To pass the time, I have been honing my haiku. A haiku is a Japanese verse form. It has three lines and seventeen syllables. The first and last line have five syllables each and the second line has seven syllables. In those seventeen syllables you are supposed to say something pithy, and perhaps even profound. Instead of forcing you to read the last few thousand words, perhaps I should

simply have written these one hundred
and nineteen syllables:

Porgy and Bess

sleep

I open up the cat
food

Two cats
inhaling

Harpo has a fight

Crusty scabs adorn hi
head

Happiness is gore

Wind in the

morning

A frozen

moment in time

Buses die of cold

Alan reads a book

The words swim roun
on the page

A book reads Alan

Chlorophylliac

Robin mulches a
big tree

Photosensitive

Solar cells unfold
petals

Chlorophobic
chips

Tanned gnomes are
drowning

Here is a
haiku
Compressed
essence of
static
Prose under
pressure

Old Hundredth

"Now then Alan," said James.

"About this laptop computer of yours."

"Yes," I said suspiciously, "what about it?"

"As I recall, it started off with two serious problems," James continued. "You couldn't get the sound card to work, which meant that you couldn't listen to music on it, and the disk access was so slow that you couldn't watch DVDs on it either."

"True," I said, because it was.

"Well," said James, "it was so easy to get the sound working, that I really

think it's time we addressed the last issue. You can't leave it only half fixed. It's very important that we get it to a state where you can watch DVDs."

James is a man who lip-syncs Muppets. Such men are deserving of respect. So I didn't laugh at him.

"It wasn't all that easy to get the sound working," I protested. "As I recall, you made me download heaps of arcane software from dusty, seldom-visited web sites. I had to blow the cobwebs off before I installed it and the wires going in to my modem were clogged with dirt for months. It cut my internet connection speed almost in half!

"And the instructions for using the

software were written by Zen-Buddhist monks who were high, or possibly low, on mind-altering substances of indescribable complexity. They all stared intently into each others belly buttons and copied down what they saw scribbled on the fluff. All the sense was hidden in the spaces between the words. It took weeks for me to understand what it wasn't saying, and then implement it.

"And even when I *did* finally get the sound card to work, the only noise it made for a month was the sound of one hand clapping. That's a very boring sound, you know!"

"That's right." James nodded happily. "Easy."

Men who lip-sync Muppets also have access to esoteric dictionaries which contain strange definitions of words like *easy*.

I accepted the inevitability of my situation. "What do I have to do?" I asked.

"I'm glad you asked me that," said James. "Here is a Fedora Core 5 live CD. Use it well and wisely, grasshopper."

A live CD, for those of you who may not know about these things, allows you to run another operating system on your computer without making any changes to the original operating system on your hard disk. Everything runs directly from the CD.

You can try things out and experiment wildly in the sure and certain knowledge that if everything dies a horrible death because of your extreme tweaks and twiddles, all you have to do is turn off the power and then boot up as normal from the hard disk and all your catastrophes go away as if they had never been.

I took the Fedora Core 5 live CD away with me to experiment with.

The next day James asked me: "Well? How did it go?"

"I have bad news," I said and his face fell.

"Oh dear," he said, "that's a shame."

"It worked perfectly," I said. "The disk responded as never before. It ran

at super fast speeds. Cerenkov radiation flew from the slots in the side panel as data was read and written faster than the speed of light!

"I could play DVDs at twice the speed that they ran on the commercial DVD player plugged in to my television set.

"The sound card worked brilliantly. It played me the music that was played at the birth of the universe. Do you know what music everybody listened to on the day when the Big Bang first exploded?"

"No," said James.

"*Bohemian Rhapsody*, by Queen," I said, and James frowned, as well he might.

"All the hardware on my laptop responded to Fedora Core 5 as if it had been granted a new lease of life," I told him, gloomily. "It was absolutely perfect."

"Why is this bad news?" asked James, puzzled.

"There is no upgrade path from my current operating system to Fedora Core 5," I said. "I am going to have to install it from scratch and re-tweak and re-twiddle all the many thousands of customisations that I set up in order to give myself warm fuzzies whenever I log on. It's going to take weeks."

"Cheer up," said James. "It could be worse. You could have had to lip sync a Muppet instead!"

I bit the bullet that had been shot to me.

"What do you want me to do?" asked the install software.

"Blow everything away and install yourself," I told it. Obliging, it did exactly that. While it was thus occupied, I painted a wall and watched carefully as the paint dried. There was a particularly interesting smear in the top left hand corner which appeared almost to spiral in on itself. It developed a fascinating crust that spread from the edges in towards the middle where it formed an irregular, crystalline skin...

"I've finished," said the install software. "Do you want to have a look

at what I've done?"

I looked and it was good. The display on the screen was crisp and clear. The network connection was fast, and the sound card played sweet music. I tweaked a bit here and smoothed out a rough edge there. I clicked on a convenient icon which allowed me to set the background picture to a map of Middle-Earth and I clicked on another icon that encouraged me to put a rude message designed to frighten away trespassers on to the login screen. I played with a few more little customisations and then went on to the next major step in the process...

All the documentation that I'd read insisted that after I'd installed the

system from the original distribution disks I should immediately attach myself to the internet in order to update the software. A lot of the packages had changed in the months since they were first issued. Many bugs had been fixed and exciting new ones had been introduced. Security updates that would stop people from hacking in to my system needed to be installed. It all sounded terribly thrilling and important and necessary.

I decided to go in to the office in order to make use of their high speed internet connection. I plugged everything in, switched everything on and incanted the correct magic spell. Things started to happen.

"I will now download and update 387 software packages," said the laptop, smugly. "This will take me about twelve hours, give or take a few minutes, so I suggest you go to the pub."

Twelve hours and several pints of Guinness later, things stopped happening and I made two interesting discoveries.

The first discovery was that all the documentation I'd read had lied to me – it had insisted that the default was to save all the newly downloaded files on the local drive in case I ever needed them again. In fact, the opposite turned out to be the case and after all the software had been updated, all the

downloaded files were then carefully deleted. If I ever *do* need any of them in the future, I will have to download them again. Humph!

The second, and more important discovery, came when I was smitten with a sudden desire to change the picture in the background. I'd been using the map of Middle-Earth as a background for several years on several different computers and suddenly I was bored with it. I clicked on the same convenient icon that I'd used when I originally set the background picture. A message box appeared on the screen.

"The program that sets the background picture has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the

developers or cancel the operation?"

Hmmm. Odd. I think I'll inform the developers.

