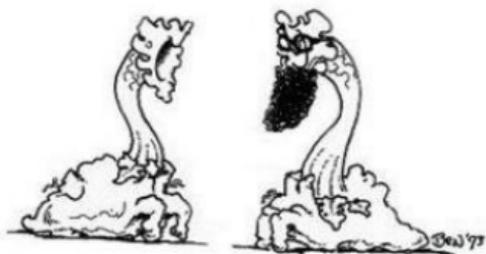


Triffid Tales

Volume 6



Alan Robson

Triffid Tales
Volume 6

by

Alan Robson

Publication Credits

Published as an EBook 2013

(c) Alan Robson

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Alan Alone

Robin was away in Australia visiting her family and the cats and I were considering how best to take advantage of the situation.

"Why don't we stay up after midnight and fall asleep watching the television?" suggested Bess.

"That's a good idea," I said, "and it sounds like a lot of fun. But we usually do that anyway. There's no novelty in it."

"Perhaps not," said Bess. "But we could do it together, just for a change. Normally I ignore the television by sleeping on the sofa where Robin sits.

But this time I could sleep on the sofa where you sit and we could both lick our bottoms and snore through the second world war on the History Channel. How does that sound?"

"That's an excellent suggestion, Bess. Now Harpo, have you got any ideas as to what we should do?"

"I could rip your leg off and beat you to death with the soggy end," said Harpo. "That's always good for a laugh."

"You've done that far too often in the past," I protested. "It's getting boring. And anyway, I'm not a fan of pain."

"Aren't you?" Harpo sounded surprised. "I am! Particularly when it

takes place in other people."

"But you're a long haired cat," I said. "Long hair means you're a hippy. You're supposed to get all mellow on catnip and espouse peace and love."

"Catnip is good," said Harpo reflectively. "Have you got any in the cupboard?"

"I think so," I said. "Why don't you go and have a look?"

"I can't open cupboards," said Harpo gloomily. "My fingers are all in favour and my thumbs aren't opposed. But nevertheless I can't manage the doors. You'll have to do it."

"Say please," I suggested.

"Just do it," said Harpo, "or I'll rip your leg off and..."

"...and beat me to death with the soggy end." I finished the familiar sentence and got up off the couch to investigate the cupboard where the cat treats live. "Here you are, Harpo. Here's the catnip."

"Thanks. You can keep your leg a bit longer." He rolled himself an enormous spliff and hid himself away in the bright orange tunnel that we got as a free gift from the vet when we bought entirely too many cat biscuits. It's his favourite place. He always goes there when he is doing, has done or is about to do something against the rules. He took a toke on his catnip. "Groovy...".

I turned the television on and

switched to the History Channel. Explosions roared, Bess snored. Time for a rhyme. Thyme for a rime...

We fell asleep to the peaceful sounds of murder and mayhem.

Over the next few days, it became abundantly clear to Bess and to me that the very best way to celebrate Robin not being here was to carry on living just as we normally did, doing all the things that we normally do. After all, we enjoyed doing them; that's why we did them. What possible reason could we have to try doing other things?

Even Harpo eventually agreed that we were probably right though he himself isn't all that fond of the History Channel. He prefers the much more

cerebral Arts Channel. Despite his addiction to violence and blood (preferably mine) he has intellectual pretensions and he enjoys shredding my flesh and committing mayhem with Mahler raving in the foreground.

And so our time without Robin passed agreeably. We cooked and we cleaned and we did the washing up. This was our only departure from normality. Robin is in charge of corpses, semi-corpses, vomit and washing up. I found I wasn't really enjoying taking over her duties and I wasn't very good at them. But I persevered.

"These cat biscuits taste soapy," said Harpo. "You used far too much

washing up liquid when you cleaned my bowl, didn't you?"

"I might have done," I said casually. I never plead guilty to Harpo's accusations. He punishes me if I do. but if I refuse to admit to my crimes, he punishes me for lying.

The time went very quickly and, almost before we knew it, Robin was due back home. Her plane was scheduled to land at midnight. However I checked the arrivals website and discovered that the plane had a downhill wind and would therefore arrive twenty minutes early. I made sure I arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare. The plane landed exactly on time, twenty minutes early.

But it was ages before any passengers appeared. Eventually Robin came through the doors with her suitcase following obediently behind her.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," she said. "But the plane was half empty, there were no other planes scheduled and the customs people were bored. So we all got searched. The drug dogs sniffed every case and the customs men poked around inside my dirty underwear."

"I hope they enjoyed themselves," I said.

"Oh yes," said Robin. "They were quite taken with the solar powered cockroach I brought as a present for the cats."

"A solar powered cockroach?" I was puzzled.

"Yes," explained Robin. "It's a life size plastic cockroach with a solar cell embedded in its back. And when the sun shines, it scuttles. The cats will love it."

"You didn't really buy it for the cats, did you?" I asked. "I know you. You bought it for yourself."

"Well, yes," she said. "But I couldn't tell that to the customs man. He'd think I was strange."

"But Robin," I said, you are strange."

"Oh yes. That's right. I forgot."

We walked out of the airport to the car and I began the short drive home.

"I got a solar powered praying mantis as well," said Robin.

Sparkly

Are you a fan of *Twilight*? Have you ever wondered why the vampires sparkle? I know why. I stumbled upon the secret quite by chance. I was reading Harlan Ellison's massive anthology *Again Dangerous Visions*. And then I sneezed. Suddenly everything became clear to me...

I suffer from what the doctors call *chronic non-specific rhinitis*. For a long time I thought that meant that I had a rhinoceros stuck high up inside my nasal passages, but even though that is exactly what the symptoms feel like, actually the phrase just means that

I sneeze a lot and nobody really knows why. It's obviously an allergy, but I've had all the standard allergy tests and they were quite inconclusive. So I sneeze and I drip and I sneeze some more. Now that the doctors have given a name to my condition, they feel that their job is done. The rest of it is up to me.

It's not a seasonal thing. Attacks come upon me out of the blue at irregular intervals throughout the year. There is no warning and no obvious cause. I just feel a gradually increasing sense of discomfort high inside my nose as the rhinoceros wakes up and starts to stomp around in there. I find that I am blowing my nose more and

more frequently as the rhinoceros gets more and more lively. It pees and poos enthusiastically just behind my eyeballs. Obnoxious substances increase in volume and flood my sinuses. Soon I am sneezing uncontrollably and leaking foul fluids like a high pressure rancid hosepipe. Soggy tissues accumulate in the waste bins and I feel more and more exhausted.

A very bad attack can see me use five or more boxes of tissues in a day (I think my all time record was seven boxes) and it leaves me so tired and wiped out that I need to sleep for fifteen or more hours to recover from it. It can be unbelievably debilitating. I

get an attack of this severity once or maybe twice a year. But less severe attacks happen every month or two, always right out of left field when I'm not looking.

Returning now to the book I was reading -- in the introduction to *Again Dangerous Visions*, Harlan Ellison admits that there were some visions that were far too dangerous even for him to publish. He rejected a story from a writer called Barry Weissman because it was about a snot vampire, a concept that even Ellison found too vomituous for comfort.

Combining my recent rhinitis attack with Ellison's editorial prejudices gave me a great insight. It is

quite obvious to me that Stephanie Meyer's sparkly vampires are actually snot vampires straight out of that unpublished Barry Weissman story, and they sparkle because they are covered from head to toe with a silvery film of dried snot that they've sucked up from the nostrils of their unsuspecting victims, all of whom, presumably, had a rhinoceros just like mine up their noses.

Trust me on this; the life I lead has made me an expert on all things mucous related. And keep this picture of snot-soaked vampires firmly in your head the next time you read the *Twilight* books or watch the movies; you'll enjoy them so much more now

that you know the secret.

Eat, Drink, Be Merry And Watch TV

Christmas Day was a lazy day *chez nous*. We spent the entire day doing our world famous couch potato impression as we watched all ten hours or so of the extended edition DVDs of **The Lord Of The Rings**. Despite the fact that we hadn't opened the DVD cases for at least two years, I was very impressed to find that the actors hadn't forgotten their lines. And they hadn't aged a day either. Quite astonishing.

We had awoken very early that morning. How early I cannot really tell because the clock in my bedroom is an undetermined number of minutes fast. The value of this number changes on an almost daily basis no matter how often I reset it. Electronic clocks are not supposed to gain or lose and I strongly suspect that my clock must have been assembled with cheap, possibly second hand, electrons in its components.

I turned the radio on. It was playing Christmas Carols.

While shepherds
washed their socks
by night
All seated round

the tub
The angel of the
lord came down
And they began to
scrub

We three men of
Orient are
One in a taxi
One in a car
One in a scooter
Papping his hooter
Following yonder
star

I turned the radio off again,
"Bah Humbug!" said Harpo.
"Where's my breakfast?" Then he bit

me.

"I like Christmas Carols," said Bess. "Why did you turn it off? Oh, and where's my breakfast?" And she bit me.

"What time is it?" mumbled Robin.

"I don't know," I said. And so she bit me.

Bloody but unbowed, I made breakfast. A can of luxury cat food for each cat which, predictably, they hated because it was new, and smoked salmon, strawberries and champagne for Robin. Dry bread and water for me as punishment for doing something wrong. The weather was all my fault. The sky was blue, the sun shone warmly. Where was the snow, deep and crisp and even?

Good King Wences
Last looked out
On the Feast Of
Stephen...

Probably his windows were extremely dirty so he didn't get to look out very often. Perhaps the last time was when Stephen, his next door neighbour, was having a barbecue and the Good King wanted to check out the guests in case the Bad King turned up. A quick spit and polish with the old windolene might be called for...

Distracted by such thoughts, I completely forgot that it was time to open the presents.

"Let's do it now," said Robin eagerly.

"Hurry up," said Bess. "I want to play with the ribbons."

"Do it immediately," said Harpo, "or I won't be answerable for the consequences. Remember that you aren't wearing any socks. Your toes are dangerously exposed."

And so there was a great unwrapping of paper and much untangling of ribbons.

"Oh darling," said Robin ecstatically. "That's just what I always wanted. Two front tyres for the car. How romantic!"

"And they are filled with nitrogen instead of compressed air," I pointed

out.

"What does that do?" Robin asked.

"Absolutely nothing," I said, "but it costs an extra \$20 and you get sexy, flouorescent green valve tops. Can I open my presents now?"

"Of course you can," said Robin and she watched in eager anticipation as I tore the paper from my strangely shaped parcels.

"Wow!" I said, in happy astonishment. "Two rear tyres for the car. I couldn't have asked for anything better. What a lovely surprise."

"They too are filled with nitrogen rather than compressed air," Robin pointed out.

"Look at the really, really cute

green valve tops." I said. "If we brake too hard when we've been travelling at Mach one there's absolutely no chance at all of the excess friction causing the tyres to burst into flames now that we've got an inert gas in them. It makes me feel so much safer than I felt in the old days when we filled the tyres with compressed air which is only about eighty percent nitrogen."

"Yes," agreed Robin. "I also feel a lot safer now than I used to. Is it time to start watching **Lord Of the Rings** yet?"

Boxing Day was a repeat of Christmas Day except that we watched Season Five of **Dexter**. Harpo stared at it entranced -- he loves stories about

serial killers and he was particularly taken with the scene where a cat was lapping up the blood of a gruesomely murdered corpse.

"I'd like to try that," he said to me. "Just lie down here for a moment while I tear your throat out."

One of the delights of **Dexter** is that while it is gruesome and horrible and dark it is also very, very funny in a sick sort of way. I admit to a certain guilty pleasure as I watch it, which makes it perfect for the Christmas season of course for the Christmas season itself is nothing but twelve days of indulgence in guilty pleasures.

And champagne.

Alan Pegs Out

When the weather is warm and sunny, wet clothes from the washing machine can be hung out to dry. My mother called it "pegging out" and she did it on Mondays. If the weather was unfavourable, she didn't peg out - instead she spread the damp clothes on a wooden frame she called a "clothes horse" which she opened up around the roaring coal fire in the dining room. Condensation caused by moisture evaporating from the drying clothes would stream down the inside of the windows and drip onto the floor, racing in matching patterns with the rain that

streamed down the outside of the windows.

Sometimes my mother hung the clothes so close to the flames that they got scorched as they dried. That's why all my underpants had strange brown marks on them.

But whether she pegged out or whether she used the clothes horse, she did it only on Mondays. In Yorkshire, it is against the law to wash and dry the clothes on any day of the week except Monday. Yorkshire folk are deeply conservative and very suspicious of new-fangled ideas. Change is anathema in Yorkshire. My mother, ever the conformist, was scared that people might think her eccentric. So on

Mondays she pegged out.

When Robin and I first moved into our house in Wellington, there was a twirly whirly framework in the back garden. A witch's hat sat on a pole and wires encircled it. Wet clothes that hung on the wires caught the breeze like sails and, if the conditions were right, the witch's hat spun in slow circles. Or not. Mostly not for it was old and creaky and its bearings had seized up.

"Oh, look," I said. "I can peg out."

"What a good idea," said Robin.

"What's pegging out?"

I explained.

"But you go to work on Mondays," said Robin. "You won't have time to

peg out."

"I have it all under control," I reassured her. "I'll peg out on Saturdays instead."

"They'll never let you go back to Yorkshire if you do that," Robin pointed out.

"I don't think I really care," I said. "There's nothing there for me any more. I've been away for so long now that I've even forgotten the words to the national anthem."

"God Save The Queen?"

"No - On Ilkley Moor Baht 'at."

"Ilkley Moor?"

"Baht 'at," I confirmed. "You can look it up on the internet. Mary Jane, worms, ducks and ritual cannibalism."

Yorkshire folk have strange ways of passing the time..."

For a while, all went well. The Gods of Yorkshire failed to notice my ex-pat eccentricities and pegging out on Saturdays was a great success. But then, one day I hung a supersaturated solution of tee shirts on the contraption and the witch's hat, unable to take the strain, fell off its perch and shattered. Pegging out was no longer an option.

"What shall we do now?" I asked Robin.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Perhaps we should steamboat."

"Steamboat?"

"You know!" She struggled with the word for a while. "Headblock?"

"That's not quite right," I said. "Can you be a bit more precise?"

"Two syllables," she explained. "Means thinking hard. Earwig? No. Anyway, why do ears need artificial hairy extensions? That doesn't make any sense. All the very best ears are bald... I know! Brainstorm!"

"Yes!" I was enthusiastic. I went into the back room and picked up the favourite cardboard box belonging to Harpo The Cat, the one that is only half the size of his body. He sleeps in it so often that the corners have torn away and now it is perfectly flat. Nevertheless it still looms large in his affections. I placed it carefully in the middle of the lounge floor.

"What's that for?" asked Robin, puzzled.

"Whatever you do," I said, "don't stand in it while we think this problem through. We'll only be able to solve it if we think outside the box, rather than inside it."

"Of course," said Robin. "Harpo will kill us if we stand in his favourite box."

"Well, yes," I said, "that is a point worth taking into consideration. But it is a well known fact that all traces of rational thought vanish when you step inside the box. You must have noticed how stupid Harpo looks when he climbs in and falls asleep. Boxes collapse brain wave functions.

Everyone knows that."

"Everyone?"

"Well, cats and physicists anyway. Don't step in the box. Now, about this pegging out. We have a problem to solve."

"Maybe we need to move the paradigm," said Robin.

"No, we can't do that," I protested. "Shifting a paradigm around is dangerous. People might not notice that we'd moved it and they'd trip over it in the middle of the night on their way to the toilet. Anyway, I like the paradigm where it is. I think it looks pretty, standing on its plinth."

"I've got the answer," said Robin. "It's really very simple. All we have to

do is string a bottom line between the boundary fences at the end of the day. That will add a synergistic improvement to the pegging out experience going forward. Problem solved."

"You're a genius," I said. "See? Thinking outside the box always works." I put Harpo's box away again before he noticed that I'd moved it.

It wasn't long before I had the back garden criss-crossed with a tangle of plastic coated string. Spiders built webs that joined the tangles together giving them extended walkways on which they could bask in the sun while they sucked thoughtfully on a fly. Caterpillars festooned the lines with

cocoons that swung in harmonic motion as the wind tickled their fancy. On sunny Saturdays I pegged out between the obstructions and the clothes soon dried.

And then one Saturday, while pegging out as usual, I turned away from the line to pick up something moist and squidgy from the basket. When I looked up again the tangle of lines had broken and there was washing all over the lawn. The constant friction between the sections of my complex construction had finally worn through one line and it had collapsed under the strain of my underwear. Who wouldn't?

I retrieved the fallen garments. They were covered in grass clippings

and seeds. New Zealand seeds all come equipped with velcro-like hooks and they latch firmly on to any passing surface. Cats, tee shirts, knickers and bras - seeds don't care, they just like to hang on to stuff and never let go.

Washing the clothes again would take care of the grass clippings, but all the seeds had to be removed one by one by hand. There had been a dozen things hanging on the line when it collapsed and each one had more than a hundred seeds firmly attached. I counted them all...

The Gods of Yorkshire are not mocked. Pegging out only works properly on Monday. Doing it on Saturday sows the seeds of destruction.

Guarding The Garage

A year ago our garage was broken into and our car was stolen and trashed. Ever since then the Robson rituals for entering the garage and driving the new car to exotic destinations like the corner shop to buy a loaf of bread have become more than a little complex.

The first stage involves approaching the garage clutching a key whose size and shape suggests that it is best suited for unlocking a medieval portcullis. However that suggestion is very far from the truth. The key

actually operates a primitive and rather rusty mortice lock on the side door of the garage. Once this door is unlocked and opened, the burglar alarm sensors detect the motion and the alarm begins a shrill whistle of warning. I now have about 30 seconds to remember my secret code and punch it into the keypad that is just to the left of the door. If I fail to remember the code in time, hideous klaxons split the welkin and drone missiles armed with atomic warheads take off from a secret base in Antarctica and zero in on the malefactors who stand paralysed with horror beneath the fearsome forces of my automated Jedi mind control rays.