"The program that informs the developers that the program that sets the background picture has crashed, has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

I'm sure the developers would like to know about that one!

"The program that informs the developers that the program that informs the developers has crashed, has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

This could be the start of an infinite

series. I think I'd better stop. Perhaps I'll change the pointer that the mouse uses, instead.

"The program that changes the pointer that the mouse uses has crashed. Would you like to start it again, inform the developers or cancel the operation?"

Over the next hour or so I discovered that none of the housekeeping functions in the pointy-clicky environment worked any more. I couldn't change the picture on the desktop; I couldn't change the theme or the keyboard characteristics. I couldn't change anything at all, really. Those operations had all worked perfectly before I'd foolishly updated the system

with all the latest and greatest versions. Now they all crashed as soon as I started them up. Bugger!

For the next week, most of the housekeeping GUI functionality remained flat, busted, broke while I considered what to do about it. It was very annoying. I could do all the *proper* computing that I needed to do inside the pointy-clicky area, so that was all right. I just couldn't change the way things looked and felt any more, and that was becoming very frustrating.

Eventually I reached a point where I simply couldn't stand it any more. I decided that I no longer had any choice. Since everything had worked perfectly on the initial install, I would

just have to downgrade my system again and reinstall all the original pointy-clicky stuff from the distribution DVD.

"You want me to do *what?*" asked the software installation program in horror. "You've got to be joking! You want me to ignore all my instincts and downgrade all my shiny, new, up to date software?"

"No way! Sod off!"

But I insisted and eventually it gave in and did what I told it to do, complaining all the while that I was causing it much unnecessary pain and suffering.

And now the pointy-clicky admin stuff is all working again. Phew!

I suppose the moral is, if it isn't broken, don't fix it. I really should have known that all along. I can't think why I didn't...

Alan And The Tooth Fairy

Every few months I visit a charming young lady and pay her very large amounts of money. In return for this emolument, she rubs her breasts all over my head. Strangely this gives me no pleasure.

You see, the charming young lady is simply using my head as a convenient support over which she angles her body into the position that gives her the optimum leverage for attacking my wide open mouth with

instruments of torture. She is my dental hygienist, and we have an uneasy relationship.

I visited her again this month.

"Hello," she said, "how are you?"

"Fine thanks," I said. "How are you?"

She looked a little puzzled at this response. I think she was expecting me to say, "I' ine, acks. 'ow ah oo?"

Members of the dental profession are only completely comfortable when talking to supine people whose conversation consists simply of vowels and glottal stops; the only sounds that can be made when your mouth is wide open and full of sterile metal.

Complete words that are filled with

consonants are not something that dentists hear very often. Consequently they seldom know how to react when such words are spoken to them.

"Lie back on the couch," she said.

I did so, and she slipped some safety glasses over my eyes in case a randomly flung tooth should chance to crash into an eye socket and blind me for life – a scenario I find extremely unlikely since I always screw my eyes tight shut in order to avoid examining the various scrapers, wrenches, gougers, drills, saws, chisels and hammers too closely.

"Open wide!"

I opened wide. She thrust her left breast into my right ear and began to

scrape and saw and drill and hammer at my teeth with exuberant enthusiasm. I really like seeing people who enjoy their work so much. Within limits, of course.

"Hmm," she said as she lined up a chisel and hit it a couple of times with a large yellow hammer, "that's a particularly resistant lump of plaque." She changed the angle of the chisel slightly and hit it again, but the plaque remained stubbornly in place. "I think it needs extreme measures," she decided.

She attacked my tooth with a pneumatic drill, not dissimilar to those with which council workmen dig up roads. She drilled a deep hole, stuffed

it full of dynamite, attached a detonator and led wires back from the detonator to a switch. She went behind a screen and flipped the switch.

BANG!

Plaque crashed down in a huge avalanche from around my teeth. She came back from behind the screen and said, "Rinse out, please."

I rinsed out my mouth and spat into the bowl. A big, nasty lump the size and shape of a small alp went *clang!* into the bowl and cracked the porcelain from side to side. I lay back down and opened my mouth. She repositioned her breasts and resumed scraping.

Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle.

Faint abdominal rumblings came

from some hidden place deep within the hygienist. The noise made her vibrate pleasantly. She ignored the sounds and carried on scraping and, being a gentleman, I too did my best to pay no attention to the incipient volcano standing beside me.

GURGLE, GURGLE!!!

Some things simply cannot be ignored.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That's my tummy rumbling. It always does that at this time of day."

I couldn't help myself, and I started to laugh. That set her off, and we giggled companionably together for a time.

"I think my tummy needs some

food," she admitted. She stared vacantly into space, obviously dreaming about roast turkey and stuffing; caviar and chips. I took the opportunity to rinse and spit. She'd been very heavy handed with her power tools and there was quite a lot of blood. I stared at it with gloomy suspicion.

"I could cook you a black pudding," I suggested.

Alan And Robin Break Christmas

Christmas day. I snuggled up to Robin and whispered, "Merry Christmas."

Her eyes were open but everything else was closed. I could tell she was still fast asleep when she replied to my greeting by saying, "It'll be floating water that we're swimming in competitively; so that we get better times."

"Yes, dear,' I said.

Her eyes fluttered closed and

everything else started to open up for the day. When she was finally awake she said, "I dreamed that you just won lotto. The winning numbers were 1 2 3 4 5 6 and another number I can't remember. Perhaps it would not be a good idea to buy a lotto ticket based on that predictive dream."

"I agree," I agreed.

I got up and fed the cats their Christmas breakfast of turkey giblets, which they adored. Then I had a shit, a shave, a shower and a shampoo. Except I missed out the shave. Steaming, I wandered back to the bedroom.

"Christmas presents," I said.

"Smoked salmon. Strawberries."

Robin got up and followed the

ablutionary trail I had blazed, except that she missed out the shave as well. And then, at almost the exact second that she rinsed away the last foaming bubble, the water went off. Every tap was dry.

Oh, No!

I rang the council.

"Welcome to Wellington Council. Merry Christmas. You are speaking with Colin."

"Merry Christmas, Colin," I said. "I'm calling from Newlands. Our water supply appears to have been turned off."

"Ah yes," said Colin. "We've had a burst water main in Glanmire Road."

"Glanmire Road?" I said. "That's

where I live!" I suddenly felt very guilty. Perhaps it was all my fault. Had I shattered the pipes with the detritus from my sweaty armpits?

I looked out of the window. Dimly, through the grey mist and drizzle of the typical Christmas weather, I could see a large man wearing fluorescent yellow trousers. He was poking gloomily at the road with a big stick. Soon he was joined by an even larger man wearing an orange jacket. They scratched their heads at the problem, normally an infallible solution, but this time it didn't work. I explained what was happening to Colin.

"That'll be the one," said Colin. "It's a big burst. The water will be off until

at least one o'clock this afternoon and maybe later."

There are only two things a man and a woman can do together when they have no water on Christmas Day. So we did both of them.

And once we'd finished drinking the bottle of champagne and opening our Christmas presents, we watched the television with our legs crossed, in the sure and certain knowledge that we only had one flush left...

I decided to start writing this article.

Frederik Pohl once said that professional writers write every day. High days and holidays, birthdays and Christmas days. And days when you

are so hungover that your eyebrows bleed. Today matched many of those criteria. I felt encouraged.

I also had the shining example of Dave Cutler to inspire me. Dave, for those of you who may not know, was the designer of Microsoft's NT operating system. In an article I read once, he claimed to be very, very proud of the fact that there was some code that he'd written in the NT kernel which was dated Christmas Day. I'm quite sure that yuletide programming effort had a lot to do with the way that the NT operating system worked. I wonder if he drank a bottle of champagne before he wrote that particular block of code?

Obviously there is something very special about stuff you write on Christmas day. This sentence, for example, was written on Christmas day. And so was this one. But his one was written the day after. I think the difference is quite marked, don't you?

Alan And Robin Go Bush

When one is in Karori, one must visit the Karori Nature Reserve. So we did.

It's a small area bounded by a pest proof fence. The fence goes deep underground so that the vermin can't dig underneath it; it has a fine mesh so that they can't get through it; and it has a complex slope at the top so that anything that climbs up it won't be able to climb over without falling off.

Building the fence must have been

a job and a half in itself. It runs firmly up some very steep hills, and it pays little or no attention at all to the local geography. There is not so much as a zig in it, and scarcely even a zag. The fence is so straight, it could have been built by the Romans. I shudder to think what it must have cost, and how difficult it must have been to build, given the extraordinarily steep terrain that it marches through.

Once the fence had been put in place, the area inside it was cleared of pests – no rats, no stoats, no ferrets, no mice, no possums. Native flora and fauna were then introduced into the reserve and left to flourish. For a modest fee, people can wander round

inside the fence and if they are lucky they get to see and hear lots of amazing nature.

Just outside the entrance gate is a small fenced area containing a table. On the table is a plastic rat which is sitting up on its hind legs snarling at the visitors.

"Ahhh," said Robin, stroking it lovingly, "it's so cute."

The Karori Nature Reserve lady glared at her.

"This," said the lady, "is the kind of pest that has decimated New Zealand's wild life over the years and we simply don't want it, or anything like it, in the reserve. So before you go through the gate, can you all please examine your

bags very closely to make sure that there are no rats or mice or pussy cats hiding in them."

We examined our bags.

"Do people really come here with rats and mice and things in their backpacks?" I asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "It's quite common – usually they are people who've been on a camping holiday or something, and things sneak in to their bags without them knowing anything about it! We've had quite a few shrieks and screams from visitors when the unexpected nasties run out of their bags."

"And is the fence successful at keeping the reserve free from

predators?"

"Pretty much," she said. "There's certainly nothing large and vicious in there. No rats or cats or possums; the fence does a wonderful job of keeping them out. We do have some mice though, and we suspect they've been carried there by birds flying over the fence with their prey in their talons. When the birds settle down for a good feed, some of the not-quite-dead-yet mice manage to escape. We've got traps set and hopefully that will stop them from getting to be too much of a nuisance."

"Are there any birds strong enough to fly over the fence with a rat or a possum in their talons?"

"I hope not," she said grimly, "but I'm suspicious of the morepork."

"The morepork?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It's New Zealand's native owl. Do you know why it's called a morepork?"

"Because that's what its song sounds like," I said. I was quite certain of this, having heard the story many times. "*morepork. morepork.* I've heard them singing."

"Well, that's part of it. But there's a bit more to it than that. Pork really *is* their favourite food and they'll go to any lengths to get hold of a pig. All the neighbouring farms have to keep their pigs in morepork-proof sties. But sometimes the pigs get out, and several

times I've seen a giant morepork flying over the pest proof fence with a squealing, wriggling pig clutched in its talons. Fortunately moreporks always seem to eat the entire pig, including the squeal. We've never even found any bones! But one day one of those unfortunate pigs is going to escape, and then we'll have a real problem on our hands as the reserve fills up with feral pigs."

Solemnly, she handed me a bowl of salt. I took a large pinch and returned the bowl to her.

Once our bags had proved to have no cats or dogs or dragons or pigs in them, we were allowed into the reserve proper. It's just bush, with paths

through it. The creatures are not captive, they are not in cages, so it's pure luck whether you see anything on your visit. The guidebook admonishes you to keep quiet and listen closely. Often the first intimation that something is sneaking up on you is a rustling in the bush, or a chirrup from up a tree. And if you pause and look carefully, you might just spot something looking back at you.

Of course sometimes it's easy.

"Chirrup, chirrup, tweet tweet tweet," sang something.

We looked around eagerly, and a tui came crashing through the canopy, singing at the top of its voice. It made a bee-line for a nice looking tree and

came in fast for a three point landing. It grabbed hold of the branch, and engaged full reverse thrust on all its engines to soak up the momentum. But I think its instruments must have been faulty because it fell off the branch and tumbled head over heels all the way down to the ground.

And as it fell, it said: "SQUAWK!", and we all knew exactly what it was saying. Some words are part of a universal language.

It landed with a thump and struggled to its feet. It seemed a bit dazed. It shook itself, looked a little embarrassed and preened all its feathers very thoroughly. Then it said: "I meant to do that, you know. It was

all done on purpose."

It flew back up into the tree and settled down on a better branch.

It is quite obvious to me that tuis are descended from cats, and they still retain much of their feline nature. I do so enjoy seeing evidence of evolution in action.

We saw a tuatara as well, though being a lizard and not a bird, it didn't sing any songs. Indeed it didn't do anything except sit in a hole and look at us.

"People," it said to itself. "I don't like people. Noisy things. Far too active. I think I'll move away from them."

"Look, look," we said to each other

excitedly. "It's a tuatara. Look!"

"Any week now," said the tuatara, "once I get a round tui. I mean tuit."

"Quick, quick, where's the camera? Gimme the camera!"

"Definitely going to move," said the tuatara. "They've got a camera for goodness sake. Every picture steals a bit of your soul. I can't be having that. I've got to move."

"Is it real? It isn't even blinking. I'm sure it's a plastic model."