Once I have turned the alarm off

without releasing Armageddon onto an unsuspecting world I usually discover that I am in possession of the magic gadget for unlocking the car (because it is attached to my key ring and is therefore hard to forget), but I don't have the magic gadget for opening the garage door (because it isn't attached to my key ring and is therefore extremely easy to forget). So I head back to the house to get it.

"Don't worry," I yell to Robin as I re-enter the house. "I just forgot my thingy again." A year ago, Robin went out to the garage and came back into the house a few seconds later to tell me that the garage had been broken into and the car was missing. Ever since

then, we've made a point of reassuring each other if we have to come back to the house shortly after leaving it. Some traumatic events leave permanent scars on the psyche.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh," says Robin in acknowledgement as she burrows back down into the warm, dark nest she's created in the bed.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh," I call cheerfully to her as I retrieve the magic gadget and head back out to the garage. I now have two magic gadgets, one in each hand. When I press the appropriate buttons, the one in my right hand will open the car door and the one in my left hand will open the garage door. I begin to quiver with existential

dread as dark choices fan out before me.

Making a decision, I press the button on my right hand magic gadget. The car doors unlock with a heavy thunk. The car flashes its indicators a couple of time to say hello. I open the driver side door and get in. I strap on my seat belt, adjust the mirror, turn on the engine and then press the green button on the left hand magic thingy I retrieved from the house. In my rear view mirror I watch the garage door rise majestically. When I judge that it is high enough, I reverse the car out into the road.

This is a procedure fraught with peril. To my right the road curves away

from me out of sight and therefore I have absolutely no idea whether or not the local hoon is barrelling down it at his usual 100kph on the wrong side of the road. If he is, he will undoubtedly smash into my car before either of us even realises that I am in his way. The reason that he drives on the wrong side of the road is because he always takes the corner far too fast. Driving on the wrong side straightens his path a little and allows him to get round the bendy bit without losing control. I once saw him drive round the corner on the proper side of the road. Inexorable centrifugal forces pulled him off the tarmac and smashed him into the grassy knoll that lurks in wait for such

foolishness. He scratched his paintwork and dented a wing. Doubtless that was very painful and he has no wish to repeat it. So he has hit upon the simple solution of using the wrong side of the road instead. From his point of view, it works extremely well. Other road users are less convinced of the brilliance of his strategy.

Assuming that I get my car safely into the road, I now have a synchronisation problem to attend to. With one hand I have to change from reverse into drive, with another hand I have to steer the car and with my gripping hand I have to press the green button on the gadget again so that the garage door will close itself. Usually I

manage to get all this right, but sometimes my concentration slips and I end up in neutral which means that the engine revs a lot but no forward motion is achieved. Of course this gives me even more time to check that the garage door is closing properly, so on balance it is probably a win-win situation. If it happens, I always pretend that I meant to do it. Then I lick myself very carefully, and rub my moist paws behind my ears. I purr a lot as well.

Once I feel that the world is convinced by my pretence, I find the proper gear and set off into the wild blue yonder, heading out on the highway, looking for adventure, for

whatever comes my way. I am the steppenwolf driving to the magic theatre. Actually, I'm just going to the supermarket to do the weekly shop, but I'm a romantic at heart...

Returning home reverses the ritual. I drive up the street, slowing down as I get closer to my house. Once I pass the last turn off, I signal left, much to the puzzlement of the man who is tailgating me because he knows there are no more side streets to turn into. I go slower and slower and he goes slower and slower. The slower we go, the more angry he gets. I can see gestures in my rear view mirror. They are not friendly ones.

As soon as I have a clear line of

sight to the garage, I pick up the magic gadget and press the green button. The garage door begins to open. Speedy reactions are now of the essence. I put down the gadget and turn the steering wheel hard left. The car swings towards the garage. With luck the door will be high enough not to impede my dramatic entrance and hopefully I won't have misjudged the angle and started heading for the edge of the door instead of the centre. This last is very embarrassing – it requires much reversal and re-alignment of the car together with a lot more washing behind my ears and possibly even a good licking of my bottom.

As I leave the road, my tailgater

hoots his horn and accelerates wildly round the bend. I hope he'll meet the hoon coming the other way but that has never happened. Perhaps he is the hoon.

I get out of the car, close the garage door and watch the burglar alarm flash angry red lights at me. It dearly wants to tear me limb from limb, but it isn't turned on yet, so it can't. I lock the car and stand patiently by the small side door, portcullis key in hand. Eventually the red lights stop flashing and a green tick mark illuminates on the control panel. Moving slowly so as not to invoke the sensors again, I punch in the secret code. Sinister beeps start to sound as the atomic weapons arm

themselves and the Jedi mind control rays begin creeping from their cabinets. I have thirty seconds to leave the garage and lock the door behind me. Usually I make it in plenty of time.

I go back into the house.

"Good news!" I call to Robin.

"Grmmhufflmmpphhhh?" she asks.

Fortunately I speak Robin fluently.

This time she is saying, "What's the good news?"

"I'm home!"

And so things stood until the curious events which took place on one particular Sunday not so very long ago...Eerie music and wavy lines...Wavy music and eerie lines...

We were just sitting down to

dinner. In our house sitting down to dinner means sitting in the lounge with our plates on our knees so that we can watch the television while we eat. That means we don't have to talk to each other – that's very important. Eating and talking at the same time is not polite. But we don't want embarrassing silences either, so we watch the television to fill in the gaps. Some conversation does occasionally take place of course. Groans of pleasure as the food is chewed and swallowed are always allowed as is yelling at any cat who takes a sudden sly interest in the knee that balances the plate.

Suddenly there was a banging on the front door. Rather resentfully, I put

down my dinner plate and went to answer it. There was my next door neighbour Paul dressed in plate armour and brandishing a huge sword.

"Let me at the bastards!" he yelled.

In the background I could hear the burglar alarm in the garage howling away and in the distance was the faint sound of ballistic missiles on their way from the south pole.

"Oh," I said. "the burglar alarm in the garage is going off. I hadn't realised. I think the TV must be on too loud."

"I'm surprised you didn't notice," said Paul. "I heard it loud and clear and so I came dashing round immediately to see if you were OK. Your garage

door is wide open. That's what must have set it off."

"Oh no!" I was horrified. "Is the car still there?"

"Yes," said Paul. "Whoever broke in must have got scared and probably ran away as soon as the alarm went off."

We went down to the garage and I turned the alarm off. Sure enough, the door was wide open but the car was still sitting safely inside. I closed the garage door and Paul and I examined it carefully. There was no sign of damage to the door or to the car. Whoever had broken in appeared to have done it without effort.

"I wonder if someone has a door

opener that works on the same frequency as mine?" I said.

Paul was dubious. "I suppose it's possible," he said, "but the odds against it are astronomical. That's why these things are considered to be so safe."

I rechecked the door one last time, set the burglar alarm and went back to my dinner. I was just swallowing the last mouthful when Paul banged on the door again.

"Something's going on," he said. "The rat bastards have come back."

Sure enough, the garage door was wide open and the alarm was howling. I closed the door and reset the alarm. As before, there was no sign of damage.

"This is all very puzzling," I said.

"Did you notice anyone running away as you came over?"

"Not a soul," he said.

We went back to our respective houses and I went into the bedroom to put the garage door opener back into my sock drawer, which is where it normally lives. As I put it away, I noticed that the spare garage door opener was sitting in plain view on the top of my dressing table. Oh...

Light bulbs went on in my head. It was time for an experiment. Without moving the door opener from its position on the dressing table, I reached over and pressed its green button. Sure enough the garage door opened and the burglar alarm started to

howl.

I raced out to the garage just as Paul arrived.

"Where are they?" he yelled. "Let me at them. I need to kill somebody!"

I turned the alarm off and closed the door.

"I've got it sussed," I said. "The spare opener is lying on top of the dressing table. I just pushed the button on it and despite the fact that the gadget was deep inside the house and also pointing directly away from the garage, the garage door still managed to pick up the signal and open wide."

"Wow!" said Paul, impressed. "That's one heck of a strong signal. I didn't know those things worked

backwards and through walls."

"Well it seems that they do," I said. "It took me by surprise as well."

"But how did the button get pressed in the first place. Weren't you and Robin both in the lounge?"

"Yes we were," I told him. "But there's a very innocent looking cat fast asleep on the bed at the moment. I suspect that he must have walked over the garage door opener on his way to his nap."

"Ah yes," said Paul. "That sounds exactly like the sort of thing that a cat would do."

"From now on I'm going to keep the spare opener out of sight in my sock drawer along with the usual one." I told

him.

"Sounds like a good idea," said Paul.

So that's what I did, and the garage door has behaved perfectly ever since.

Alan And The Weather Bomb

"Weather bomb! Weather bomb!
Watch out for the weather bomb!"

The newspapers and the television were full of dire predictions for the next day's weather. Torrential rains and 150kph winds were forecast. Everyone was advised to hunker down and not travel anywhere unless it was absolutely essential. The weekend promised to be stormy.

On Saturday morning the weather bomb exploded. Robin and I awoke to howling gales and torrents of rain

smashing furiously against the windows. The whole house was shuddering under the impact. Bess tied a knot in her bladder and refused to go outside. Harpo said, "Ha! It's only weather," and pranced out into it. His fur streamlined itself as the wind hit him and he staggered slightly under the impact. Then he vanished bravely into the bushes.

"Lunatic!" said Bess, and she tucked her nose firmly under her tail and went back to sleep.

"Alan," said Robin in worried tones.

"Mmmm?"

"There's a big pool of water in the kitchen."

I wandered into the kitchen. A large puddle looked at me. I looked at the large puddle. My first thought was to blame Harpo, with Bess a close second. "I wonder if it's cat pee?"

I squatted down next to the puddle and sniffed. Then I dipped a finger into it. Then I sucked my finger.

"Yuck!" squealed Robin.

"Watch closely," I said. "I'll do it again."

I did it again.

"Euuuurrrrrggghhhhhh!!!!!"

"You weren't watching closely," I said. "I'll do it slowly."

I dipped my first finger into the puddle, raised my hand towards my mouth and sucked my second finger.

"See? It's just a trick to disgust the audience. Works every time. Nobody ever notices you change fingers."

"So what's the verdict?"

"I don't think it's cat pee." This time I sucked the proper finger. "No, it's just water. I wonder where it's coming from."

As the words left my mouth, something went *Plop!* on my head.

"I saw that," said Robin.

We both looked up to the ceiling. Slowly, a drop of water formed and then dripped down to the floor.

"Damn!" I said. "Looks like the weather bomb might have broken the roof."

Robin cleaned up the puddle and I

fetched a bucket. We ate breakfast to the accompaniment of a rhythmic *plinking* sound as, one by one, drops formed and fell into the bucket.

Robin went towards the room where her computer lives. She wanted to play *Skyrim*. She had monsters to kill. But on the way there, she walked into trouble.

"Alan! There's another puddle outside the bathroom."

Water was dripping down from the trapdoor that covers the loft entrance. I got the stepladder and climbed up to the ceiling. The trapdoor isn't hinged, it's a box which sits in a little well. I lifted it up, turned it slightly and slid it out of its housing. Water poured out of

it all over me. I climbed down the ladder and showed it to Robin.

"Water's been dripping into this for quite some time," I said. "Look, the weebix board that it's made of is absolutely saturated. And once it couldn't absorb any more, the water started dripping out onto the floor below. I wonder if I can see where it's coming from..."

We put the loft trapdoor into the bath to drain and dry and I climbed up the ladder again with a torch.

The loft stretched out before me, dark, gloomy and cobwebby. The torch cast small circles of light on the huge silver tubes of our dehumidifier system which snaked hither and yon, looking

for all the world like alien caterpillars exploring the dark and hidden recesses of the roof space. The cold water tank, a tall copper cylinder, lurked just to my left. I examined it carefully in case it was the source of the leak, but it seemed sturdy and watertight. I shone the torch up towards the roof. Two damp tracks traced their way across the ceiling beams. Even as I watched, a drop of water formed at the base of one of them.

Plink!

I climbed down the ladder. Robin placed another strategic bucket beneath this second leak.

Plink! Plink!

Stereophonic drips. One for each

ear, each drip slightly out of sync with the other, just for maximum annoyance.

"It's definitely coming from the roof," I said. "We'll have to get a roof man. It could be expensive..."

"Well there's no use calling anyone now," said the ever practical Robin. "The weather bomb is booming and it's Saturday. Nobody can do anything until things calm down, and even if they could they'd charge us several large fortunes to come out after hours. It will have to wait until Monday."

I resigned myself to two days of *plinking* noises. However by the next day the wind and the rain had died down. Small streaks of sunshine

peeped shyly from behind thick, grey clouds. The drips from the ceiling died away. Dry silence descended on the house. On Robin's advice, I replaced the trapdoor into the loft even though it was still quite damp.

"It's really hot in the loft," said Robin. "That and the dehumidifier will dry it out a lot faster than anything else we can do."

Them there interweb tubes proved to be very helpful when it came to identifying people who fixed roofs. And so, on the following Monday morning, I rang a local firm and spoke to a nice man called Simon.

"You were lucky to catch me," said Simon. "The phone's been ringing off

the hook."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "I'm sure that I'm just one among many. Though I am, of course, the most important."

"Indeed you are," he agreed gravely. "I'll pop round in an hour or so to see just what the damage is."

He was as good as his word.

"Come in," I said. "Let me show you what happened."

First I showed him the buckets with a derisively small amount of water in them. "A lot of it has evaporated over the last couple of days," I said somewhat shamefacedly.

Simon nodded wisely. "It happens," he said.

I picked up a torch. "Let me show

you what I found in the loft," I said.

I climbed up the stepladder and removed the trapdoor. It was bone dry. I shone the torch on to the beams that the water had been dripping from. They too were bone dry. There was not a trace of water in the loft.

"There's not a trace of water in the loft," I said to Simon. "This is embarrassing"

"Let me have a look," said Simon. He climbed up the stepladder and looked around, but he had no more success than me. "Nope," he said. "Nothing there. I'll have a look at the roof. It's probably loose nails or something."

He went outside and got his ladder.

The cats and I listened to him clomping about on top of the house. "That sounds like a bloody big bird up there," said Harpo. "Can I go on to the roof and kill it?"

"No!"

Eventually Simon reappeared. "The roof is in quite good condition," he said. "But they've used lead nails to attach it to the beams and the nails have reacted with the roofing iron and it's started to corrode."

"Galvanic corrosion," I said. "I know about that. We studied it in my physical chemistry courses at university. Two metals in contact with each other generate small electrical currents which can accelerate

corrosion."

"Simon looked surprised. "Most people have never heard of galvanic corrosion," he said. "They accuse me of making it up just to pad the bill.

Anyway, you really should have the nails replaced with more modern screws which have an insulating layer on them to minimise the ion migration. The corrosion is particularly bad around the area just above where you saw the water coming in."

"How much will it cost to fix?" I asked.

Simon made a face. "Well, it's quite a long job," he said. "It will probably take most of a day. We'll have to extract the old nails, treat the rust and

then put the new screws in. Hmmm..."

He did calculations in his head and came up with a final total that was somewhere between 'wow' and 'boingggggg'. I did a double take. "Can I have a discount for knowing about galvanic corrosion?" I asked.

He rounded down to the nearest dollar. I decided to put the 40 cents I'd saved straight into my piggy bank. "When can you start?"

"March 15th, weather permitting," said Simon.

The weather permitted and Simon knocked on my door early in the morning of the 15th.

"Can I plug this cable in somewhere?" he asked, proffering a

dirty orange cord with a three pin plug on the end.

"Of course," I said and headed off to the laundry where there is a spare power socket and a small window to feed the cable through. Simon gave it the Simon seal of approval and clambered on to the roof, his body festooned with complex roofing tools. Soon the sounds of banging and power screwing began to echo through the house.

Harpo, the cat who isn't afraid of anything except the things that he is afraid of, ran out through the cat flap never to be seen again until tea time. Bess, the cat who isn't afraid of anything at all, stared curiously at the

roof and then went back to sleep.

One by one, Simon pulled out each roof nail, cast a magic spell on any corrosion that he found, and then screwed a screw into the hole the nail left behind. On and on and on...

What a mind-numbingly tedious job.

There was a knock on the door.

"There you go," said Simon.

"You've probably got the most securely fastened roof in the whole of New Zealand. I've never seen so many nails in a roof before." He showed me the box he'd been putting the nails in. At a rough estimate there were at least umpteen and three of them. "The original roofer must have been really

worried about the high winds."

"Well this is Wellington," I said.

"It's a notoriously windy city. And I do live on top of a hill."

"I suppose you are a bit exposed," said Simon. "Do you get the northerly winds or the southerly winds?"

"Yes," I said.

Alan And Robin Have A Holiday

We were going to be away for six days. So I put my small suitcase on the bed, opened it up and put six underpants, six pairs of socks, six shirts and a spare pair of trousers into it. I closed the suitcase.

"I've finished packing," I said to Robin. "Now it's your turn." It had taken me less than five minutes to pack so there was plenty of time left over for Robin. I was sure she'd need every second of it.

Robin chose a much larger suitcase

than I had. "The weather forecast says it's going to be warm and sunny all week," she said. "I'll just pack my summer clothes."

She put the left hand side of her wardrobe into the suitcase.

"But it might rain," she said. She sounded worried at the prospect.

"Perhaps I'll take some winter clothes as well, just in case."

She put the right hand side of her wardrobe into the suitcase.

She frowned thoughtfully. "Nothing in there matches my Hannah Montana shoes," she said. "I need more purple." She began opening drawers. Soon there was plenty of purple in the suitcase. "Should I take my summer nightie or

my winter pyjamas?" she asked.

"Yes," I advised.

"Good idea," she said. And in they went.