"Yep!" said the tuatara, "I'm definitely going to move somewhere else. Plastic model, indeed! I've never been so insulted. Moving. Moving..."

The connection between the tuatara's brain and its muscles is

notoriously slow, and by the time we left it in order to go in search of further excitement, it hadn't even blinked yet, let alone moved its body. However when we came back about two hours later there was no sign of it. So obviously the messages had finally got through to the muscles in the legs. Either that or a Karori Ranger had come by when we weren't looking, and had picked up the plastic model and put it elsewhere in the reserve to fool another batch of tourists.

One of New Zealand's more amazing creatures is the weta – a fearsome insect that is named after the famous digital effects studio that did all the computer graphics for

the *Lord Of The Rings* movies. The weta is best described as a cross between a cockroach and tyrannosaurus rex. They are quite harmless (though the larger ones *can* give you a painful bite). However they have all the aggressive instincts of their T. Rex ancestor. They are one of the very few insects that will actually chase a human being, though they seldom know what to do with one when they catch it. Most New Zealanders, suitably bribed with beer, can tell you horror stories about being trapped in a corner of the garage by an angry weta out for blood.

The Karori Reserve has built quite a lot of hotels for its wetas where they can live a life of unbridled luxury and

decadence. A weta hotel is simply a dead tree with lots of holes going deep inside it. Such holes are very attractive to wetas. A section of the tree has been cut in half lengthways, thus exposing the interior of the holes. Transparent plastic has been set into the holes so that the viewing public can see inside them. Then the tree is put back together again, complete with a set of hinges so that one side can be swung open by any passing visitor. In the fullness of time, wetas will move in to the hotel in search, perhaps, of unbridled luxury. Wetans enjoy being waited on hand, foot and antenna. Visitors to the Reserve can open up the hotel and stare through the plastic at the wetas as they

consummate their passions.

I swung open the door of a weta hotel. A dozen or so wetas, who were sitting around a table in the bar drinking vintage champagne, waved their antennae furiously at me.

"Shut the bloody door! The sunshine is blinding!"

"Sorry," I said.

"Hey Jimmy, can your mother sew?" asked one particularly vicious specimen.

"Yes," I said, puzzled.

"Then tell her to stitch this, Jimmy!" And he head butted me through the plastic.

I staggered back, shut the hotel door and left them to their carousing. It

was time for me to go home and do some carousing of my own. Someone had moved the plastic rat at the entrance and now it was staring longingly into the reserve that it was forbidden to enter.

"Poor little thing," said Robin, and she gave it a final stroke as we left.

Alan And Robin Get In Hot Water

Bang!

I was half asleep, so I just turned over in bed and punched the pillow even though it hadn't done anything to me. I can be cruel like that sometimes. The pillow took it uncomplainingly, wimp that it is. Robin came in to the bedroom carrying a bowl of cereal.

"Did you hear a bang?" she chomped.

"Maybe," I said.

"I thought it came from the

kitchen," she said, taking another mouthful of cereal. "I checked to see if it was my coffee exploding in the microwave and I opened the cupboards to see if any shelves had fallen down. But it wasn't any of those things."

There being no obvious signs of terrorist activity in any room in the house, we decided the bang had probably come from next door. Robin went to work and, in the fullness of time, I went for a shower.

About half way through my shower the fog of sleep began to lift from my brain and I recalled that about twenty years ago the immersion heater in my hot water tank exploded. It had said "Bang!" in much the same tone of

voice as the bang that banged this morning. I wonder...

Showered, unshaven, dried and dressed, I looked in the cupboard where the hot water water tank lives.

Drip, drip, drip...

The floor was very wet, and getting wetter. Oh dear, where's the Yellow Pages?

I found a plumbing company with an intriguing advert. "We know how frustrating it can be when tradespeople don't turn up at the promised time. So if we don't arrive when we say we will, we'll do the job for free." That sounded promising. I rang the number and spoke to Dan.

"OK," he said. "I'll come and have a

look at it."

I noticed he hadn't mentioned a time. "When exactly should I expect you?" I asked cunningly.

"Oh, in about 30 or 40 minutes or so," he said, seeing right through my ploy.

Exactly 35 minutes later there was a knock on the door.

"Hi, I'm Dan," said Dan, "and this is Felix."

Dan was young, small and super-model slim. He looked very much like Steve Marriott, the singer with Small Faces and Humble Pie. Felix was slightly bulkier and very, very black.

"Where are you from, Felix?" I asked him.

"I'm from Zimbabwe," he said, "and I am just 16 days old in New Zealand."

"Well, welcome to the country," I said and shook his hand.

He grinned broadly. "It's so cold here," he said. "But the people are nice and warm and that makes up for it."

Cold? Both Dan and I were sensibly dressed for the weather. We wore t-shirts, shorts and sandals and I suspect we both found the day a little sultry even for that minimal set of clothes. Felix wore a bulky woollen sweater over a heavy shirt, denim jeans, boots and thick socks. In moments of silence I could hear his teeth chattering.

I showed Dan the hot water tank. "Gosh, it's well lagged," he said. "Best

lagging I've seen in years!" He pulled out pins and tore off sticky tape and removed untold layers. Then his face lit up like beacon. "Wow! Look at that! It's the second oldest tank I've ever seen. 1967. They built them to last in those days. Look; it's exactly forty years old!"

"Happy birthday," I said. "What's the oldest one you've seen?"

"1958," said Dan. He looked carefully around the tank. "The good news is that we can get the tank out without having to demolish the cupboard. You wouldn't believe how many times we have to tear cupboards apart. Far too many people put the tank in first and then build the cupboard

snugly around it. Not a good idea.

"The bad news is, we've got to take the tank out of the cupboard. You need a new one. The old one's stuffed."

"What a way to spend your fortieth birthday," I said. "Getting ripped out and sent to the tip. Poor little thing. Oh well, let's do it." I wiped away a surreptitious tear.

Dan turned off the valve that controlled the water supply from the header tank. "How do I get down below here?" he asked. "I need to find the drainage tap so I can empty it."

"There's a very small crawl space," I said dubiously. "But it's really, really cramped."

"Oh that's OK," said Dan. "We only

employ very small people. As long as it's larger than the glove compartment on a car, I can get in to it."

I took him downstairs and showed him the tiny cupboard with the removable back that gives access to the crawlspace. With a twist and a wriggle he was gone.

"If you find any hidden treasure, it's mine!" I said.

"Fair enough! Oh wow – look at this. Your pipes are all copper. That's great. You just don't see that these days." He wriggled about a bit. "There's no drain tap here. The pipe leads outside. There must be a tap out there somewhere. Felix – can you go and look outside?"

Felix and I went out exploring. I took Felix to the side of the house which I thought the crawl space led to. Sure enough there was a tap sticking out of the wall.

"Here it is," said Felix.

"Great," said Dan's disembodied voice from behind the wall. "I'll come out."

He and Felix unscrewed the stopper from the front of the tap and turned the tap on. Hot water began to gush out and boil the weeds.

"I always wondered what that tap was for," I said.

"Right," said Dan. "We're off to Plumbing World to buy a new tank. See you in an hour or so."

An hour or so later the tank was fully drained. Dan and Felix arrived back, exactly on time.

"Here we are," said Dan, "bearing gifts."

"Gifts?" I asked. "Does that mean it's free then?"

"I spoke metaphorically," said Dan. "Oh."

They took the fuse for the water heater out of the fuse box and then began disconnecting everything. It wasn't long before the tank came loose and they carried it downstairs, through the sliding door and out into the garden. They left it lying on the lawn. I went and had a look. The bottom of the tank was very corroded and flaky. I

could peel strips off. It obviously wouldn't have been very much longer before the whole bottom gave way, dumping the entire contents of the tank onto the floor in one fell, foul swoop. I began to feel very lucky that I'd got away with only a slow drip from (probably) a small fracture in a welded seam, or maybe a tiny hole in the corroded bottom.

"How long do you think it's been leaking?" I asked Dan.

"Maybe a couple of weeks or so," he said. "Certainly not very long. I could see that water had soaked through when I was down in the crawl space, but there wasn't any real damage to see.

"You were lucky you caught it early. Some people don't notice until the rotten floorboards give way and the whole thing crashes down into the room below. That can be very messy, not to mention expensive."

"Expensive?"

"I told you not to mention expensive!"

They fitted the new tank very quickly and efficiently and let some water dribble in to test the seals. It all seemed watertight.

"All we need now," said Dan, "is an electrician to wire up the heater. I've rung several but either they're not answering the phone at all or they can't give me an appointment until the

middle of next week. I presume you *do* want hot water before the middle of next week?"

"Yes please," I said, contemplating with horror a week of being unable to do the washing up or take a shower. Of course, Robin would love it – washing the dishes is her job; and she resents time wasted in the shower when she could be doing more interesting things, like gardening. But I was not attracted to the idea.

"Bloody tradespeople!" said Dan. "You can never get one when you need one." He made a few more phone calls. "OK," he said, "we've tracked one of the elusive bastards down. He says he'll be here early in the afternoon, whatever

that means. Felix and I are going off to our next job. When he arrives, give me a ring and I'll come straight back."

By about 2.45pm I was starting to get worried. It was no longer early in the afternoon. The afternoon was getting later (and older) by the second. Then a van drew up and Dan and Felix got out.

"The electrician's just sent me a text message," said Dan. "He'll be here at 3.00pm. So while we're waiting, I'll just start work on attaching the straps that will stop the tank falling over in an earthquake. I'll only fix up one end at the moment, just in case we need to swivel the tank for the electrician."

He carefully measured the length of

strap required and cut exactly that length off a roll. It was an inch too short.

"Bugger!"

He tried again, with slightly more success. By now it was 3.15pm. No sign of the electrician. "Anything else you need me to look at while we're waiting?" offered Dan.

"Well you could have a look at the cistern on the loo. It fills up a bit too much and water runs out of the overflow pipe."

He took the lid off the cistern and peered at it. "I've never understood how these work," he said. He poked at it a bit and twirled the flushing handle. Nothing happened, apart from a couple

of gurgles.

"Would you like me to flush it for you?" I asked.

"Yes please," he said, mildly embarrassed.

I gave the handle a little twiddle and water gushed like Niagara Falls. "It's all in the wrist action," I said. "And the suppleness of the follow through."

We watched the cistern fill up. Dan poked a thingie here and twisted a whatsit there. Then he turned the flushing handle again. Nothing happened so he tried one more time. It still didn't flush. I reached past him and twirled gently. Niagara Falls again.

"Call myself a plumber," said Dan,

chuckling at his own misfortune. "I can't even flush a toilet. Perhaps it's time to hand in my cards."

"If it's any consolation," I said, "lots of people find this design hard to flush. My mother in law can't flush it, and her middle name is efficiency. Phyllis Efficiency Clarke. I really can't imagine what her parents were thinking of when they christened her that."

"I've adjusted it a bit," said Dan, peering into the cistern as it filled. "And now the water level is about an inch below the overflow pipe. That should fix it."

"Thanks," I said. I looked at my watch. "It's nearly quarter to four. In light of your advertised promise, do I

get the job done free because the electrician's so late?"

"It doesn't filter down to subcontractors," explained Dan.

"They're outside our control. Come to think of it, they're outside *everyone's* control."

"Pity."

The electrician arrived just after 4.00pm. He attached wires, put the fuse back, waved a voltmeter and said the happy word, "Perfect!".

He went away again and Dan finished fixing the earthquake straps. Then he opened the valve to the header tank and turned the heater on.

"There we are," he said, "all finished."

"Any idea what went bang?" I asked.

"No idea at all," he said. "It wasn't anything to do with the old tank. There was nothing dislodged, nothing obviously broken. Bit of a puzzle, really."

Odd...

The next morning I lay lazily in bed, cuddling a cat, at peace with the world.

Bang!

Alan And Robin Go North

"What time shall I set the alarm for?" I asked Robin.

"5.00am would be good," said Robin. "That's really 6.00am because the clocks go back an hour tonight, so we'll get a good night's sleep and still be able to make an early start."

To hear is to obey, and I set the alarm for 5.00am.

At 4.00am, which was really 5.00am of course, I woke up full of excitement and anticipation. There was

no sound of snoring, so it was a fairly safe bet that Robin was awake as well. "I'm awake," I said quietly.

"So am I," confirmed Robin.

"Why don't we get up and make an extra early start?" I suggested. I looked out of the window. Rain was stair-rod-rod-rod out of a pitch black sky; visibility was nil. "Conditions are perfect," I said.

And so we packed the car and set off for the far north of New Zealand. Not surprisingly the roads were almost empty and we made very good time. Slowly the black, wet night turned into a grey, wet dawn and the grey, wet dawn turned into a grey, wet day. I kept the headlights on to give the car

maximum visibility just in case anybody else was mad enough to be out. However as far as I could tell, everyone else in the country was still tucked up warm and snug in bed.