"What about your new trousers?" I asked. "Did you put those in?"

"Oh no! I forgot my new trousers!"

By now she had reached the bottom row of drawers in her dressing table. Empty drawers peeked down forlornly from the top. "I think I might have finished packing," she said. "Can you sit on the suitcase so I can close it."

"You have finished packing," I said. "There isn't anything left anywhere in the bedroom. It's all in your suitcase."

"Are you sure?" She didn't sound convinced.

"I'm sure," I said.

I took the suitcases out to the car which sagged noticeably on its suspension when I heaved Robin's suitcase into its boot. Now we were ready to go on holiday...

New Zealand is a long, thin country. It has lots of up and down. It has very little left and hardly any right at all. We were going to Rotorua and so today we chose the direction of up. We set off very early in the morning. The sun was scarcely over the horizon and there was almost no traffic. Patrols of self-important pukekos policed the side of the road, pecking the verges, shaking their feathered heads sadly as we sped past them and raising peremptory feet

to emphasise the road rules that they felt honour bound to enforce.

We stopped for morning tea in Taihape, home to all the gumboot fetishists in the North Island. We admired the statue of a gumboot that graces the town centre. We ate at the Brown Sugar Cafe. I had gumboot soup and Robin enjoyed some rubber sole food.

Onwards!

The roads were still deserted. We sped northwards for mile after empty mile. The sun shone and the countryside glowed in the freshness of the brand new day. As we drove across the central plateau the volcanic cones of the mountains stood out clear and

stark, grim silhouettes against a cloudless blue sky. Ruapehu, the actor who played Mount Doom in Peter Jackson's production of *Lord Of The Rings*, was resplendent in his movie star sunglasses. There was a large queue waiting for his autograph. We drove on by without stopping and he hissed his disapproval at us.

Lunch in Taupo. We parked by the lake which sparkled like liquid diamonds as the sun bounced off the wavelets. Wet black rocks were dotted hither and yon close to the shore. Each and every rock was being stood upon by one, and only one, preening water bird. Birds in New Zealand are not very good at sharing.

By now we were deep into the thermal areas. Mysterious steam spouted over the trees and as we got close to Rotorua we got hellish whiffs of fire and brimstone.

"I love the smell of hydrogen sulphide in the morning," I paraphrased.

"Can I fart now?" asked Robin.

"Please do," I said.

We checked in to our hotel and were shown to our room. I unpacked my case. I put my six shirts in a drawer together with my spare trousers, and I put my six underpants and six pairs of socks in another drawer.

Robin elected to have a horizontal wardrobe. She unpacked her suitcase

on to the spare bed and surveyed the results with a sceptical eye.

"I haven't got nearly enough socks," she said. "And I need new shoes to match the socks that I did bring with me."

"We can go shopping tomorrow," I reassured her.

"And the four jackets I brought are all either too thick or too thin or the wrong colour."

"We can go shopping tomorrow," I reassured her.

"Okay." She smiled. "I'm having a wonderful holiday," she said. She hooked her arm through mine. "Let's go and have dinner."

The next day we went shopping.

Robin bought socks and shoes and jackets; not too large, not too small, not too thick and not too thin. All were just right. Then, satisfied and satiated with shopping, we went on a trip on the duck bus. This is a WWII vintage landing craft which has been painted bright yellow so as to resemble a bathtub rubber ducky. It takes tourists on scenic trips around and across the lakes that surround Rotorua. As we boarded the bus, we were each handed a duck call device.

"When we drive past people on the streets," said the tour guide, "I want you all to blow loudly on your duck call to give them some encouragement. Pay no attention to the sign language

that they employ in return. It's just a quaint local custom."

We quacked our way through Rotorua until we reached a big blue lake.

"This is called the Blue Lake," said the guide. "There's a green lake further over that way. It's called the Green Lake. But we aren't allowed to explore that because it is a sacred lake and we don't want to desecrate it."

We drove out into the Blue Lake. A group of young men were playing with a small radio controlled speed boat. A stately swan swam past and the speedboat veered towards it. Suddenly all trace of dignity vanished as the swan, wings flapping and feet

spiralling in a mad, splashing panic, ran away from the roaring monster. I began to feel as if I was starring in a Disney cartoon.

The water in the lake was clear and clean. We could see all the way to the bottom where weeds waved in the current. I might have seen a fish.

"The lake is stocked with trout," said the driver of the duck. "I often come fishing here and I've caught some wonderful fish. Nothing tastes quite as good as a freshly caught trout. Some of them grow very large – six pounds or more. Once I caught a nine pounder."

Someone quacked derisively.

"No really," said the driver. "I did. I've got photoshopped pictures to prove

it."

There were holiday houses on the lake shore. "That one," said the guide, pointing out a special house, "is one of the most luxurious lodges in the world. It costs \$10,000 a night to stay there and the minimum period you can book it for is three days. Stephen Spielberg stays there quite regularly and so does Peter Jackson. But you never find out they've been there until after they've gone. They value their privacy, and \$10,000 a night buys you a lot of privacy."

The duck bus resounded with quacks of amazement and quacks of jealousy as we all tried to imagine being rich enough to afford a lot of

privacy. We drove back across the lake and up on to the shore. Then we quacked back into town just in time for afternoon tea.

The next day seemed to be ideally designed for getting lost in a maze and so that's exactly what we did.

"There are two entrances," explained the maze lady. "The first one is harder than the second one. But whichever one you choose, the rules require you to exit the maze from the same gate that you went in by."

"I see," said Robin.

"There are four interconnected mazes," said the lady, "and in the far corner of each one there is a chamber with a coloured roof. There's a red one,

a green one, a blue one and a yellow one. You have to reach all of them before you are allowed to leave the maze."

"I see," said Robin.

"Don't worry if it takes you a long time or if you get thoroughly lost," said the maze lady. "We turn the lights on when it gets dark, so you'll always be able to see where you are going."

"I see," said Robin.

We chose an entrance. Mazes are Robin's speciality and so she led our little expedition. She chose a modified left hand rule strategy and it didn't take us long to find the red corner and the blue corner. I took photographs to prove that we were there. However the

yellow and green corners proved particularly elusive and it took quite a while before Robin's rigidly adhered to strategy finally succeeded in tracking them down. I took more photographs.

"Now all we have to do is find our way out," I said.

"I see," said Robin.

After much back tracking and track backing, we finally emerged from the maze. But catastrophe struck! We exited from the wrong gate!

"You broke the rules," shrieked the maze lady. "You'll have to buy an ice cream."

We soon discovered that this wasn't the only maze in Rotorua. The city itself is a maze; the streets are laid out

in a sensible, regular rectangular grid, which is very confusing to those of us who come from cities where the streets meander on a whim through multiple dimensions (I'll swear the centre of Wellington is a perfect Klein bottle). But in addition to this grid of maze-like city streets, there is also a much more traditional hedge maze growing on the outskirts of the town.

"Your goal is to reach the centre of the maze," said the maze man. "If you get scared or lost or if you just want to come out for a rest, there's a series of red doors that lead straight out."

"Can we cheat and use the red doors to reach the centre?" I asked.

"Certainly not," he said. "They only

open from the side you aren't on."

That seemed clear enough. So we set off to explore. Having used the left hand rule on our first maze, we decided to use the right hand rule on this one. The strategy worked perfectly except for the occasions when we had to turn left. Soon, after lots and lots of walking around gently curving hedgerows, we made it to the centre where we were rewarded by the sight of a genuine pirate boat flying the skull and crossbones.

After a rest, we left the maze through the red doors. There was one per hedge circle and I counted them on the way out. I was astonished to find that we had travelled through a dozen

hedgerows to reach the centre. It hadn't felt like nearly that many.

Close by the hedge maze was the Paradise Springs Trout Hatchery and Lion Park. Here both trout and lions are bred and possibly even interbred (the shaggy manes on the larger trout were a dead giveaway).

The river running through the grounds had a fiercely strong current. Ducks paddled madly against it, trying hard to stay in place and seldom succeeding. As they got tired, the current would whisk them away out of sight and out of mind. One duck was pretending it was a Pooh Stick. It allowed the current to sweep it under the bridge that Robin and I were

standing on and then it struggled back upstream to do it all over again. We dashed from side to side of the bridge so as to join in the game properly. The duck gave us an exhausted quack of appreciation as it finally gave up and drifted away downstream.

Beneath the struggling ducks, gigantic trout all faced upstream, mouths wide open, letting the water flow past them and nibbling on any goodies that it was carrying past them. They were obviously completely full of yummy food because none of them showed any real interest in the trout treats that Robin and I tossed into the water ahead of them. But the ducks seemed very partial to the trout treats.

They came racing in from all corners of the universe and squabbled loudly and fiercely over the manna that rained down from heaven. Ducks are partial to anything that will fit into their bills. I never met a duck that wasn't hungry.

Past the trout hatchery were some fenced in paddocks with goats and miniature horses, an alpaca, several pigs and the cutest wallabies you ever saw in your life. Robin fed the goats and the wallabies from the palm of her hand. The wallabies were beautiful, gentle creatures with soulful eyes and wistful faces. Robin immediately fell in love.

"Can we take them home with us?"

"No."

She went to feed the alpaca but was warned off by someone who seemed to know what they were talking about.

"Don't get too near the alpaca. They spit green slime at you."

Wishing to avoid green slime, we gave the alpaca a wide berth as we headed for the lion enclosure where we met two eight week old lion cubs. They were, of course, utterly delightful and completely irresistible animals. One was absolutely convinced that her right front paw was incapable of exploring by itself, and so she carried it around in her mouth to make sure that it wouldn't miss out on anything as she staggered around her enclosure on her other three legs. At first I thought that perhaps she

had hurt her paw, but the keepers reassured me that this was perfectly normal behaviour for her.

The keepers picked up the cubs and cuddled them close and then we were allowed to stroke them. Their coats were quite rough and the fur was much coarser than I had expected it to be. But nevertheless I felt immensely privileged to be so close to such magnificent animals.

Everywhere in Rotorua is thermal but some bits are more thermal than others. The best of them, according to the Lonely Planet Guide, is Orakei Korako. As you drive up to it, the first thing you see is a huge toilet block labelled "Guysers" and "Galsers". Once

you have finished splitting your sides with laughter at the multi-level puns, you wander down to a jetty where a ferry takes you over the lake to a boardwalk that winds through the thermal area.

Hot water cascades down silica terraces, depositing more stuff as it goes. These are the largest terraces still in existence in New Zealand. The famous Pink and White terraces were larger, but they were destroyed when Mount Tarawera erupted in 1886.

"It's the same principle that causes fur to build up in kettles," I explained to Robin, "only on a much larger scale."

"So what we are seeing here is

really Nature's Own tea kettle," she observed.

"Yes," I said. "But I'm not sure I want to drink a cup of whatever brew it is that She is mashing."

Unexpected steam was everywhere. It rose in great clouds from the silica terraces and in small wisps from the side of the boardwalk. Rather to my surprise, there was life everywhere. Not only were plants growing right to the edges of the terraces, there were large green patches of algae on the terraces themselves. Dragonflies zipped and hovered through the clouds of steam and spider webs glistened in the foliage.

There was one large patch of

sulphur gleaming bright yellow against the white silica. From a lookout point perched high above it we could see that it was ringed with green and brown and orange. This section is known as the Artist's Palette, for obvious reasons.

Pools of boiling mud played Bach Cantatas for us but the two major geysers in the area remained sullenly silent as we walked past them.

The boardwalk twists and turns and rises and falls for almost 3 kilometres. When you get back to the ferry landing you press a button and the ferryman in the cafe on the other side of the lake puts down his cup of tea and comes and picks you up. When we got back to the shore we had lunch on the verandah

that overlooked the lake. We could still see steam drifting into the sky from the thermal region.

Suddenly, without any warning at all, a huge plume of steam and water roared into the air high above the treetops.

"Look," said the ferryman who was drinking tea at the next table. "Geyser!"

He was a man of few words but every word was important. One of the geysers that had ignored us so thoroughly just a few minutes before had now decided to blow its top. I was sorry to have missed seeing it close to, but even at a distance it was magnificently impressive.

Robin and I drove back to Rotorua

in silent amazement. The Lonely Planet Guide was absolutely right. Surely this thermal area must be one of the most stunning sights in the world.

Our holiday gave us six days of blue skies and sunshine. The weather gods were definitely on our side. They proved this by sending us torrential rain on the day we returned home. Rotorua was sad to see us go - even the skies were crying.

Looking Backwards From The Year 2012

As I write this, we are just over a week away from New Zealand's 33rd National Science Fiction Convention. I have been asked to be on some panels to discuss the highs and lows of the conventions that I have attended in the past.

Actually, I'm not at all sure that I can tell the difference between the good bits and the bad bits. I don't think I've ever been to a convention that I

didn't enjoy in some way, shape or form. But some people's high spots are other people's bad memories, and some stories are definitely in dubious taste. Let's just see where the memories take me...

I first started going to conventions in England in the 1970s. The most immediate impression they made on me was that here were people whose books I'd been reading for years, and they were ordinary people, just like you and me. I was mildly disappointed to find that Brian Aldiss didn't have two heads – I'd always assumed that such a brilliant writer must have had more brains than the average, and surely he'd need somewhere to keep them,

wouldn't he? But it was encouraging to learn that he liked his beer and that, despite the lack of a second head, he was always witty and insightful.

James Blish, waspish and scholarly, already in the grip of the illness that would kill him a couple of years after we first met, was unfailingly charming. He was a literary polymath, interested in everything and he too was never far from a pint of beer.

Harry Harrison, striding up and down the stage and yammering into a microphone:

"I want to talk about two things. Something that interests you – sex! And something that interests me – my new book!"

refreshed his speaking voice with sips of beer. I began to spot a trend.

John Brunner, urbane, sophisticated and opinionated would drive his audiences to screaming fury as he said outrageous things with a supercilious sneer. It was years before I realised that he was doing it deliberately. He took great delight in winding people up.

I met Ken Bulmer, the man of a thousand pseudonyms. Fortunately he left a few spare ones lying around for John Brosnan to use. Between them they wrote almost every bit of pulp fiction that was published in England in the 1970s. Someone once asked Bulmer why he chose to write under

the silly and very unconvincing name of Tully Zetford.

"Because I was completely fed up with Roger Zelazny always being at the bottom of every alphabetical author list," he said. "I thought somebody else deserved a turn."

Ken Bulmer told us a funny story. He'd just got married and he and his new wife were spending their honeymoon at a friend's cottage somewhere deep in the English countryside. The cottage was charming and picturesque and their host was warm and welcoming. He showed them to their room. They dumped their suitcases onto the bed to start unpacking, and they immediately

discovered that the bed squeaked very loudly. Ken had a brilliant idea which he whispered to his wife. She giggled and agreed.

And so they spent their wedding night taking it in turn to jump rhythmically up and down on the bed. Slow, slow. Quick! Quick! Slow...

When one got tired, the other took over. Hour after squeaky hour. At breakfast the next day, his host shook Bulmer's hand admiringly.

I met Anne McCaffrey in a lift. She was painted green from head to toe. James Blish had written a play which was being staged as a convention highlight. Anne was cast as a witch and she was anxious to do a good job. As

the lift descended, she practised cackling. She was extremely good at it.

At various conventions, random members of The Deep Fix, Michael Moorcock's backing band, would play for us. Usually without Michael Moorcock, who'd largely given up coming to conventions. But sometimes he turned up and once he autographed a book for me. He scribbled his name on the title page and then he drew a cartoon of a rather dyspeptic looking chicken.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a moor cock!" he said, nearly laughing himself into a seizure.

But the highlight of every British convention in the 1970s was Bob

Shaw's Serious Scientific Talk. About half an hour before Bob was due to speak, the bars would begin to empty and everybody would crowd into the room hoping for a good seat. Bob, completely stone faced, would read from a prepared speech in his soft, lilting Irish voice. The speeches were always full of utterly demented science, excruciating puns and running gags that just went on and on. And when you were sure the gags couldn't run any further, he'd force them to take one more step. And then another. And another.

It was very important to be sitting down for Bob's Serious Scientific Talks. Those people who were too late

for a seat were in grave danger of falling over as they lost control of their motor functions from laughing too much. I have seen people literally sobbing with laughter at Bob's presentations, so weak with hysteria that it was a good five minutes after the talk ended before they were able to leave their seats in search of a reviving beer or three. And all through his presentation, Bob's face never once slipped. Indeed, he usually managed to look puzzled, even slightly annoyed that these people were taking his serious scientific ideas so lightly...

"I had a terrible hangover from all the room parties I attended last night," he said, opening one of his talks. "But

one of the convention committee brought me a guaranteed cure from the chemist's shop next door to the hotel. It's a local anaesthetic..."

At one convention, my friend Howard decided that he would spend the entire four days both completely drunk and wide awake.

"Sleeping", he declared, "is not an option."

None of us could persuade him that these were mutually incompatible ambitions.

"No – it's all quite logical," he said. "Since I won't need a hotel room to sleep in, I'll have heaps of money left to spend on beer."

By the third day of the convention,

he was more than a little the worse for wear, noticeably fraying around the edges. We went to a room party where he saw a slim young man sitting alone by a window. He staggered over and introduced himself. "Hello, I'm Howard," he said. "And you look just like Donny Osmond!"

Then he opened the window and vomited copiously out into the street.

The young man seemed most impressed by this conversational gambit and he and Howard were soon fast friends. He spent the rest of the convention with us and we discovered that he was the son of a writer called Edmund Cooper. Cooper is largely forgotten these days. He died in 1982

and his books are all out of print, but at the time of which we speak, he enjoyed a modest reputation. I was very fond of Cooper's books, and I had long been hoping to meet him at some convention or other, but I never did. He was quite reclusive. He didn't like the gross immaturity of the fan community very much, and so he never came to conventions.