As we passed across the central plateau, there was no sign whatsoever of the mountains. They were hiding shyly in the mist, refusing to come out and play.

"They know their own names," I told Robin. "If you call them by name they'll come to you."

"Nonsense," said Robin. "You're pulling my leg. Aren't you?" She sounded doubtful.

"Honest," I said. "They really do come when you call them. Try it and

see."

Ngauruhoe, Tongariro, Ruapehu – Robin tried hard, but she couldn't quite get the names right, and so the mountains stayed hidden. Ngauruhoe and Tongariro paid us no attention at all, but Ruapehu was so annoyed at this seeming disrespect that he roared out loud, shattered the walls of his crater lake and threw a mighty lahar down towards us. As we sped away from the raging mud and water, we could hear the sounds of gates crashing shut as the desert road was closed behind us. But we didn't care, we were away free and the mountains were far behind us now.

We stopped for lunch in Taupo. The weather eased slightly and though it

was still misty, the rain was less intense. An extremely damp motorcyclist pulled up outside the café. His helmet had recently been groomed with a mohawk haircut, but the spiky black hair now sagged sadly to one side. Helmet under his arm, he stomped into the café and steamed as he ordered chips. We resumed our journey.

Just beyond Taupo, a farmer was winding string around stakes arranged in a small square. Bemused cows stood huddled together inside the string fence.

"We're trapped, ladies," said the head cow. "There's nowhere to go. We'll never break out of here in a month of Sundays. What a small field

this has turned out to be!"

"I know what we can do," said another. "Let's chew cud. That always makes things better."

The road went ever on, north and north and north again. Blue signs with stylised white pictures indicated accommodation (a picture of a bed) and food (a picture of a crossed knife and fork) and service stations (a picture of a petrol pump). Once we passed a blue sign that contained only of a picture of a bed and a picture of an aeroplane. I have no idea at all what it was trying to tell me.

And so we reached the Bay Of Islands – it's a bay; it has islands in it. What else would you expect of a

country that calls its northernmost island The North Island and its southernmost island The South Island? We were staying in The Duke of Marlborough Hotel in Russell. Round the corner is a pub. It's called The Pub Round The Corner.

About five minutes drive from Russell is a beautiful beach with lazy waves. It's just perfect for swimming or for simply sitting in the sun. The beach is quite long; it's called Long Beach.

There's a flagstaff on top of a hill called Flagstaff Hill. You drive up Flagstaff Road to get to it. There's a church in the middle of Church Street; and just by the sea is a house called

Wharemoana, which translates as *seahouse*. This last gave me a little thrill – when I was a small child in England, we would often take our summer holiday in a small coastal village in Northumberland. The village was called Seahouses. That's *Wharemoana* as well.

Ferries run regularly across the bay linking Russell to Paihia. There's a ferry that is painted blue; it's called The Blue Ferry. There's a ferry that is painted white; it's called The White Ferry. There's a ferry that is painted red. It's much faster than the other two and so it is called The Fast Ferry. That's the one we took.

Paihia has a mall with 24 shops in

it. It's called The 24 Shop Mall. There's a licensed restaurant with a name that cannot be read for the sign outside is written in such a distorted script as to be completely illegible. Possibly the real name of the restaurant is The Illegible Licensed Restaurant, but I'll never know.

We rejoined the Fast Ferry to return to Russell.

"Today," announced the driver, "we are going to be the Very Fast Ferry for I have six stranded Germans on board. They got stuck in traffic and missed their tour boat. It's waiting impatiently for them in Russell, so I'm going to get them there as quickly as I can."

He was as good as his word. We

simply tore across the bay. We overtook the Blue Ferry. We overtook the White Ferry. We overtook a low flying seagull who looked rather bewildered as the water from our wake almost knocked him out of the sky. We squealed dramatically to a stop by the pier at Russell, spraying water everywhere. Six moist Germans marched straight to their tour boat which immediately headed off to the islands. Then the Very Fast Ferry became the Very Slow Ferry as it went *putt, putt, putt* to its proper berth where Robin and I got off. We went round the corner to The Pub Round The Corner and we each sank a soothing pint of their home brewed beer. They

have a choice of two; a bitter and a lager. One is called The Pub Round The Corner Bitter. The other is called The Pub Round The Corner Lager.

The next day we went exploring. There's a back road out of Russell which twines, twists and turns for mile after tedious mile until it joins State Highway 1 just south of Kawakawa. Interesting signposts declare that it isn't far to some small township or other, but they are all telling lies.

"Hey," said Robin. "It's only six kilometres to Rawhiti. Won't we have such fun when we get there? I can hardly wait!"

Six kilometres of rugged bush and sheer cliffs later, with no sign

whatsoever of Rawhiti, we learned that Ngaiotonga was only another ten kilometres down the road.

"Well, I never did care much for Rawhiti anyway," said Robin. "Let's stop trying to find it. Let's go to Ngaiotonga instead. I've heard that it's a much more happening place in every respect."

Ten kilometres later we stopped and got out and looked around a bit. Ngaiotonga, just like Rawhiti before it, appeared to be town built of invisible buildings.

"Perhaps it's concealed inside a Klingon cloaking device," I suggested. I kicked a stone out of the road and looked around a small, scrubby fern in

case Ngaiotonga was hiding behind it. It wasn't.

"I'm bored with Ngaiotonga. Let's go on to Tutaematai," said Robin. "This signpost says it's only three kilometres away."

"OK," I said and we got back in the car and drove off. As we drove round the first bend in the road I heard a distinct *click!* behind me as the people of Ngaiotonga turned off their Klingon cloaking device and resumed their partying.

The road went ever on and on, but we never did find any of the small towns that the signs pointed to. Just endless bush and steep, rugged cliffs. Eventually the road met State Highway

1 and we turned on to it with a sense of relief. All the signs on the state highway pointed to places that really did exist. It was nice to be back in the real world. We headed north again, towards Russell. A thin, brown man with a long beard walked along the side of the road. He was bowed down under the weight of a huge wooden cross which he was carrying over his shoulder. Presumably he was heading north for Easter.

The best way to see the islands that fill the bay is to take a cruise around them. We went on the Cream Trip, which lasts all day and which visits all the major islands. The cruise is not just a tourist trip – the boat delivers

packages and mail to the islands as well. From the main cabin of the boat you can look out of the very large forward-facing observation windows. A tourist with an enormous bottom spent the entire cruise outside on the forward deck, leaning up against the windows, buttock cheeks spread out squashily all over the glass. I took a photograph.