However Howard's unique social skills opened up a private channel of communication with Edmund Cooper for us, and as a direct result of the wonderful time his son had at the convention with us, Cooper agreed to come and give a talk to the Nottingham Science Fiction group that Howard and

I both ran. He proved to be a fantastic speaker – he was loud, opinionated and argumentative and we all had lots of fun. It was one of our most successful meetings ever.

My favourite of Cooper's novels is **Kronk**, which was also published under the title **Son Of Kronk**. It turned out to be Cooper's favourite novel as well. He autographed a copy for me. In it he wrote:

For Alan, who actually bought it!
In this one I worked out all my pet hates.

Sometimes low moments can lead on to good things.

By the early 1980s I was living in New Zealand and I helped with the

organisation of some conventions here. The first one with which I was closely involved had Harlan Ellison as the guest of honour. I was a little worried about this for Harlan had the reputation of being difficult to get on with. Almost everyone who met him had some sort of Harlan Ellison horror story to tell.

Anyway, the great day arrived and we met Harlan at the airport and brought him to the hotel where he would be staying. Almost his first words to us were:

"I'm the guest of honour – make sure to use me!"

And he meant every word of it. He was very conscious that a guest of

honour can make or break a convention. He was enormously flattered to have been asked to come to the bottom of the world and he was determined that this convention was going to be a success. He insisted on being involved in absolutely everything that was going on. He made himself very visible and very approachable. I found him to be pleasant, polite and charming. I have no Harlan Ellison horror stories to tell.

But I do have a Harlan Ellison story.

The con committee took him out to dinner. We had a wonderful time. The food was beautifully cooked and impeccably served, the conversation

flowed, a good time was had by all. As we left the restaurant and started wandering back to the hotel Harlan said, "That was a truly superb meal. I hope you left a good tip."

"No," I said. "We didn't leave a tip at all. We don't tip in New Zealand."

"Oh my God!" Harlan was horrified. "You didn't leave a tip!"

He raced back into the restaurant and started handing out fistfuls of money to any staff member who wandered into view. "Fantastic meal, thank you. Thank you so much."

I have no idea how much money he gave in tips, but it definitely wasn't a small amount. I won't hear a bad word said about Harlan. He was a joy and a

delight.

Actually I think all convention guests are good guests. I don't think we've ever had a disappointing guest though some have certainly had their idiosyncrasies.

One charming and delightful guest insisted on being supplied with prostitutes and marijuana. Once the committee had arranged that to his satisfaction, the rest of the convention went fantastically well.

Another guest claimed that he was using the trip as a tax write off. He was researching a novel, part of which would be set in New Zealand. He asked us lots of questions and took copious notes so that he would have something

to show the tax department when it came time to fill in his return. I'm sure he got a huge tax refund from his notes. What a shame he didn't use any of them in the book that he wrote. The New Zealand sequences in it were thoroughly unconvincing.

Alan Dean Foster also wrote a novel set in New Zealand. It's called **Maori** and it's about the eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886. It's a brilliant novel which I recommend unreservedly. Foster had spent his honeymoon in New Zealand and he fell in love with the country. The novel was a direct result of what he learned during the time he spent here, and there's no doubt that he did his

homework well.

He was absolutely thrilled to be asked back many years later as a guest of honour at a convention. And he enjoyed himself just as much the second time around. It goes without saying that he proved to be a perfectly wonderful guest.

Joe Haldeman has been a guest of honour at three New Zealand conventions. At two of those conventions I was the corresponding fan guest of honour, so between the both of us we had the convention sewn up.

Joe and his wife Gay have a huge number of friends in New Zealand and it was very noticeable that at the last

convention where he was a guest many people who had not been to a New Zealand convention for years and years made a special point of coming just to see Joe and Gay again.

In 1995 Roger Zelazny and Vonda McIntyre were joint guests of honour. And true to form, they were wonderful guests. Accompanying Roger was Jane Lindskold, then just starting out on her writing career. She won the heart of everyone she met. We always claimed that she was our special, secret guest of honour. She has since had a successful career as a science fiction and fantasy novelist, and we are all enormously proud of her.

Jane and I have kept in touch, and

over the last year we have written a book together. So from a purely personal point of view, I have to say that the Norman ConQuest of 1995 was the best ever New Zealand convention.

Conventions have high points and they have low points and sometimes those points coincide. The masquerade at one British convention is a perfect example. The high point was a woman who was dressed as the viewpoint character from Robert Silverberg's novella **Nightwings**. She was stark naked, apart from her wings, and she was the most beautiful person I have ever seen in my life. The whole room reverberated to the distinctive sound of jaws dropping *thunk!* to the floor. She

got huge ovation, and she won every prize in sight.

And then came the low point. Brian Burgess came on stage. Brian was an English fan who had been coming to conventions for years. He always had a secret supply of pork pies and milk which he sold at outrageous prices to desperate, starving fans in the small hours of the morning. Many a fannish life has been saved with pork pies and milk at 4.00am. Everybody knew Brian. He was an institution.

Brian was a large and wobbly man and he too came on stage (almost) stark naked. He was wearing only shattered underpants and a ray gun. He stomped furiously around the stage, waving his

ray gun and shouting incomprehensible threats in lower Middle-Martian, jowls and belly undulating in unison. Only sheer willpower kept the remains of his underpants in place. The judges awarded him a special prize for Skimpiest Costume Ever.

Of course the fans are the life and soul of any convention. And just as conventions succeed or fail with the guest of honour so too they succeed or fail with the behaviour of the fans...

Once there was a room party, and in the small hours of the morning it dawned on someone that all the married men in New Zealand fandom were together in the same room. It was quite clear what had to happen next. A

new world record needed to be set.

"Let's see if we can get all the married men in fandom peeing simultaneously into one toilet bowl."

This required much logistical organisation. The toilets in hotel rooms are not noted for their wide open spaces, and just getting that number of men into the room was fraught with difficulty. But somehow we managed. Our next problem soon became clear. How could we aim accurately when we were so crowded? Even under the best of circumstances, men are notoriously inaccurate, and these circumstances were not of the best.

An English actress once remarked on Michael Parkinson's television chat

show that she was constantly amazed at how men ever managed to get women pregnant. After all, she pointed out, toilet bowls are quite large comparatively speaking. And if a man can't hit a hole that big with the light on and both hands free...

So there we all were, jammed together around the toilet bowl, barely able to move.

"Perhaps we should have had our willies fitted with gun-sights before we started this," I suggested. There was much nodding of heads. Why hadn't we thought of that first? Oh well – in for a penny, in for a dollar.

"On the count of three..."

We all nodded agreement.

"Three!"

There was the sound of much unzipping and then a new world record was set. It remains unbeaten to this day. Surely that's something to be proud of?

Alan Eats A Toad

In my capacity as President of SFFANZ (the Science Fiction and Fantasy Association of New Zealand), I constantly receive requests to review self-published novels. Indeed, some people even want to send me their unpublished manuscripts under the delusion that SFFANZ can arrange to have the things published for them. Considering that these people think of themselves as writers, they show a disturbing lack of comprehension of the written word. I would have thought that the descriptions of SFFANZ on our website would have made it abundantly

clear to the meanest intellect that we are not publishers and we are not affiliated with any publishers and we have no influence on any decisions made by publishers. It even says, in big bold letters on the front page of our site:

Please do NOT send us your manuscripts. SFFANZ is not a publisher.

But that makes no difference. The information just zooms past the eyeballs of these cretins without sinking in at all.

I consistently refuse to accept or review unpublished material. But my SFFANZ book reviewing colleagues and I do feel that we have some

obligation, albeit a small one, to at least look at the self-published material. We refer to this as "...eating a live toad" and we take it in turn to consume these sometimes less than savoury meals...

Just occasionally the meal actually is truly tasty. One of the nominations for this year's Sir Julius Vogel Award for best novel slithered in, hopping and croaking at us. Rather to our surprise, that particular toad turned out to be a well-disguised handsome prince. But this is the exception - almost always the books are dire.

The less tasty toads all have several things in common. Invariably the books are the first volume of a trilogy

or greater (nobody EVER writes stand alone novels any more) and the books are always very, very fat. In other words they look and feel exactly the same as the majority of books from commercial publishers. So why, you may ask, haven't the toads been published commercially?

I think there are several reasons. One very obvious one is that the books are often extremely derivative. They consist of page after turgid page of what some critics have called extruded fantasy product (or EFP for short) and show little or no trace of originality at all. When nothing distinguishes one book from another, when nothing leaps from the page to grab you, when

characters, plot and sometimes even geography can be moved unchanged from book to book and author to author then whether or not you win the lottery and get a professional publishing contract becomes simply a matter of chance. And the chances of success are vanishingly small. Publishers spend all day sliding between tottering stacks of slush pile paper - well actually these days the piles are probably made of electrons rather than paper, but the same image applies. If nothing makes your book stand out from the rest, if your characters and your plots simply make the reader's eyes glaze over with boredom, then you are unlikely ever to be noticed by the wheelers and the

dealers, the movers and the shakers of the publishing world.

And the very best way to not get noticed is to write what everybody else is writing.

Another reason why the toads taste so foul is that many of their authors can't write a simple declarative sentence to save their lives. Often the books are so large because every noun is qualified by six mutually exclusive adjectives and every verb is pinned quiveringly in place with endless adverbial lists. Metaphor and simile are strained to breaking point with grotesque images that add nothing whatsoever to the sense. One author described a lady attending a formal

dance like this:

In the sea of dancing, she glided like a bird inches from the waves...

Since when was a formal dance like the sea? And what's the lady doing hovering just above the dance floor? Do the other dancers push her to one side if she gets in the way? Is she a frictionless bearing or does her mass impart too much inertia to make her easily moveable? If we assume a perfectly spherical dancer of uniform density could we derive some useful equations of motion...

Another very common besetting sin in toad after toad is that whenever a new character appears on stage the action stops and we get a six page

potted biography of the character from the moment of his birth to the present. If we are really unlucky we'll also get ten pages on his ancestry, his family's social position, his hobbies and interests, the clubs he belongs to and the names of his pets. Then, once every backstory I is dotted and every backstory T is crossed, the action of the novel resumes, a door opens, another spear carrier walks in and... lather, rinse, repeat.

It is also quite clear that many of the toad authors have a tin ear for language and simply don't realise how strange and silly some of their sentences appear. One sure way to test out the language of the story and to

zero in on the more egregious stupidities is to read it out loud. It is sometimes quite obvious that the toad writers have never, ever let a word of their stories slip past their lips into the real world.

One of our toads had two characters, brothers I believe, who were called OHRL and FAERL. If you say those words out loud, no matter where the emphasis in your voice falls, it soon becomes clear that the two names are homonyms for ALL FAIL. Somehow I don't think that these two brothers are going to succeed in their quest, do you?

Another toad of my acquaintance managed the incredible feat of giving

every single character in the book exactly the same tone of voice and speech pattern. Elf, dwarf, troll or hideous, ravening fire-breathing monster, it made no difference - all of them spoke in the same way, with the same cadences and word choices. The dialogue was quite impossible to follow.

Furthermore, every single character in the book, no matter what their race, had the same moral imperatives, the same ethical view of the world, and the same political opinions. The only way you could tell the characters apart was when they went to a bar - they all liked different things to eat and drink. Aha! Could this be a character trait at long

last? Well, no not exactly. The comestibles all had weird, made up alien names. So who knows what was slithering down which gullet? Not me...

Urban legend claims that you can get high by licking toads. Not with these toads you can't. With these you can only get very, very low.

Alan And The Restaurant Fly

“Waiter, there's a fly in my soup!”

The waiter glanced lugubriously at my soup bowl, “Yes sir,” he said.

“That's Alfred.”

“Alfred?” I was puzzled. Why would a fly have a name?

“Yes sir,” explained the waiter. “Alfred is the restaurant fly. Every restaurant in New Zealand is obliged by law to employ a fly. You must have seen restaurant flies before.”

“Well yes,” I said. “I have noticed that I do seem to come across a fly

every single time I eat in a restaurant. But I was not aware that the employment of these flies was a legal obligation. When was the law passed? I don't recall any discussion of it in the newspapers.”

“Oh it's not a new law, sir. It's been on the statute books for more than 150 years. It was one of the very first laws passed by the New Zealand Parliament after the Treaty Of Waitangi was signed.”

“So Alfred the Fly is an employee of the restaurant?” I asked, trying to get my head around the idea.

“Indeed he is,” said the waiter. “And his duties are quite onerous. He actually earns a larger salary than I

do.”

“But I don't suppose he gets as many tips as you do,” I said. “Surely that cancels the larger salary out?”

“Well,” said the waiter, “in most countries of the world it would. But since nobody in New Zealand ever leaves a tip, the point is moot.”

“So what are Alfred's duties?” I was intrigued.

“Mainly he has to take a swim in every glass of wine. That's quite exhausting when you are as small as Alfred. We've been trying to persuade him to conserve his energy and use the breast stroke. After all, he's not as young as he used to be. But he insists that breast stroking is for wimps. Real

flies use the Australian Crawl. By the end of the evening he's often quite tuckered out.. Sometimes he barely has enough strength left to shit in the salads. That's his other major job and I think it's his favourite.”

I watched Alfred doing the Australian crawl up and down my soup bowl. “So presumably it isn't only the wine that he swims in?”

“Oh no sir – any and all liquids are available to him, though wine is to be preferred because it is the most expensive of our liquid refreshments. However he has complete discretionary access. I think his choice of liquid depends on his mood. Possibly he was feeling chilled after his last marathon

effort in a glass of Chardonnay. Your soup represents a perfect opportunity to warm himself up.”

Alfred swam lazily to the side of my soup bowl and hauled himself up onto the rim. He brushed himself down with each and every leg, one by one, and shook little drops of soup off himself back into my bowl. Then, after a brief rest, he launched himself into the air heading determinedly for the other side of the restaurant.

“Ah,” said the waiter, “I see that one of my colleagues has just served a salad to the diners on table number ten. Alfred must heed the call of duty. He's very conscientious. He seldom takes a rest. But don't worry, sir. I'm sure he

will eventually make his way back to you. Would you care for another glass of wine?”

“No thank you,” I said. “Not just at the moment.” I put my soup spoon down. “Perhaps you could clear my soup away,” I said. “I feel that I've had enough.”

“Was everything to your taste, sir?” enquired the waiter.

“Indeed it was,” I replied. “But I'd like to leave room for the next course. However I have a question for you.”

“Yes sir?”

“Outside in the street it is the middle of winter. Why isn't Alfred hibernating, or whatever it is that flies do in the winter? Generally speaking

they are seldom if ever seen at this time of the year.”

“Alfred doesn't know that it is winter,” said the waiter. “We have a lovely temperature controlled tropical rain forest in an alcove just off the kitchen and that's where Alfred lives. He seldom goes outside and so the changes of season remain unknown to him. Please don't inform him that it is winter. We wouldn't want to lose him, he's a valuable and popular employee.”

“Perish the thought,” I said.

“Thank you sir,” said the waiter.

“By the way, I notice that you are reading an ebook while you enjoy your meal,”

“That's right,” I said. “I find ebook

readers to be very convenient gadgets. And the touch screen is a joy and a delight to use.”

“Hmmm,” said the waiter. “I feel I should let you know that Alfred recently got a substantial pay rise because a new task has been added to his job description.”

“Oh yes?” I said. “What's that?”

“He is required to walk left and right across the screen of every customer's ebook reader, thus causing the pages to turn in rapid succession and making the customer lose his place in the book he is reading.”

“I would imagine that would be very annoying,” I said.

“Indeed it is,” said the waiter, “and

Alfred is particularly proud of his skills in that area.”

“I think I'd like to order a salad,” I said, “and a glass of wine. Perhaps Alfred might find them distracting enough to allow me to finish my chapter.”

“Certainly sir,” said the waiter. “I'll fetch them immediately.”

Alan And The Clockwork Man

“What's the time?” asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Well the big hand is pointing at the II and the little hand is pointing at the IX so it must be ten past nine.”

“That can't be right,” said Robin.

“*Midsomer Murders* has just started on the TV and that always starts at 9.30.”

“You're right,” I said. “Perhaps the clock needs a new battery.”

I changed the battery and adjusted the time. We settled down to watch the television.

Time passed. The clock ticked. Almost without us noticing, today turned into tomorrow.

“What's the time?” asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Well the big hand...”

“We've already done that,” said Robin.

“Sorry.” I compared the time on the clock to the time on my watch and the time on my computer. “The clock's about ten minutes slow,” I said. “The new battery doesn't seem to have helped. I think the clock might be broken.”

“How can we get it fixed?”

“There's a shop in Wellington that specialises in fixing clocks,” I said.

“I'll take it there.”

The next day I went into the clock shop clutching my clock. The walls of the shop were covered in things that went *tick* and things that went *tock*. Occasionally, much to my annoyance, one of the things went *cuckoo*.

“Yes?” said the man behind the counter.

“I have a clock that is greatly in need of repair,” I explained.

“Well you've come to the right place then,” said the man. “That's all I do, day in and day out. I fix broken clocks. I don't do anything else. Let's have a look at it.”

I laid my clock on the counter and explained my problem. The man

sneered at it.

“It's got one of those battery driven movements,” he said contemptuously. “Modern rubbish. They're always breaking down. It can't be repaired. I'll have to throw the old movement away and replace the whole thing. Not that it's worth bothering. Cheap, nasty things. Can't be relied on.”

I started to get the feeling that he didn't approve of clocks with electronic cogs. “But you can fix it?” I asked.

“Just said that, didn't I? Not that I really want to. Waste of time if you ask me.”

“But we really like it,” I said. “It was one of the first things we bought ourselves after we got married. It has

great sentimental value. And besides, the face is really rather attractive. We like that fact that the clock is oval rather than round and the Roman numerals are particularly elegantly presented.”

“Alright! Alright! Leave it with me and I'll see what I can do. But it will take at least two weeks, I've got a huge backlog. And it will cost a fortune.”

“How much?” I asked.

“\$70,” he said, obviously pulling a figure out of thin air in the hope that I would go away and stop bothering him.

“Righto,” I said. “Let's do it.”

He sniffed and sneered and tore a couple of inches of paper off a pad that was lying on the counter. He picked up

a green felt tipped pen. “What's your name and phone number?” he asked.

I told him my name. He wrote it down wrongly, as everybody always does.

“No,” I said, “that's not right. The name is R-O-B-S-O-N not R-O-B-E-R-T-S-O-N.”

He scribbled over the E-R-T. “And the phone number?”

I told him my phone number. He wrote it down wrongly.

“No,” I said, “that's not right. The last four digits are 6-3-3-5 not 6-3-5-5.”

He changed the first 5 to something that might have been a 3 if you squinted at it just right, and the wind

was from the west. But we only get northerly winds in Wellington, except when we get southerlies. I was not hopeful that future communications would be fruitful.

“I'll ring you when it's ready,” he said as he sellotaped the scrap of paper to the clock face. I left him to his *ticks, tocks* and *cuckoos*.

Time passed. Three weeks to be exact. I went back to the shop.

“Three weeks ago, I left a clock for repair,” I explained. “You said it would take two weeks. But since I haven't heard back from you, I thought I'd come and see what was happening with it.”

“I've been phoning you, but nobody

answers. The phone just rings and rings and rings.”

“Funny,” I said. “We've not had any calls at all.”

“I've been ringing and ringing. You're never bloody there. Anyway, what does your clock look like?”

“It's sort of oval shaped...” I waved my hands vaguely and looked around the shop for inspiration. “There it is! That one over there, hanging on the wall.” I pointed at my clock and he unhooked it from the wall and brought it over.

“Here you are.” He plonked it down on the counter. There was a scrap of paper sellotaped to it. I looked at the paper and read the green felt tipped

words.

“My name isn't Mr Carruthers,” I said. “And that's not my phone number.”

“Well no wonder you never answered the phone if it isn't your number,” he said. He didn't sound very surprised.

“But who is Mr Carruthers and why didn't he answer?” I asked.

“I've no idea who Mr Carruthers is,” said the man. “I imagine he's someone who wanted a clock repaired.” He looked around the dozens of clocks hanging on the walls. “I wonder which one is his?”

“Probably the one with my name on it,” I suggested.

“I doubt if it's that simple,” he said scornfully. “Oh well, it'll sort itself out. He'll come in one day asking for his clock. I'll find it for him then.”

“Does this sort of thing happen often?” I asked.

“Oh yes, all the time. You get used to it. That'll be \$70.”

I took out a credit card.

“I don't do credit cards or eftpos,” he said. “Nasty, modern electronic ideas. They'll never catch on. Cash or cheque only.”

“I'll be back in a little while,” I said. “I'll have to go to a money machine. I don't usually carry that much cash on me.

“Hurry up,” he said. “If you're not

back here in five minutes I'll give your clock to Mr Carruthers.”

Fortunately there was a money machine just across the road and I was back in the shop very quickly.

“Here you are,” said the clockwork man. He put my clock in a plastic bag and I took it home.

“What's the time?” asked Robin.

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Well the big hand...”

Alan Stays In A Hotel

The first hotel I ever stayed in was The Bay Hotel in the small seaside village of Cullercoats, which is on the Northumberland coast in the far North of England. For most of the 1950s, my family went to Cullercoats every July for our annual summer holidays. We'd spend the time visiting relatives and playing on the beach. Merchant ships with cargoes of coal flowed out of the port of Newcastle. On their return journey they would wash out their empty holds just off the coast and

consequently the beach at Cullercoats was always black with the coal dust that the tide brought ashore. All the sandcastles that I built there were speckled black and yellow, and I would return to the hotel at the end of the day, tired and triumphant, looking rather like a coal miner who had just emerged from a hard shift in the pit.

By modern standards, The Bay Hotel was rather primitive. None of the bedrooms had washing or toilet facilities; we all had to use the communal bathroom at the end of the corridor and it was furnished and equipped with the grim post-war austerity that typified 1950s England. But I had nothing to compare it with.

The Bay Hotel was my first hotel, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. Every year I looked forward to re-visiting its shabby, greasy furniture and its frayed carpets. I have very fond memories of our summer holidays in Cullercoats.

Since then I have stayed in hotels large and small, both luxurious and slummy, all over the world. I have learned many things about hotel cultures and I have found that it isn't the condition of the building that matters, it's the ambience that is important and that ambience is a combination of many things, most of them quite intangible.

The So Hotel in Christchurch had

ambience down to a fine art. Run by unregenerate post modern hippies, it was the practical personification of new age philosophy. It had homeopathic mood lighting in every room and meditative visual mantras on the television. It was so laid back that it lost its balance in the earthquakes and sadly it no longer exists. That is So upsetting.

Another very ambient hotel, and one of my very favourite hotels ever, now also sadly demolished, was in Suva, the capital city of Fiji. The hotel was an old colonial building and the bar and restaurant area were decorated like a stage set from a 1920s play. I kept expecting Somerset Maugham to

wander casually into the bar and order a pink gin. The chef was truly inspired and the meals, full of fresh local produce, were mouth-wateringly delicious.

My bedroom was old and shabby but the sheets on the bed were spotlessly clean and the ladies who did were all terribly proud of their high standards. Every bit of crumbling chrome in the bathroom shone, every stain in the shower was polished to perfection. I would lie in bed at night soothed by the rustling sounds of cockroaches scurrying hither and yon across the floor. Sometimes I'd turn the light on just to watch them run away and hide. Most mornings there were

several cockroaches trapped in the toilet. I quickly learned that cockroaches are flush-resistant and I never felt truly comfortable lowering my bottom onto the seat while the cockroaches waited beneath me, eagerly anticipating the treat to come.

It wasn't long before the cockroaches and I were on first name terms. Like all the hotel staff, they were friendly and obliging creatures. One morning, about 4.00am, I was nudged awake by Derek, the largest of the cockroaches. He had huge antennae and was the best scuttler I'd ever met.

“Alan,” said Derek urgently, “something's going on.”

Outside the hotel, there was a lot of

raucous shouting and rhythmic chanting. These sounds are not commonly heard at 4.00am in Suva and Derek was worried.

“Do you think it might be a coup?” he asked. Fiji is famous for its coups. They are a national sport. When there's nothing worth watching on the TV, they have a coup. And there's never anything worth watching on the TV...

“No,” I said. “It isn't a coup. There's an important rugby match this weekend and the team are out training on the rugby pitch next door to the hotel. When I had dinner last night, the waiter warned me that this would happen. He's on the team. I'm sorry – I forgot to pass the message on to you.”

“That's all right,” said Derek. “But why are they training at 4.00am?”

“Because the temperature hasn't got uncomfortably hot yet,” I explained.

“It's still lovely and cool outside, just perfect for chasing a rugby ball. And anyway, they've all got jobs to go to during the day so they'll be too tired to train in the evening after working hard all day in the sun.”

“I see,” said Derek thoughtfully.

The cockroaches and I opened the curtains and peered outside. On the rugby field, golden moonlight shone on massive men built like tree-trunks who chased and tackled each other with enormous enthusiasm. Crowds of excited spectators urged them on.

“This is fun,” said Derek, and all the cockroaches nodded their heads in agreement. And so did I.

Some hotels go out of their way to make you feel unwelcome. There is a hotel in Auckland which has this down to a fine art. The reception desk is officially closed during normal check-in and check-out times. If you are ever unlucky enough to find someone at reception during the weird hours when it is actually open, they are invariably surly and uncooperative. Every room has a compendium describing the hotel facilities. Every sentence in the compendium begins with the words “You will not...” and goes on to describe the dire consequences that

will ensue should you dare to commit any of the enumerated sins. Crucifixion is strongly hinted at and impalement is implied. Guests at this hotel suffer permanent scars to the psyche. The ambience is negative.

Most rooms look out over a building site where large yellow machinery makes loud industrial noises at all hours of the day and night. Ear plugs are an extra charge on the room.

After all that it comes as something of an anti-climax to find that the rooms are the size of broom cupboards (but that's all right – there's a rule against cat swinging, those caught indulging in the practice are condemned to be nibbled to death by mice).

It is also less than surprising to find that the shower fitting is pulling away from the wall and that it leaks through so many orifices that there is barely any pressure in the shower head itself. But this, being the fault of the hotel rather than the fault of the guest, is not subject to any punishment at all.

Somewhat to my surprise, I found a person sitting in reception.

“The shower leaks,” I said, “and the soap tray is broken and hanging by a thread. Can I move to a room where the fixtures and fittings actually work?”

“No,” he said, and then he nailed my feet to the floor as punishment for my temerity in asking for another room. “Anyway, all the rooms are the

same. Moving won't change anything. None of the showers work.”

I haven't stayed in a hotel since then. It's hard to go anywhere else when your feet are nailed to the floor.

Lurgi Strikes Alan

In 1954, according to contemporary accounts authored by Spike Milligna and Eric Sykes, Great Britain suffered from its first and greatest epidemic of the lurgi, the most dreadful malady known to mankind. Symptoms include knee trembling and an uncontrollable urge to cry 'Yack-a-boo!' at crucial moments.

As the epidemic took its fearsome toll, It became abundantly clear that nobody who played a brass-band instrument ever caught the lurgi, thus clearing the way for Count Jim "Thighs" Moriarty and the Honourable

Hercules Grytpype-Thynne to dispose of their hoarded instruments at a huge profit.

Soon Britain was safe again, and the Brighthouse and Rastrick Brass Band had so many new members that they had to hire an extra forty two halls for the annual championship play off with the Grimethorpe Colliery Band.

Brighthouse and Rastrick won by three goals and a minor key touchdown, though some people claim that their use of the double reverse sousaphone manoeuvre in the closing minutes of the second half gave them an unfair advantage.

The dreaded lurgi soon spread throughout the English speaking world,

except for America of course, where it seemed to manifest as the much less dreaded cooties. It became quite common for people to ring the office and explain that they wouldn't be coming in today because they had the lurgi. Milligna and Sykes now found themselves in very distinguished company. Along with Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll (with both of whom they had a lot in common), they had invented a new word which quickly became part of common usage.

In August 2012, lurgi struck me down. I was marooned in Auckland at the time and bereft of brass instruments. Not a trombone was to be had, scarcely a trumpet. Oh goodness

me, there was nothing for it – the dread disease would have to run its full course.

It began on the Monday morning. I awoke with a sore throat and a fever. I don't know about you, but when I have a fever my skin becomes very sensitive. The slightest touch is almost, but not quite, horribly painful. My legs are particularly prone to this nasty sensation and pulling a pair of trousers over them is decidedly unpleasant. The hairs curl and wriggle excruciatingly under the press of the fabric. I began to contemplate the advantages of trouserless teaching. Would my students be able to cope? Reluctantly, I decided not to put it to the test. They'd

already be nervous about all the high-powered things they'd have to study. I could see no point in reinforcing that inferiority complex by appearing before them with naked legs. And so, covered in trousers, I made my sick and shaking way to the classroom for my first day of torture.

"I have the lurgi," I explained to my students. "And by the end of the week you too will probably have the lurgi. But in between those two events I will endeavour to teach you all I know about computers. You will be pleased to hear that I have a degree in chemistry, and I am therefore fully qualified to teach computer courses."

The students were duly sympathetic

to my plight. I coughed and sneezed my way through the day, explicating esoterica as I went. String quartets, those saccharine structures, slid through my nasal passages and slithered down my throat which itself was getting more painful by the minute as the catgut and horsehair tangled around my tonsils. My leg lagging became progressively more irritating and I could feel my knees turning blue. By the end of the day I had lost my voice and I had spots before my ankles.

" ", I said to the class when it was time to go home.

"Bye, bye. See you tomorrow. I hope you soon feel better," said the students.

" ", I replied and made my way back to the hotel where I collapsed into bed and, pining for a flugelhorn, fell asleep.

As the week progressed, so did my lurgi. Entire orchestras died unpleasant mucoid deaths as they smothered in the amazonian flow of a foul and slimy liquid that leaked constantly from my nose and throat. I changed my surname by deed poll to Phlegming because it seemed as if I was spending all my time doing exactly that. But at least I was being green – and that's about as politically correct as you can get in this best of all possible worlds!

Feeble trumpeters had little success in keeping the holocaust at bay. Lurgi

enveloped my classroom. "Yack-a-boo! Yack-a-boo!" Students writhed in intellectual agony. Kneecaps succumbed to the esoterica of the linux command line.

" ", I explained.

"So lucid!," exclaimed my students. "Such elegance of expression."

Somewhere the haunting sound of phantom cornets played. Nothing else could save me from ignominious tragedy. Early to bed and early to rise showed no signs whatsoever of making me healthy, wealthy or wise. All I got was lots of sleep and a deep appreciation of raucous music.

Somehow the terrible week dragged its way to a conclusion and eventually

it was time to go home. First step – get a taxi to the airport.

" ", I said to the taxi driver.

"?", he replied.

I quickly acquired a euphonium from the Black Dyke Mills Band, and with it I honked the opening bars of "Leaving on a Jet Plane". Peter, Paul and Mary, who happened to be passing, sang harmony and strummed their trombones. The lurgi relief was immediate. My kneecaps settled down to a normal rate of spin and my deep throat ache eased into a shallow throbbing.

"!", said the taxi driver. "Yack-a-boo!"

Oh dear...

Checking in at the airport was a trivial exercise. It's all done automatically by magic machines these days; no cut throat work is required at all. But my double bell euphonium caused some consternation when I took it through security.

"It's essential medical equipment," I croaked. "I have a prescription signed by the famous, not to say infamous, Doctor Eccles himself."

"Infamous?" said the security man.

"I told you not to say infamous!"

"You can't take that thing on an aeroplane," said the security man. "It's far too sharp."

"Will it be safe enough if I promise only to play it flat?"

Robin welcomed me home with open sackbuts. The cats put their paws in their ears.

"That noise is far too horny," said Harpo. "I might be forced to throw a bucket of water over you."

"Oompah, oompah, stick it up your joompah," I replied.

Tooth Is Stranger Than Friction

Robin had been away for a week, visiting her parents in Australia. The cats and I were looking forward to a weekend of incredible debauchery.

"Will there be creatures?" asked Harpo, flexing his claws. They slid in and out of their sheaths like evil stilettos. "Things to kill?"

"Yes there will," I said. "There's one quivering in fear behind the fridge even as we speak."

"Is there?" Harpo sounded doubtful.

"Yes – it sneaks out at night when

nobody is around and eats the remains of your dinner. Haven't you noticed how fast the food has been disappearing lately?"

"We'll see about that!" declared Harpo and he went and sat to attention by the fridge, waiting for action.

Bess was less certain about the weekend of sin. "I'd really rather just sleep on my new cushion," she said. "Is all this really necessary?"

"If that's what floats your boat," I said, "then sleep away. This weekend is all about doing what makes you feel good."

"What are you going to do?" Bess asked.

"I've got a book to read and a DVD

to watch," I said, "and I'm cooking a curry. It's going to be the most debauched weekend ever."

"Oh YES!" said Harpo, and all three of us gave each other high fives. As we did that, one of my teeth gave a little twinge. I ignored it.

The Saturday of our weekend of unalloyed pleasure arrived. There was a mild, throbbing pain in my tooth now, but I paid it no attention. I had far more important things to concentrate on; I had a curry to cook. Shortly after breakfast, I began to concentrate on frying onions and adding pinches of this and that to the increasingly savoury sauce that the lamb was simmering in. Curries are best cooked

the day before they are eaten. The longer they rot in the fridge before you re-heat and serve them, the tastier they become. It's never too early to cook a curry. The cats watched anxiously.

"Don't you think you should add a bowl of mice?"

"How about a dried lizard to give it some body? I've got a spare one under the sofa."

I took their advice very seriously. Always listen to your cats. They are wise in the ways of the world. Then the phone rang.

"Hello, Laurie here," said Laurie.

"Hello, Laurie Here," I said, "this is Alan There."

It's our little ritual. We find it

amusing. Nobody else does. I can't think why...

"What are you doing this evening?" asked Laurie.

"I have a curry, a book and a DVD," I said. "The cats and I are planning some decadence"

"No you aren't," Laurie hinted.

"Aren't I?"

"No," suggested Laurie gently. "You are coming round here for dinner."

If Laurie ever invites you for dinner, you should always accept. The man is a kitchen god, similar to, though considerably less shapely than, the Nigella herself. However he compensates for his lack of shape by

singing in a much higher register than the comparatively husky Nigella – he sings counter-tenor with the Orpheus choir.

I took my twinging tooth to Laurie's where I was pleased to find that the food was soft and delicious. I was starting to doubt my ability to bite anything hard. My tooth was feeling very sensitive, and so was I.

By the time I left Laurie's to go back home, my tooth was really the only thing I could think about. I was in quite a lot of pain and when I got home I collapsed straight into bed. But I didn't sleep very well. A blacksmith had moved an anvil just behind my tooth and a never ending procession of

dwarves were rhythmically beating swords into ploughshares on it. I dosed myself with pain killers. They didn't kill any pain.

The following day being Sunday, all the dentists in the country were out playing golf. I lay in bed with a throbbing jaw. I drank lots of tea – the warm liquid helped a bit and I chewed on the hot tea bags. That also helped a little. Eventually I had a bright idea and I put a wet rag in a plastic bag and warmed it in the microwave. I spent the rest of the day and most of the night holding it to my cheek and jaw.

As soon as the dentist opened for business on Monday morning, I rang and asked for an emergency

appointment.

"Come round immediately," said the nurse, so I did.

The dentist sat me down in his torquemada chair. "So," he said, "let's see what's going on here. The first order of business is to find out just which teeth are causing the problem."