The boat travelled leisurely around the islands, mooring at jetties in order to deliver the mail. All the people on the islands knew when the boat was near because they all had dogs, and all the dogs barked in delight when the boat appeared. The dogs all love the boat because the crew always make sure to give each dog a biscuit before

the mail is handed over. As far as the dogs are concerned it's the biscuit boat, not the mail boat.

One dog was so enthusiastic that he leaped on board and said hello to all the tourists. He got lots of pats, but he didn't get any extra biscuits. Not that he seemed to mind; pats are almost as good as biscuits.

One of the jetties was rather hard to moor against. Somebody had bolted a small dinghy on to the end of it. The dinghy was full of earth, and growing in the earth was a huge flax plant. The skipper of our boat was bewildered.

"That wasn't there last time I tied up to the jetty," he announced over the public address system. "Some eccentric

or other has obviously been very busy indeed. But why on earth would anyone want to grow a flax plant in a dinghy on the end of a pier?"

Answer came there none. Silence was the stern reply.

Many of the islands are known by their Maori names. Thus we have Moturoa Island, Moturua Island, Motukiekie Island and Urupukapuka Island. Since the Maori prefix *motu* means *island*, some of the names are tautological. It also turns out that the Maori are just as unimaginative about naming things as the Pakeha are. The suffix *roa* means *long*. Thus the rather long and skinny island called Moturoa is simply Long Island.

The suffix *rua* can be translated as *pit* or *chasm*. So Moturua Island is the island with a chasm on it. A *kiekie* is a species of thick vine. Motukiekie Island is an island where the kiekie vine grows. *Uru* is a grove (as in a grove of trees) and a *puka* is a shrub-like tree with large leathery leaves. The repetition of a word in Maori adds emphasis to the word. Thus *pukapuka* would mean lots and lots of this particular shrub. And so Urupukapuka Island would be the island covered with thick groves of shrubs. Oddly, the word *pukapuka* also exists in its own right (rather than as added emphasis for *puka*) and it means a book or, more generally, a document of some sort. So

perhaps Urupukapuka Island is the island where books grow on groves of trees! What a paradise for a bibliophile like me. I couldn't wait to get there.

We stopped at Urupukapuka Island for lunch. The books hanging from the trees had not yet reached their full growth. They were unripe and unreadable. It would be at least another two months before they ripened and were ready to be harvested.

Disappointed, Robin and I headed off to the island's other major attraction; the yellow submarine *Nautilus*.

It isn't really a submarine, though it is shaped like one, just for fun. Tourists climb on board and take their seat in the keel which is, of course, under the

surface of the sea. The keel has glass sides and as the boat chugs slowly around the bay the glass sides afford a perfect view of the fish swimming past in huge shoals. There are always massive numbers of fish, because the crew of the *Nautilus* always make sure to put a lot of fish food into the water to attract them. They've been doing this for years, and word has spread. Every fish in New Zealand territorial waters knows exactly where to come for a good feed. There are so many fish in the water that you can almost walk across the bay on their backs.

From Urupukapuka Island, we headed off to The Hole In The Rock. It's a huge great rock with a hole in it.

When the sea is calm, the boat sails through the hole from one side of the rock to the other. There is something amazingly surreal about sailing right through an island.

The sea was completely calm and clear and we could see shoals of fish swimming around the boat as we emerged from the hole. Sometimes a fish would jump exuberantly into the air and then dive down again into the water with a huge splash of foam.

We sailed away from the Hole In The Rock and headed down the mainland coast back towards Russell. We briefly explored Deepwater Cove – it's a cove where the water is very deep – and Assassination Cove. Can you

guess what happened at Assassination Cove in June 1772?

We got back to Russell just in time for tea.

One of the must-see excursions that you can take in the far north of New Zealand is a coach trip up to Cape Reinga at the very top of the North Island. Along the west edge of the spit of land that terminates at the cape is a beach that is sixty four miles long. It is called Ninety Mile Beach. Since sixty four miles is almost exactly ninety kilometres, a better name might be Ninety Kilometre Beach. But the beach is very old and set in its ways, and it has no patience with these modern, new-fangled metric measurements. So

it remains Ninety Mile Beach, and if you dislike the inaccuracy of the name that's your problem. The beach doesn't care.

At low tide, the beach is officially part of the state highway system and the coaches on their way to and from Cape Reinga always zoom along the hard-packed sand close to the water's edge. There's something quite thrilling about zooming along the beach at 100kph for mile after mile after mile.

We travelled north on the beach. On our left, the sea stretched endlessly west to the horizon, and the sea and sand ran together north and south as far as the eye could see. Long, lazy waves swept in and beached themselves

gently on the shore. To our right huge, soft sand dunes loomed, held together by spinifex and scrubby grass.

Birds strutted along the sand and glided gracefully in the air, skimming along the edge of the waves. Pied shag, red billed gull, black backed gull, oyster catcher, dotterel, godwit, caspian tern, white fronted tern, left tern, right tern...

The coach stopped and we got out for a walk on the sand.

"Don't get hit by a bus," warned the driver, and he wasn't joking.

There were some rocks poking up from the sand. Thousands upon thousands of worm casts pock-marked the surface of the sand around the

rocks. Small creatures scuttled in little pools. The wind rustled across the sand stirring it up into crazy patterns.

We got back on the bus and carried on to the end of the beach where huge sand dunes towered like mountains. Adventurous souls carried body-boards up to the top of the dunes; an enormous trek. The dunes were so tall that the line of people walking up them looked as tiny as ants. Everybody walked in single file, putting their feet carefully in the footprints of the person in front of them. When they reached the top, each person flung themselves head first on to their body board and slid down the side of the dune at an enormous rate, screaming all the way in a huge

cloud of sand.

Some people braked themselves by digging their feet in. Other, hardier souls just zoomed in at full speed and splashed down in the water at the bottom. All of them spent the rest of the day picking sand out of their teeth.

The bus drove on to Cape Reinga, popularly supposed to be the northernmost tip of New Zealand, though in fact the rather more aptly named North Cape stretches 15 kilometres further north.

From Cape Reinga, the spirits of the Maori dead make their way down to the underworld. It is a very spiritual, very sacred place. The cape is also where the Tasman Sea meets the

Pacific Ocean. As you stand at the lighthouse on the cape and look north you can see the waves from the Tasman Sea on your left rolling in from west to east. The waves in the Pacific Ocean on your right roll in from east to west. The two sets of waves meet just below the lighthouse and annihilate each other in a shattering spray of white water. It is a hugely dramatic and humbling sight.