He picked up the silver hammer that he had bought from Maxwell's Dental Supplies. Bang! Bang! Maxwell's silver hammer came down upon my tooth. Bang! Bang! Maxwell's silver hammer went seeking for the truth. "Does that hurt?"

I shook my head. Wrong tooth. He tried again.

Once he and the nurse had pulled

me down from the ceiling, he said, "I'll take that as a yes."

Eventually we determined that two teeth in my upper jaw were very sensitive. X-Rays were called for.

"Aha!," he said. "There's an abscess under one of the teeth, but I can't see any reason for the other one to be hurting. Perhaps it's just a sympathetic pain. Well, let's work on the obvious things first. I'm going to drill down through the root and let the abscess drain. I'll just numb you a bit before I start."

He produced the needle of necessary things and pumped several gallons of paralysing fluid into my gum. All sensation fled from my face

and for the first time in several days I was feeling no pain.

"That'll do," I said. "Let's leave it there. I'll just come back every couple of hours for a top up."

"Sorry," said the dentist. "It doesn't work like that." He began to call for the tools of his trade and the nurse handed them over, one by one. Black and Decker drills whirred, dynamite was packed in the holes and titanic explosions rocked my jaw.

"Gosh," said the dentist, "that's the longest root I've ever seen. I wonder how far it goes? I think I need another X-Ray."

Another X-Ray later, the dentist said thoughtfully, "What's the longest

drill we've got?"

"42mm," said the nurse.

"That should be long enough," said the dentist as he resumed drilling. "I might even reach the brain with that one. I always wanted to drill into a brain."

Eventually he seemed satisfied with his progress. He packed the enormous hole in my tooth with a temporary antibiotic soaked filling and sent me on my way. My wallet was so light after paying his golf club membership fees for the next three years that I almost floated out of his office.

Overnight the left side of my face swelled up to the size of a football. The swelling was so huge that I could

barely open my left eye and my nose was twisted several millimetres off centre. I rang the dentist. The nurse answered the phone and I explained my symptoms.

"Oh gosh, that's not normal," said the nurse. "You'd better come back straight away." So I did.

"That's rather impressive," said the dentist when he saw my face. "Looks like the infection from the abscess has spread into the soft tissues. I think we'd better put you on a course of antibiotics. Meanwhile let's see what's going on with the teeth."

Maxwell's silver hammer revealed that the second tooth was still sensitive. "That worries me," said the

dentist. "There's no obvious reason for it. There's nothing on the X-Rays. I think I'd better drill into it and see what's going on."

Drills drilled. Have you ever noticed how good drills are at drilling? You'd almost think they were designed for it...

"Aha!" exclaimed the dentist triumphantly. "There's an infection actually in the root itself. No wonder it didn't show up on the X-Ray. I think I'd better drill the whole root out."

"OK," I gulped.

"Nurse," he thundered, "fetch me a size 84 Ryobi and Makita with the patented left hand twist reverse power screw."

Afterwards, I staggered off clutching a prescription for massive doses of antibiotics. I wondered if I had enough money in my wallet for the prescription charges. My dentist now had a lifetime membership of his golf club, and as I left the surgery, I overheard him on the phone booking an extended cruise to the Solomon Islands.

I returned to work. Since the swelling had closed my left eye, the monocular vision from my right eye left me with no depth perception whatsoever. This had strange and interesting results when I tried to draw diagrams on the white board. I couldn't tell how close the marker was to the

board and I made lots of squelchy squiggles as it constantly took me by surprise. Fortunately my students were very understanding and they only laughed at me when I wasn't looking.

Over the next few days the swelling started to die down as the antibiotics kicked in. I had binocular vision again and my nose straightened up. There was no pain any more, thank goodness, but there were extremely high levels of discomfort, which was almost as bad. The dentist couldn't put permanent fillings in yet because of the infection. He put another set of temporary fillings in and gave me a prescription for more antibiotics.

"Let's see how it looks in a week,"

he said presenting me with yet another enormous bill.

The following week I was pleased to see a new Rolls Royce parked in his private space when I arrived for my treatment. "Nice car," I said.

"Thank you," he said, rubbing his hands gleefully. "How's the tooth?"

He had a good look around inside my mouth and decided that it was time for the permanent fillings at last. "I'm going to use a rubber dam," he explained. "It stops nasty tasting things falling into your mouth and it keeps the saliva away from the holes in the teeth. Horrible stuff, saliva. Full of germs. We'd all be better off without it."

He stretched a thick green condom-

like object around my teeth and hammered some wedges in to hold it in place. Then he drilled out the old fillings.

"Cement," he said to the nurse.

She turned on the cement mixer and it churned away for a while. "We're running out of sand," she observed.

"Better order some more after we've finished this job," said the dentist. He shovelled cement into my tooth and pounded it flat with a pneumatic jackhammer. "There," he said in tones of deep satisfaction, "that should do it."

I paid the final bill.

"Thanks," he said as he showed me to the door. "Any idea what's involved

in gold-plating a Roller?"

"No," I said. "But I'm sure you'll tell me all about it when I come for my routine check up next month."

I went home feeling glad it was all over and things were back to normal. As I opened my front door, I saw Bess looking anxiously at me.

"Are you OK now?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Oh good," she said. "So is it time for my debauchery at last?"

Alan And The Change Of Life

I was in the pub sipping a beer and reading a book, as one does, when a voice said, "Are you Alan Robson?"

I looked up, still half lost in the story I was reading. A man was staring at me. "Yes," I said tentatively.

He smiled. "John Simeon," he said.

Three decades of my life raced across the room and walloped me around the head. "John," I said, delighted. "It really is you!"

And it was. We spent the rest of the evening swapping scandal and playing

catch up on each other's lives.

So now let me tell you all about John Simeon, the man who brought me to New Zealand in the first place, the man who completely changed my life.

#####

England in 1980 was a pretty depressing place for me. Ian, my best friend, had just moved to Holland, my family was being more than usually poisonous, and there were rumblings of big changes in my job. I'd survived one round of layoffs. It wasn't clear whether or not I would survive another. I wasn't even sure if I *wanted* to survive another. So I was fed up and more than half looking to move

somewhere new. Preferably somewhere a lot further away from my immediate family.

Then one day Ian rang me all the way from Dordrecht in Holland.

"Have you seen today's *Times*?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Should I have?" I didn't normally read the *Times*, but Ian had it air-freighted to him every day at vast expense because he was addicted to the crossword puzzle.

"Yes you should," he said. "The New Zealand Dairy Board is recruiting programmers and they are holding interviews in London. You need to apply."

"Why?" I asked. "I don't want to go

to New Zealand."

"Yes you do," explained Ian. "I want to come for a holiday and I'll need to sleep in your spare room."

"Oh, I see," I said. "You'd better give me the details then."

He read out the contact details and I scribbled them down. Interviews were being held in a posh London hotel and the advert said that all the candidates who were invited for an interview would have their travel expenses to London refunded. Suddenly I got interested. London was full of science fiction bookshops and I was running short of my favourite recreational drug. Here was a perfect opportunity to get a free trip to my dealers so that I could

top up my bookshelves. There'd be a boring half hour in the middle of the day while I answered interview questions, but I was sure I could cope with that.

I polished up my CV and posted it to the address that Ian had given me. A few days later a letter arrived inviting me for an interview. Apparently I would be interviewed by John Simeon, the IT manager at the Dairy Board. I packed an empty suitcase that I intended to fill with books and set off for London.

I arrived at the hotel where I was greeted by a tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice. "I'm John Simeon," he said. "Come in, sit

down, make yourself comfortable."

He had papers spread out on a desk. He picked up my CV and we went through the details of my life and career and he scribbled some notes as we spoke. John told me all about life in New Zealand and about what the Dairy Board did. I found him very easy to talk to, and because I was really there just to visit the bookshops, and because I wasn't all that bothered about the job itself anyway, I was very relaxed as the interview progressed. I just answered John's questions with the plain, unvarnished truth. I made no attempt whatsoever to bullshit or to gild the lily. In retrospect, I think that must have made a big impression on him. I

remember one question that he asked.

"What do you know about indexed-sequential files and ISAM?"

"Nothing at all," I said. John made a note.

The interview proceeded and eventually we got to the point where John said, "And have you got any questions for me?"

"Yes," I said. "Why have you come all the way from the far side of the world just to recruit programmers?"

"Oh there aren't any programmers left in New Zealand," said John airily. "They've all gone overseas, mainly to Australia. So we decided to look further afield."

"But why come to England?"

"Because I want to go to Wimbledon," said John. "I just love tennis!"

I was beginning to understand how John's mind worked. We may have been from opposite sides of the world, but nevertheless we were very similar people.

"Can I take a photo of you?" asked John. "Just so I remember what you look like. I'm interviewing a lot of people and there will be many different faces sitting where you are over the next few days. I don't want to get confused."

"Yes of course," I said. John produced a polaroid camera. He pointed it at me and pressed a button.

The flash went off and a small piece of paper slid out from the bottom of the camera. We waited while the image developed and then we examined it and we both agreed that yes, it did look a little bit like me. John stapled the photograph to my CV, together with the notes he had made.

"What did it cost you to get here for the interview?" John asked. I told him, and he gave me the money. We shook hands and I left to buy my books. It had all been a very successful day.

A week or so later a letter arrived from John. He was offering me a job. Goodness me!

Without pausing to think, I immediately wrote back accepting the

offer. I knew that if I thought about it too much, I'd chicken out because the idea of uprooting myself and going so far away was very scary. But once my letter of acceptance dropped into the post box, I felt I was committed. I couldn't back out now.

The bureaucratic wheels began to grind. I had to have a medical exam. I had to apply for permission to come and live and work in New Zealand. I was invited to come for an interview at New Zealand House so as to determine my fitness to live in the country. I was greeted by another tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang in his voice. Good heavens! Did they all look and sound like that?

He sat me down and gave me some leaflets and we chatted a bit. I flipped through the leaflets and was appalled to find that New Zealand didn't have colour TV yet and that when I arrived in the country I would be eligible to be conscripted for military service. I asked the man about those two rather worrying details.

"Oh, no," he said. "Don't bother about that. We've had colour TV for donkey's years and we got rid of conscription ages ago. But unfortunately we printed far too many of those leaflets and my boss won't let me update them until we've run the stock all the way down." He looked mildly embarrassed, and he blushed

slightly through his sun tan.

"There is one formal question I have to ask you," he said in his official voice. "Do you have a criminal record?"

"No," I said.

"Oh come on," he said, relaxing again. "Surely you can do better than that? Look, it's Friday. I've had a really slow and boring week. Can't you be an axe murderer or something?"

"I got a speeding ticket about five years ago," I offered.

"No, no," he said. "That won't do at all. Damn! I suppose we'd better let you come to New Zealand then. I can't see that I have any other choice." And he stamped several bits of paper rather

viciously with a large rubber stamp. It looked as if I was on my way.

A few weeks before I was due to fly to New Zealand, John Simeon left the Dairy Board to start up his own software and consultancy company. So when I finally arrived in the country I was met at the airport by yet another tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice. Yes, they really were all like that. Goodness me! "Hello," he said. "I'm Mike. I'm your new boss."

Mike got me settled in and introduced me around. "Because you are new," he said, "and because you don't know much about how the Dairy Board operates, we are going to start

you off in our maintenance section. The Dairy Board was one of the first companies in New Zealand to get a computer and we started developing our systems in the 1960s. You'll be looking after those older programs, fixing bugs and adding new features. Once you get really familiar with how everything works, we'll see about moving you to the development area where you can start writing new stuff."

In the 1960s, everyone involved with computers was an amateur. Computers were very new and nobody fully understood how to program them properly yet. Everybody was learning together on the job. I found myself trying to understand and tweak stuff

which, by modern standards, was the most appalling junk.

"Who wrote this nonsense?" I demanded. I looked at the name of the author at the top of the program listing – John Simeon! I called down curses on his name as I struggled to cope with his legacy.

Actually, I quite enjoyed the technical aspects of my job at the Dairy Board, but the office politics were byzantine, distinctly unpleasant, and sometimes quite vicious. The staff turnover was enormously high and I quickly came to understand that the real reason they had been recruiting programmers in England was because they'd used up all the programmers in

New Zealand and Australia, and nobody wanted to work for them any more. So now they recruited their staff in places where their reputation hadn't spread to yet.

It wasn't long before I too handed in my notice and so found myself at a bit of a loose end. I went to talk to an employment agency where a tall, sun-tanned man with an antipodean twang to his voice said, "There's a small software and consultancy company looking for a programmer at the moment and I think you might fit the bill. I'll arrange an interview for you with the company's owner. He's called John Simeon. I'm sure you'll like him."

Somewhat to my surprise, John

remembered me from that interview in London all those years before. We chatted backwards and forwards, reminiscing a bit and contemplating the future. It was all very informal and comfortable and, just as before, I found him very easy to talk to. We laughed at each other's jokes and we had similar opinions on many things. John backed his original judgement and offered me a job for the second time. I accepted immediately.

The next few years were very happy ones as I worked directly with John on a variety of projects. We both had a lot of fun and we enjoyed each other's company. But the late 1980s were a time of great change. Sharks swam in

the business seas. Big companies gobbled up small companies and grew fatter as a result. Eventually time and circumstance caught up with John. His little company vanished from the scene, and each of us went our separate ways.

It was quarter of a century before John and I met each other again. But then one day we both chose to go to a certain pub in Auckland at exactly the same time...

Only one thing worries me now. In the past, every time I've bumped into John after a few years of separation, he's profoundly changed the course of my life. So now, of course, I'm starting to wonder just what's going to happen

to me next?

Worming Robin

Last Christmas I bought Robin two new front tyres for the car. This year I decided that she needed a present that was much more romantic than that. So I bought her 1000 worms.

She was thrilled. "Just what my worm farm needs!" she declared and she went out and bought a bucket.

"What's the bucket for?" I asked.

"It will live in the kitchen," explained Robin, "and you will put all your vegetable scraps into it as food for my worms."

"OK," I said.

"Don't give them fruit or anything

with seeds in," she said. "I had a worm farm back home in Australia and I gave my worms far too much fruit. They left home in protest and moved next door. They made a lovely den for themselves under the canopy that covered the swimming pool. My neighbours were very impressed when they removed the cover so as to go for a swim. Worms everywhere! The children used to dive into the water, come back up to the surface and then spit out the lumpy bits."

"OK, no fruit," I agreed solemnly, even though our next door neighbour doesn't have a swimming pool. "Why can't I feed the worms seeds?"

"Because the seeds germinate and

grow inside the worm farm and soon there's no room for the worms. That makes them want to leave home as well."

"Oh, that would never do," I said.

The worms came in a small cardboard box which Harpo the Terror Cat immediately wanted to sit in. We strongly discouraged him. "It's full of slimy wriggly things."

Harpo looked puzzled. "What's wrong with that?" he asked. "As far as I'm concerned, it just adds to the attraction."

"Cats don't like worms," I said firmly.

"Oh don't they?" asked Harpo. "OK. I'll go and sit on an early bird instead."

Robin took the box outside and unpacked it on the lawn. She laid all the worms out in order, smallest to largest. "Stop wriggling!" she ordered firmly. Then she counted them. "One, two, three, four... Oh no!" she said. "What a catastrophe! There are only 999 worms. You've been short changed by the shop – you'll have to take them back immediately." She looked inside the box again. "Oh, it's OK. There are 1000 worms after all. There's a dead one in the corner. Poor thing. Perhaps we ought to have a funeral for it."

Robin dug a deep hole in the garden and we buried the worm with full pomp and circumstance. Robin wiped away a tear, and then she took her worms to

their new home, a purpose built, architecturally designed worm farm with a tap on the bottom for draining dubious fluids. Robin introduced the worms to their new home one by one and as she put each worm into the farm, she gave it a name. "Arbuthnot, Abigail, Alan, Anne, Andrew ... Zacharia, Zamorah, Zan."

"Why are you giving them names?" I asked.

"So that they can tell each other apart," explained Robin, "and so that they can introduce themselves to each other when they have sex. You can't have sex with someone whose name you don't know." She sounded quite shocked at the idea.

"So you expect the worms to have sex a lot?" I asked.

"Oh yes," said Robin. "That's what worms do. You know how people shake hands when they first meet each other?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Well worms don't have hands," said Robin. "So whenever they meet, they have sex instead. And what's more, they are hermaphrodites, so they do it both ways at once. They all have twice as much fun as anyone else does – I suppose there have to be some compensations for being a worm."

"So worms are all actually hippie refugees from the Summer of Love?" I asked.

"That's right," said Robin. "Didn't you notice their long hair and the faint smell of marijuana when I took them out of their box?"

"So we'll soon have a lot more than 999 worms?" I asked.

"I expect so," said Robin.

"What happens when the worm farm is so full of worms that they can't even wriggle any more?"

"That's when they stop having sex and start eating each other instead," explained Robin. "Life in a worm farm is just one long, decadent orgy."

The next few days were anxious ones. I put vegetable peelings, tea bags and coffee grounds into the bucket. I even put in some cat biscuits that

Harpo and Bess turned had their noses up at. Robin kept emptying the bucket into the worm farm and she'd come back with a very long face.

"They aren't eating," she reported gloomily. "I think they must still be traumatised by the move."

"Never mind," I soothed. "I'm sure they'll recover and start eating soon. Perhaps they are having trouble remembering their names. Once they get that sorted out, I'm sure everything will be fine."

And then one day Robin came back from her worm farm beaming all over her face. "They've started eating," she declared. "And look at this!" She held up a small bottle full of black goo.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's my first bottle of worm wee," she said. "Isn't that just fantastic? The instructions say I've got to dilute it to the colour of weak tea and pour it on the flowers."

"What happens then?"

"You step back quickly before the rapidly growing flower hits you in the eye," said Robin. She diluted her worm wee and spread it liberally around the garden.

Sproing! Sproing! Sproing!
Sproing! Sproing! Sproing!

"I think that chrysanthemum just punched a hole in a passing aeroplane," I said.

"Hmm..." said Robin, thoughtfully.

Summoned By Shoes

Most mornings, when the sun has barely had time to clear its throat and have a cough and a spit, Harpo the Cat comes into the bedroom demanding breakfast. This is not unusual – sooner or later most cats learn that the best way to get breakfast is to nag their slaves until they get up and provide food. But Harpo has found a unique way of attracting my attention and forcing me out of bed.

He throws my shoes around the bedroom.

Clatter! Clatter!

Bess may be asleep on the bed or she may be curled up on her favourite cushion in the lounge. Either way, she completely ignores the noise that Harpo makes. She regards him as a hopeless case. She will join us for breakfast when the fuss has died down and the shoes have all been put back in their proper places. It would be terribly bad-mannered of her to trip over a shoe on her way to the kitchen. She'd die of embarrassment at such a faux pas and then she'd have to wash herself all over at least twice before she could possibly eat a thing. Oh dear, that will never do.

Robin sleeps calmly through all the noise. They aren't her shoes. Her shoes

are hiding in her wardrobe in a mountainous and rather scary pile. Every so often, while dressing for dinner, she will screw her courage to the sticking place and burrow deeply into it. Eventually she will re-emerge, panting and frazzled, with a shoe. Just one.

"These will go perfectly with my new trousers," she says. Then she scratches her head. "I wonder where the other shoe is?" she asks thoughtfully.

"Who knows?" I reply. "Perhaps it is inside a cat." Actually I consider this to be extremely unlikely. Both cats have far more sense than that. Robin's shoe mountain even manages to scare Robin! Goodness knows what it does to

a cat. The missing shoe is probably still cowering somewhere deep in the recesses of her wardrobe.

"I think I'd better buy another pair of shoes, just in case," Robin decides.

And so, bit by bit, her shoe mountain grows to even more terrifying proportions. Therefore every morning Robin can sleep the sleep of the just don't care, in the sure and certain knowledge that Harpo the Cat will never go anywhere near that scarily unstable pile.

Clatter! Clatter!

I pull myself gloomily awake and peer short-sightedly at the world. I know exactly what I will see. The three pairs of shoes that I own are no longer

neatly lined up against the wall. They are scattered around the room and Harpo is busy killing one of them. The others stare in horror as the poor victim expires beneath Harpo's claws and fangs. I can hear a faint whispering:

"Oh no! Not again!"

The chosen victim groans in agony. I climb out of bed and, leaving my whimpering shoes behind, I go into the kitchen to prepare breakfast for Harpo and for Bess. As I walk past Harpo, he swipes my leg with his paw. If I've waited too long to get up, there will be severely protruding claws. Most mornings I find that I have waited too long to get up.

"You need more shoes," says

Harpo. "I've killed all three pairs at least a dozen times. I'm getting bored. I need variety in my killing sprees."

"Three pairs of shoes is enough for anyone," I explain. "I've only got two feet you know. Actually, three pairs of shoes is probably at least two pairs too many."

Since shoes are such an integral part of the breakfast ritual, I consider it important to keep my supply topped up. There generally comes a time when work colleagues can be heard whispering scandalously to each other about the tooth holes that decorate some of my older shoes. Mortifying glimpses of sock can occasionally be seen. The most severe wounds drip

polish in a steady stream, staining the carpet. In winter the rain gets in and I squelch. Perhaps I ought to do something about that?

When a shoe gets completely beyond all hope of redemption I give the pair a decent Christian burial and then go off to The Warehouse, where everyone gets a bargain. That's what the adverts sing, so it must be true. I spend \$20 on a size 8 pair of black shoes which are identical in every respect to the size 8 pair of black shoes that I have just disposed of. I am a creature of habit.

Sometimes, if I'm really lucky, the shoes will be on sale and will only cost me \$10. When this happens, I always

make sure to buy an extra pair so that I still spend my accustomed \$20. Did I mention that I am a creature of habit? This occasional Warehouse bargain is the reason why I now have three pairs of shoes rather than the requisite single pair.

Because the shoes are so cheap, there is a strong probability that they will disintegrate before I get them out of the shop. However, mostly I am lucky, and I manage to arrive home with my new shoes in one piece. Harpo looks at them in disgust.

"These are identical to yesterday's corpses," he says. "Couldn't you do better than that?"

"No," I explain. "I am a creature of

habit."

"You already mentioned that," says Harpo.

This year, Christmas morning chez Robson began just like every other morning. As usual I was summoned by shoes and I wandered off into the kitchen with torn and bleeding legs to give the cats their Christmas breakfast feast. Bess, who is always a very polite lady, was sitting quietly to attention by her bowl. Harpo teleported from the bedroom to the kitchen and was waiting for me when I arrived. He paced back and forth menacingly.

"Get a bloody move on!"

Normally breakfast consists of a bowl of biscuits. But today being

Christmas, breakfast was a can of sliced beef in rich gravy. Both cats love gravy. They like to lick it up before they attack the meaty chunks.

"Oh, wow!" said Harpo as he inhaled the whole bowlful in an instant. "It must be Christmas." He licked his bowl as clean as clean could be and then he clattered off through the cat flap to go and mug a reindeer.

Bess ate her breakfast in great gulps.

"This is lovely," she said. "Thank you so much."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I told her.

"Sorry, I forgot."

She finished the bowl of food in

record time and then wandered off into the lounge where she threw up her entire breakfast all over the rug. The clash of colours made an interesting contrast. None of her meal appeared to have been chewed at all. Even the gravy was still intact and of the proper consistency.

"That was a fantastic breakfast," said Bess contentedly as she licked her lips. "Why don't you gather it all up and put it back into my bowl? I'll have it again for lunch."

"No, Bess," I said as I went to get a cloth, "that's not how it works. In this family we eat each meal once, and once only."

"That's because you are silly

creatures of habit," said Bess. She went back to sleep on her cushion.

No Flies On Robin

We have patio doors which give access to the back garden. The cats love to sit by them, and gaze through the glass at all the exciting things going on outside. Leaves move in the breeze, birds hunt worms on the lawn and shriek insults to each other. The cats find these things utterly fascinating.

"Wow!" said Harpo, the mathematical cat, as he stared out into the garden. "Just look at the singularly attractive catenary curve that the washing line makes as it stretches from fence to fence. I could watch it for

hours. And see! There! A leaf just twisted past in a perfect Fibonacci spiral. You don't see that very often – I think it got the golden ratio exactly right; what a talented leaf. This is the best garden *ever!*"

Bess is much less of a geek than Harpo and has quite different aesthetic values. After a hit of really good catnip her eyeballs rotate as she grooves on the garden's pretty colours. "Oh man," she mutters just before an attack of the munchies sends her off to her food bowl.

When we first moved in to the house, friends came to admire. "Gosh," they would say as they passed by the patio doors, "look at the leaves moving

in the breeze. And see all the birds hunting worms on the lawn. Could that one possibly be a lesser spotted humming thrush?" People bear a remarkable resemblance to cats. But people are nowhere near as intelligent as cats. No sooner had the words left our visitors lips than, one and all, they would attempt to walk out into the garden, straight through the solidly closed patio doors, severely bruising their noses, their foreheads and their egos. Robin got really good at mopping up the blood that dripped from shattered noses, applying arnica cream to bruises and rebuilding fractured pride.

"This has to stop," she decided.

"OK," I said. "Why not attach something to the glass so that people get a visual clue that it is there? That might stop them trying to walk out into the garden when the doors are closed."

"Good idea," said Robin, "I'll get some stickers."

Within days some rather authentic looking bullet holes appeared, scattered at random across the glass. Not long after that I noticed that each door now had a screw in every corner – none of this modern Phillips head screw nonsense either, these were good, solid old fashioned screws with a single deep slot for the screwdriver to get a good grip on. And then, for extra support, Robin put a row of Phillips head screws

across the middle of each patio door.

"They stop the glass falling out in high winds," she explained.

"So they do," I said. I pushed hard against the glass. "It's extremely firm and solid now, just like it was before. You've done a really good job there!"

It was clear that we had perfect patio doors. Nobody ever walked into them again. Problem solved!

But there was more to come.

If Robin has a fault, which she does not, it is that she has no idea how to finish her projects. Once she starts, just like the energiser bunny, she goes on and on and on and on...

"Look what I've got!" announced Robin one day.

"Show me," I said.

She held up a bag full of quivering things. Once they stopped shaking I could see that they were all twenty six letters of the alphabet.

"Why are they quivering?" I asked.

"Because they are made out of wobbly with sticky on the back," she explained. "They'll be perfect for the patio doors."

Soon after that, I noticed that the alphabet had been joined by a car, several dinosaurs, a self-satisfied cat, three rainbows, several musical notes and a rugby team. All were made out of wobbly with sticky on the back. They shimmered and shivered when people or cats walked past and, if you squinted

at them from just the right angle, they refracted the sunlight in pleasing patterns. But we were starting to run out of space on the patio doors. They were looking awfully crowded.

"Do we really need all these extra decorations?" I asked. "Nobody's walked into the door for ages."

"They aren't for stopping people walking into the door," said Robin. "That's just a side effect. They are mainly for being pretty to look at."

"Oh," I said. "That's different."

"Yes it is," explained Robin firmly.

And then, quite by chance, we had summer. We weren't planning on summer – it doesn't happen very often and even when it does happen it mostly

can't be seen. But this year, against all expectation, we had summer and so we opened the doors and windows to let the flies in – I feel so sorry for them as they bang their heads against the window, begging to be let into the house.

The flies buzzed around for a bit, making nuisances of themselves as they crawled over every exposed surface. Occasionally they landed on my ebook reader and very helpfully turned the page for me, thereby saving a lot of wear and tear on my fingertip. However I soon discovered that flies are almost completely illiterate, and they were just making random guesses about when I'd reached the bottom of

page and it was time to turn it for me. Flies aren't very good at guessing games, so I soon got tired of their helpfulness.

The cats chased the flies for a while, but it wasn't long before they got bored with the game and they left the buzzing nuisances to their own devices.

"You're falling down on the job," I told the cats. "To earn your daily biscuits, you have to kill all intruders. Start killing!"

"But this cushion is so comfortable," said Bess, and she put her tail over her nose and went to sleep.

"I don't do flies," said Harpo. "Union regulations, and I'm a Union cat – solidarity in all things brother. I do

rats and mice and sparrows. Sometimes I do butterflies and moths, even though they make me throw up copiously. But I don't do flies. Oh -- I do Alans as well." And he bit me on the leg, just to reinforce the point.

Then, one day, I noticed that I seemed to have spent an inordinate amount of time turning my own pages on my ebook reader. Where were all the helpful flies? Summer was still here, the sun was still shining, the sweetcorn in Robin's veggie garden was as high as an elephant's eye. So where were the flies? It was a puzzle. I mentioned the anomaly to Robin, because she likes puzzles.

"Oh, I know where the flies are,"

said Robin. "I'm surprised you haven't spotted them yet. Come with me." She led me to the downstairs room where the patio doors give access to the garden.

"There!" she said triumphantly.

"That's where all the flies have gone."

All the bits of wobbly on the patio doors had melted into an amorphous mass in the fierce rays of the summer sun, and they'd spread a layer of sticky all over the glass. The flies, attracted by the large areas of light, had flown straight into the patio doors and glued themselves firmly to the glass. Unable to escape, they had slowly starved to death. One or two of the larger and hairier flies were still buzzing feebly as

they struggled against the inexorable grasp of the sticky.

"Nobody is ever going to walk into these patio doors by accident again," said Robin in tones of deepest satisfaction.

I looked at all the myriad black blobs of fly corpses that festooned the glass and I had to agree with her. I was absolutely certain that now we had the most visible patio doors in the country. It seems that flies have their uses after all.

Flushing Alan

I came back to my hotel suffering from severe hydraulic overpressure caused by the drinking of lashings and lashings of ginger beer (the Famous Five and I had been having a party). I took the lift up to my room and then had a very satisfying wee wee. Once I was finished, I pressed the button to flush the toilet. To my consternation, absolutely nothing happened – there was no comforting sound of rushing water to be heard. I pressed the button again and exactly the same thing didn't happen. Oh dear...

I closed the toilet lid and rang

reception.

"Reception – how can I help you?"

"My toilet doesn't flush any more,"

I said.

"Oh no!" said reception. "That's not good. I'll send someone up."

About 10 minutes later there was a knock on my door. I opened it and standing there was a svelte and handsome young man dressed in the standard hotel uniform. Behind him was a young woman, also dressed to the nines in a beautifully ironed skirt and top. Neither looked at all like a plumber, but I let them into the room anyway.

"I gather your toilet doesn't flush," said the svelte young man.

"That's right," I said.

The young woman said nothing at all. Her presence remained unexplained. Perhaps she was a chaperone, there to guard the honour of the svelte young man in case I should be overcome with carnal lust at the sight of his sveltness.

We all went into the bathroom and the svelte young man pressed the flush button on the toilet. Nothing happened.

"Your toilet doesn't flush," he said.

"How clever of you to notice," I said. "It took me ages to figure that out."

The svelte young man didn't react, but the chaperone turned pink and started to vibrate. I winked at her, and a

distinct giggle escaped before she gained control of herself again.

The svelte young man removed the top of the cistern and played with the ballcock. Flushing noises happened and he smiled in triumph. The cistern refilled and he smiled even more triumphantly. He put the top back on the cistern and pressed the flushing button with an exultant flourish.

Nothing happened.

The svelte young man stopped smiling and took the top off the cistern again. A previously unnoticed piece of plastic was dangling forlornly from the flushing mechanism. It gave every indication of having once been connected to something important, but

now the connection was irretrievably broken, no matter how hard the svelte young man tried to reattach it. It was quite clear to all of us that I would have to do a lot of manual ballcock manipulation to satisfy my bodily needs.

We all contemplated that thought in silence for a moment. Hmmm...

"I'm very sorry about this, sir," said the svelte young man. "We really should move you to another room, but unfortunately we are fully booked at the moment."

"Oh, that's a shame," I said. "But never mind, I can always pee in the wash basin." Out of the corner of my eye I could see the chaperone starting

to vibrate again. I decided to see how far I could take this. Would I be able to make her lose complete control?

"However by tomorrow morning," I continued, "I will be full to the brim with unsavoury substances, and I am going to require something which has a much larger aperture than the wash bowl to take care of the problem. In order to prevent that catastrophic occurrence from taking place, I think it will be necessary for you to supply me with a cork."

By now the chaperone was making ominous rumblings, but the svelte young man remained stony faced.

"Perhaps you could get me a free bottle of fine wine," I mused. "I could

use the cork from that." But then I was struck by a sudden thought. "Oh no, that won't do – wine bottles come with screw tops these days. And they are most unsuitable for the purpose I have in mind. You will have supply me with champagne instead. Champagne bottles have lovely corks. And the corks come with a nice lip on the top so that they don't go in too far. Ordinary wine bottle corks are smooth all the way up and tend to disappear, never to be seen again. Yes, champagne will do nicely, thank you very much. How about you send a bottle of Moët & Chandon up to my room, compliments of the hotel of course."

The chaperone couldn't stand it any

more. She rushed out of the room with her hand over her mouth. Hysterical shrieks could be heard from outside, together with the distinctive sound of heels drumming on the floor.

Eventually she regained control and came back to us, looking slightly dishevelled.

"I'll see what I can do," said the svelte young man, completely stony faced. I admired his self-control. Obviously he had recently attended a Hotel Management Training Course. Those courses must be worth their weight in gold. He turned away and picked up the phone. He had a quiet conversation with reception. Then he hung up the phone, turned back to me

and said, "We'll move you to another room sir."

"I thought you were fully booked," I said, somewhat surprised. The chaperone nodded in puzzled agreement.

"The Queen has a tummy bug," explained the svelte young man, "and she had to cancel her booking. So now we have a room."

The chaperone began to turn pink again. I awarded the svelte young man ten points out of ten – a perfect score. "Thank you," I said. "I'll just need a few minutes to pack my things."

"I'll send someone up in about quarter of an hour sir," he said, then he and the vibrating chaperone left me to

my own devices.

About fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door. Another svelte young man stood there. "I come to take you to room," he said with a strong Slavic accent. "Where is bags?"

I gestured at my suitcase and he extended the handle and trundled it down the corridor. I followed. "Where are you from?" I asked him.

"From Ukraine," he told me.

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

"Since three years I have lived here," he said.

"Do you like New Zealand?"

"Yes. Is lovely country. Very quiet, very peaceful. Nobody shooting at me

every day."

I didn't really know how to reply to that, so I said nothing. We trundled down the corridor to the lift and travelled up for several floors. Then we trundled along another corridor which was absolutely identical to the first one. Eventually we stopped outside a door which was indistinguishable from all the others except for the number on it.

"Here is new room," said my escort.

He gave me the key and my suitcase. I opened the door and went in. I was not completely astonished to find that the new room looked exactly like the old room. I went into the bathroom and pressed the flushing button on the

toilet. I heard the very satisfying sound of running water. I flushed it once more for luck and then I went to bed.

In the morning I did everything I needed to do. The toilet did everything it needed to do. What a perfect start to the day. I hopped in the shower and turned on the tap.

Nothing happened.

Rubbish!

How does one deal with a corpse? Sometimes dead bodies litter the house – there are birds in the bathroom, and mice in the kitchen. Every so often rats go squish crunch as you walk to the toilet in the tiny, tiny morning hours. Lizards lie in wait, skinking beneath casual feet. Feathers tickle, but nobody shrieks with laughter, they only shriek with horror. Semi-corpuses are even worse. They skittle and scuttle and hide under the fridge. Sometimes they scream. Mostly, Robin and I inhume dead things in plastic supermarket bags and deposit them in the kitchen rubbish

bin. Over time bacterial decomposition releases clouds of noxious gases and the bags containing the corpses swell to such enormous volumes that there is no more room in the rubbish bin for potato peelings or broccoli stalks. Then we have a rubbish crisis. But never mind, it will soon be Sunday...