From the cape we headed south again and travelled through the Puketiki kauri forest. There are very few kauri trees left now. The small number that remain are tall, graceful giants more than 1000 years old. There have been three distinct kauri forests here in the last 50,000 years. Each has been

destroyed by the forces of nature, rather than by the depredations of man, though nobody is quite sure exactly how it happened. Excavation of the remains of these forests suggests that the trees grew roots only on one side in order to anchor themselves against the prevailing winds, which tend to blow in a constant direction. Perhaps one day there was a storm and the fierce winds blew from a different direction. Since the trees lacked support on that side, whole forests simply lay down and died.

The weather had been quite gloomy during the trip to Cape Reinga and as we got back to our hotel Robin remarked, "We were very lucky really.

The rain kept away while we were sight seeing. It only rained while we were driving around in the coach."

"Yes," I agreed. "It could have been worse. We could have had continuous rain."

No sooner had I spoken the words than we began to get continuous rain. It tumbled out of the sky in a drenching torrent. It got heavier and heavier. So we went to bed and ignored it.

The next morning it was still raining. Actually, "rain" is much too small and insignificant a word to describe the huge niagra-like cascades that were pounding down. The roof of the hotel rang and rattled as though it was being battered by liquid

cannonballs. The rain was hitting the ground so hard that it was bouncing up into the air again before finally settling into enormous puddles and, where the ground sloped away, into raging rivers.

It soon became clear that the hotel leaked like a sieve. The staff scurried around putting pot plants under the most significant leaks. The plants greedily sucked up the water like manna from heaven; which it was of course. But the rain was so heavy that it wasn't very long before the plants began to exhibit symptoms of acute indigestion. Soon they were writhing in agony, and vomiting up all the water they had just drunk. They were quickly replaced by a collection of

miscellaneous buckets and tubs dragged up from who knows where, and someone was deputed to run around emptying them before they overflowed.

Robin and I sat in the bar watching the rain fall down. We hadn't brought any wet weather gear with us; everyone knows it doesn't rain in the winterless north in the tourist season. So we were stuck in the hotel. Through the window we could just see the end of the pier jutting out into the bay.

"Look," said Robin. "There's a ferry."

We watched as the ferry from Paihia appeared out of the curtain of rain. It moored itself to the pier.

Nobody got off; nobody got on. The ferry hung around for a while and then went back to Paihia. Half an hour later it reappeared in Russell. Again, nobody got off and nobody got on. Neither Robin nor I was very surprised at this. Who in their right mind would ever want to go out in this weather? Obviously the ferry company came to the same conclusion, for the ferry went off back to Paihia and we never saw it again. Service was suspended for the duration of the storm.

I ordered another beer, plugged in my laptop and watched a DVD. Robin went up to our room and watched the television.

And so the day passed. It was a day

of beer, DVDs, television and rain. At a suitable time, we went to bed. The rain continued to fall. We lay in bed listening to it and soon the regular sound, loud though it was, lulled us to sleep.

The next morning it was still raining. If anything, the downpour was heavier than it had been the day before.

"Looks like another day of DVDs, beer and television," remarked Robin.

"Yes," I agreed. "But it could be worse. At least we've still got electricity."

No sooner had I spoken the words than the lights went out. There was a brief pause and then the lights flickered and came on again. We heard a

rumbling sound and the air filled with the distinctive smell of diesel fuel as the hotel's emergency generator kicked in. It had just enough grunt to keep the essential services running – the lights, the bar, the till, the kitchen, and the sign outside the hotel that advertised Stella Artois beer. There was no power for the televisions or for the sockets in the wall. Even the water supply to our room stopped because it was a high pressure system and there was no power for the pumps. We couldn't flush the toilet in our room and so, whenever we felt the urge, we trotted off to the public toilets in the bar. That way the stench became someone else's problem instead of ours.

"Well," I said, "we won't be watching any television or DVDs today. What shall we do instead?"

"Eat," said Robin. "And drink a lot."

Shortly after the power failed, we heard the chilling sound of sirens in the distance.

"I bet that's something to do with the power failing," said Robin. "I hope there hasn't been an accident."

We learned later that there had been an enormous slip on the main road out of Russell. Six huge, ancient trees had fallen with it and they had crashed across the power lines, bringing them down.

Our hotel was the only building in

Russell with its own generator and therefore it was the only place in Russell where food and drink could be obtained. It wasn't long before the glowing Stella Artois sign at the front attracted people like moths to a flame and the hotel did a roaring trade as most of the tourist population of Russell ate, drank and made merry as they watched the never-ending rain fall down.

About twelve hours later the power came back on, though few people were in any position to notice since most of them were over-full of beer and wine. I went up to our room and had a celebratory flush of the loo just because I could.

By now the rain was starting to die down and by the next morning it had gone completely. The day dawned bright and cheerful with clear blue skies. Six grim men wearing fluorescent orange jackets trudged past the hotel. They had a lot of work to do...

All the roads out of Russell were closed, blocked by enormous slips. Opuia was still without power and it too was isolated because the roads were blocked. The bridge at Kawakawa was closed to traffic because it was unstable. Four motel units had been swept away by the raging river at Haruru Falls. Fortunately nobody was in them at the time. A fourteen year old

girl had been winched to safety across the river. We were marooned in Russell and we had nothing to do except wander round the immediate area and look at things.

We went up to Flagstaff Hill, the highest point in Russell. There were several large slips on the road up to the hill, but one lane was open. From the top of the hill we could see out across the bay. The water was a deep yellow colour because it was so full of churned up sand. A boat chugged slowly across the bay leaving a wake behind itself. The wake didn't go away – the sand was so thick in the water that the boat was making a permanent track.

Twenty four hours later the

situation had slightly improved. Some roads had been opened by the simple expedient of pushing all the slips to the side with a bulldozer, thus opening up a single lane. We drove cautiously out of Russell past enormous teetering heaps of earth and trees and rocks. Many roads were still closed and detours were in place to bypass the worst of the damage. But even the roads we detoured through were only barely passable. At one point half the road simply wasn't there any more; the floods had undermined it and swept it away without trace.

We drove past paddocks that looked like swimming pools. The topmost branches of trees stuck

forlornly above the flood. A house sat abandoned in the middle of a field, the flood water lapping gently against the downstairs windows.

"We were very lucky really," I said. "It could have been worse. We could have had..."

"Shut up!" Robin interrupted fiercely. "Haven't you realised yet that those words are a magic spell? Every time you speculate on how it could be worse, it gets worse! Just keep your mouth shut and let me drive us out of this mess that you've made of the north of the country."

So, being an obedient, dutiful husband, I did what I was told.

The End