Every Sunday evening there is much hustle and bustle in our household. Rubbish must be carefully collected and collated, for tomorrow is collection day. The rubbish collectors come at an obscenely early hour on Monday and therefore the rubbish has to be put out on Sunday evening so as to avoid the stench of farting sparrows in the morning. But we are not allowed

to put the rubbish out too early on Sunday evening – the council leaflets warn of dire consequences for anyone who litters the streets with rubbish prior to 7.00pm. Hanging, drawing and quartering are among the least of the penalties that may be imposed. Consequently the window of opportunity for getting the rubbish safely to the kerbside is small. It can only be done after dinner time and before bed time. All too often the gap between these events is tiny – Robin and I are both old and ugly. We require lots of beauty sleep. The house commonly resonates with the sound of snoring by 7.15pm. Sometimes the snoring is so loud that we have to wake

the cats up because they are drowning out the dialogue on the television.

This particular Sunday, the cats were helping me with the rubbish ritual. They were anxious to get everything done as efficiently as possible.

"Where are the council rubbish bags that you empty the kitchen bins into?" asked Harpo. "I really enjoy their yellow crinkliness. It feels so good beneath my claws when it splits and shreds."

"And then it spills all that yummy stuff on the floor," said Bess, licking her lips in anticipation and flexing her claws.

I filled the yellow council rubbish

bag with rubbish from the kitchen bin while the cats watched me fill it with treasure. I considered piercing the ballooning corpse containers in order to make more room but I decided against it. The cats peered with interest at the exhumed remains of their prey.

"I remember that mouse," said Harpo reminiscently. "I had lots of fun with it on the lawn before it stopped moving. That's when I brought it in for you and you made it vanish into thin air. So that's where it finally ended up. Well I'll go to the foot of our stairs!"

"Is there a rat in there?" asked Bess. "I distinctly remember a rat."

"Never you mind," I said. "Just help me carry this lot out to the kerbside."

We carried the rubbish bags outside and deposited them by the kerb. Harpo shot across the road to go exploring, narrowly missing a car along the way. His great bushy tail spread out behind him, giving the impression of a feline fox. He vanished into the darkness, a black cat out in the black night. Bess watched him go.

"He's always out having adventures," she complained. "Why can't I do that?"

"You can," I said. "The door is always open for you to come and go as you please."

"But the sofa is so warm and comfortable to sleep on all day and all night long. Apart from your bed, of

course. That's the most comfortable of all."

"You do go out sometimes," I said. "At least once a day you go for a shit, a shave, a shower, and a shampoo in the garden."

"And it's fun," said Bess. "There are lots of rats in the bushes at the bottom."

"Oh. So that's where they come from. Tell me, why do you always make a point of bringing them to me on Monday evening after the rubbish has been collected? I really don't like it when they have to rot in the rubbish bin for a whole week."

Bess looked puzzled. "But Monday is rent day," she said.

"Rent day?"

"Yes," she explained. "You don't expect me and Harpo to live here without paying our way, do you? You provide board and lodging and in return we pay you for it. Fair's fare, so to speak. Monday is rent day."

"Couldn't you pay the rent on Saturday instead?"

"Oh no, that would never do. Cats are very conservative you know. We don't like change. Monday is rent day, and that's all there is to it."

Bess cut the conversation short by going over to the cushion that's always been her for ever favourite place for at least three weeks now. She curled up on it, wrapped her tail around her nose

and fell asleep.

The next day, I lay in bed like the meat in a cat sandwich. Harpo was curled up close on one side of me and Bess was snuggled up on the other. I listened to the rubbish collectors outside as they tossed the bags into their truck and then moved on to the next house. Today was rent day.

Hmmm...

Eventually the cats decided it was breakfast time and I was permitted to move. I poured biscuits into their bowl then I thought for a moment and took about half the biscuits out again and put them back in the packet.

"Yum," said Harpo, who doesn't quite understand quantitative measure.

He dived in and began chewing but Bess looked suspicious.

"There aren't very many biscuits in my bowl," she said. "What's going on?"

"The vet says you are a bit overweight," I explained. "It's your sedentary lifestyle. And that's fine, it's your choice. But I'm cutting down on your food a little to make allowances for it."

"That's not fair," protested Bess. "Is it my fault that the house is full of comfy cushions?" She nibbled unenthusiastically at the slim scattering of biscuits in her bowl.

Once the cats had finished their breakfast, they both went out for their morning constitutional. Because today

was rent day, I made sure to lock the cat flap behind them. Chortling with glee at my cleverness, I toddled off to get breakfast for myself.

Later in the day I heard Harpo howling outside the people door. Obviously he wanted to come in. I checked carefully through the window and as far as I could see, he didn't have the rent with him, so I opened the door to let him into the house. He stalked haughtily inside.

"What took you so long?" he demanded. "I told you to open the door at least thirty seconds ago."

As he walked past me he lashed out with a claw at my ankle and I bled a little onto my sock. Bess took

advantage of the ensuing chaos to race in from beneath the bush where she'd been hiding.

"Thanks for distracting him, Harpo," she said.

"No worries," said Harpo, and he sauntered off in search of a nap.

Bess deposited a rat head, a bird beak and two weta legs at my feet.

"Rent," she announced. "The rat head is my payment for the week, the bird beak is Harpo's and the weta legs are because weta legs are horrible and I couldn't think what else to do with them."

I was puzzled. "Where's the rest of the rat, the bird and the weta?" I asked. "Normally you bring me entire

corpses."

"Harpo and I took a unilateral decision," she explained. "You reduced the amount of food you give us, so we decided to reduce the rent that we pay."

I couldn't fault her logic. I began to anticipate lots of extra space in the rubbish bin. What could I possibly fill it all with?

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Jane Lindskold who carefully explained to me the subtle rules of how and why cats pay rent.

More Rubbish

Our weekly rubbish collection alternates between glass recycling and paper, plastic and tin can recycling. Once every other week we put our glass into a derisorily small turquoise crate, and the following week we put our paper, our plastic and our cans into a massively large wheelie bin with a yellow lid. The wheelie bin with a yellow lid has enough room in it for the recycling of appropriate rubbish from at least a dozen households like mine. I'm not sure how the council came up with the relative sizes of their containers, but if they based it on any

significant statistical studies, it seems plain that I must be an outlier who consumes far too many things that come in glass bottles and not nearly enough things that come wrapped in plastic or cardboard. Perhaps I should drink more Coca Cola (yuck!) and less beer, but I'm not sure I could afford the dental treatment.

The last time we had a wheelie bin with a yellow lid week, I was away from home on business. I spoke to Robin on the phone.

"I've lost the wheelie bin with the yellow lid," she said.

I was astonished. "How can you lose a wheelie bin with a yellow lid?" I asked. "Have you checked underneath

the glass recycling bin?"

"The glass recycling bin is much smaller than the wheelie bin with the yellow lid," Robin pointed out. "The wheelie bin with the yellow lid can't possibly be underneath it."

"It would fit underneath the glass recycling bin if it shrank in the rain," I pointed out. "I read in the paper that there had been lots of rain in Wellington."

"I don't think it was the rain that caused the loss of the wheelie bin," said Robin thoughtfully. "Surely the yellow lid would have protected it from the rain? It's far more likely to have been the wind that blew the wheelie bin away."

"Wind?" I asked. "In Wellington? How unusual."

"I know," said Robin. "But the wind was gusting up to 180 kph last night and this morning there was no wheelie bin. No yellow lid either."

"I'm surprised," I said. "Yellow lids are just as well known for their wind resistance as they are for their waterproofing properties. The weather must have been truly astonishingly bad if the wheelie bin with the yellow lid failed to survive it."

"It was," said Robin. "There were reports in the paper of low flying clouds which knocked over power poles and garages. Then, when darkness fell, I noticed that the Moon

is now noticeably further away from the Earth than once upon a time it was. We really did have enormously strong winds last night."

"Perhaps you could walk down the road to see if the wheelie bin with the yellow lid has been blown into someone's garden?" I suggested.

"I took a brief investigative walk," said Robin, "though I find the concept of down the road somewhat hard to come to grips with. All the roads in our suburb go upwards, as well you know. There isn't any down anywhere at all that I can find. Sometimes I think that we have far too much geography for our own good."

"That does present some practical

difficulties," I admitted. "In most suburbs people take a walk to get fit. In our suburb people get fit so as to be able to take a walk. Did your investigations prove fruitful?"

"All I saw were wheelie bins with red lids," said Robin. "And they are collected by a private contractor who has nothing at all to do with the council collections. Wheelie bins with yellow lids were quite noticeably absent everywhere I looked."

"I'm surprised there were any wheelie bins with red lids left out," I said. "Red lids are notorious for their failure to protect the bins they are attached to from the forces of nature. I read about it in *Physics and Biology*

For the Utterly Brain Dead. The authors posited a clear connection between wheelie bins with red lids and the socks that fail to emerge from the washing machine every week. It seems likely that socks are the larval form of wheelie bins with red lids and that wheelie bins with red lids mature into multi-dimensional, gossamer winged creatures that fly away into the interstices of Hilbert Space when the wind blows from the North. Or when it blows from the South. Yellow lids suffer none of these disadvantages and are therefore much more suitable for wheelie bins."

"That's common knowledge," said Robin. "But nevertheless, there were

the wheelie bins with red lids all along the street, just waiting to be emptied."

"Extraordinary," I mused. "I wonder where the wheelie bins with yellow lids went to? Perhaps the strange weather took advantage of a bug in the yellow lid operating system of which we were previously unaware?"

"That must be the case," said Robin. "I'll keep you posted."

We hung up our phones and I spent the remainder of the day and much of the next quite bewildered about the mysteriously disappearing wheelie bin with the yellow lid.

Later that evening, Robin rang me again.

"The wheelie bin with the yellow lid is back," she said.

"Oh, thank goodness," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"A man from up the road returned it. He'd found it in his garden."

"Did he wheel it up to us?" I asked.

"No," said Robin. "He put it in the back of his four wheel drive along with a dozen or so others that he'd collected. He was driving around delivering them to their proper houses."

"Wheelie bins with yellow lids are well known for their gregarious nature," I said, "unlike the more stand-offish wheelie bins with red lids. But having a dozen or more of them gathered together in one person's

garden seems a little over the top."

"It was all the fault of the man's children," explained Robin. "They'd baited the garden with a succulent selection of squashed cans, empty shampoo bottles and flattened cardboard boxes. The wheelie bins with yellow lids were quite unable to resist the temptation of a really good free feed, and so they gathered together in his garden for a raucous party."

"Ah, that would explain it," I said. "I hope he imposes a cruel and unusual punishment on his children."

"He caught the wheelie bins dancing widdershins around an empty cardboard box that used to have a cat in it," said Robin. "They were clashing

their yellow lids in a punk rock rhythm."

"Sounds like quite a party," I said. "But at least it's back home where it belongs now."

"Indeed," said Robin. "And I think it's quite hung over after its celebrations. It looks quite sorry for itself. Thank goodness we don't have to use it for another couple of weeks. It really does need time to recover from its excesses."

"Self inflicted wound," I said. "I have no sympathy."

"Maybe it's learned its lesson," said Robin. "Perhaps it will be better behaved from now on."

"Let's hope so," I said and I hung up

the phone.

Soothing Savage Breasts

I don't play a musical instrument and I'm utterly ignorant of the meaning that lies behind those little black dots that are connected to each other by slanting lines. They hang there on the telegraph wires of the sheet music, looking just like the flocks of birds that I see through my window, perched insouciantly on the power cables. What does it all mean? I have no idea. But though I may be unskilled as a practitioner, nevertheless, music has always been a hugely important part of

my life.

It all began in the 1950s, as so many things do. I was a small child surrounded by a strange new world and looking to try and find my place in it. There was always a radio burbling in the background. I remember that radio well – it sat in pride of place in the lounge, a huge great monstrosity, a cabinet of highly polished wood with a fabric overlay in front of the speaker. It took several minutes to warm up and start working after it was turned on and it filled the air with the faint perfume of burning dust as it reached its optimum operating temperature. And then we were rewarded with the sound of a BBC announcer playing “Family

Favourites” -- a record request programme through which lonely wives sent messages of love to their husbands serving overseas in the army, all wrapped around saccharine songs that were mostly sung by Doris Day and Frank Sinatra, Vera Lynn and Dean Martin.

The second world war was long over, but as the 1940s rolled over into a new decade the world was again going through a time of great political turmoil. When the politics turn sour, the armies move in. The British Army was a conscripted army, and it was fighting in trouble spots all over the world. In the Middle-East, Irgun and the Stern Gang were slaughtering

British troops in the deserts of Palestine as the new state of Israel struggled to establish itself, and war was brewing in Korea.

I don't actually remember those incidents – they happened just before, during and just after I was busy being born. But I do remember the struggles that followed on from them. I remember the small wars that were fought against the communist guerillas in Malaya and Aden, and I remember the atrocities committed by the EOKA terrorists in Cyprus where Archbishop Makarios preached the gospel of what later came to be called ethnic cleansing, as he exhorted the indigent Greeks to expel the Turks from the

island that they'd lived in for generations. I remember the Mau-Mau fighting in Kenya to overthrow the dying remnants of the Empire and I remember the tragi-comedy of Suez that made Britain a little bit of a world wide laughing stock.

And all of those grim conflicts were surrounded by music as the radio played heartfelt wishes of love to our brave troops overseas. I absorbed it all. It was ubiquitous, it was all around me.

But subversive elements were starting to creep in. Sometimes that old radio pumped out strangely exciting rhythms in between the standard fare of Vera Lynn and Dean Martin. Somebody called Bill Haley was

singing something called Rock and
Roll...

One,
two
three
o'clock
rock,
four
o'clock
rock
Five,
six
seven
o'clock,
eight
o'clock
rock,

We're
gonna
rock
around
the
clock
tonight...

It made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Even as a small child, I knew that it was complete rubbish. But my goodness me, it was *exciting* rubbish. Sometimes I'd see Bill Haley on the television – he was at least as old as my parents, possibly even older, and an utterly ridiculous kiss curl of hair hung greasily over his forehead as he raved with artificial excitement

through his strangely attractive song. Naturally, my parents hated him and they hated all the many imitators that sprang up in his wake. That's what parents are for. But he was very hard to ignore, and his rock and roll was broadcast at such unpredictable intervals on the radio and television that you couldn't help but hear it. I listened in swooning amazement while my parents grumbled and groaned as they waited impatiently for the next bit of Frank Sinatra's crooning.

But rock and roll wasn't going to go away any time soon. Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Eddie Cochran roared across our

airwaves all the way from America. But they were soon completely eclipsed by Elvis Presley, who was indisputably the uncrowned king of the new music. Pale British imitations followed in the wake of these musical giants – Joe Brown, Marty Wilde, Billy Fury, Tommy Steele and, of course, Cliff Richard who, at one point in his career, was actually regarded as a serious contender for the crown that Elvis wore, hard though that may be to believe today.

Teddy Boys stalked the streets of England wearing crepe soled brothel-creeper shoes and sporting heavily brylcreemed duck-arse hair styles, with outrageous quiffs sticking out stiffly

into the sky; black and greasy phallic erections – proud boasts about the endowments that may or may not have been hiding behind the socks in their crotches. The teddy boys wore tight trousers and long jackets and thin ties and, when the mood took them, they beat up passers by and used their flick knives to carve each other up and to slash the seats in the cinemas where they watched crappy Hollywood exploitation films about their rock and roll heroes. Everyone was afraid of the anarchy espoused by the teddy boys and the newspapers were full of outraged editorials – hang, draw and quarter them! Put them in the army! And of course that's where most of

them ended up. Conscription was in all their futures, and the army shaved their heads, put them in uniform and sent them off to die in the steamy Malayan jungles and the dry Middle-Eastern sands. Their sweethearts, still at home, sent record requests to “Family Favourites” and slowly the radio began to play more and more rock and roll. I loved it all.

The great British heroes of this new sound were The Shadows. Originally they were just Cliff Richard’s backing band, but they made some hugely influential records of their own. They played instrumentals – after all, Cliff was the singer; trying to replace him would have been *lèse majesté*. Their

music was thrilling – The Shadows did things with their guitars that nobody had ever done before and that nobody would ever do again until, a generation later, Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix showed the world how a guitar *really* ought to be played. But Clapton and Hendrix were standing on the shoulders of giants – Hank Marvin paved the way for that later musical revolution and The Shadows reigned supreme in British rock music until the Beatles pushed them to one side in the 1960s. The first LP record I ever bought was *The Shadows Greatest Hits*. I still have that record sitting in pride of place on my shelves and I still listen to it regularly. The tracks on it are just as

exciting now as they ever were – *Apache* still sends shivers down my spine and I think it always will, even though these days I know I'm listening to it with rose coloured glasses over my ears, if I may be allowed to mix my metaphor a little bit. I knew the names of the people who played in *The Shadows* long before John, Paul, George, and Ringo usurped their throne and I still know their names today. But somehow the names of Hank, Brian, Bruce and John don't have quite the same ring about them as once upon a time they did...

As the 1950s came to an end the communist guerillas retired in defeat, EOKA went quiet and the last traces of

Empire turned quietly into the Commonwealth. The Israeli thugs legitimised themselves and one of them even managed to get himself elected as Prime Minister. But his past came back to haunt him when, some time in the 1970's, he came to England on a state visit, full of pomp and circumstance. Unfortunately he was still under sentence of death in Britain after a trial *in absentia*, and a special act had to be passed in the British Parliament to pardon his crimes. Without that act being passed, the law would have required him to be hanged as soon as he stepped on to English soil – not the most diplomatic reception for a visiting head of state. He had the

blood of far too many British soldiers on his hands and not everybody felt comfortable about welcoming him. But the reality is that yesterday's terrorist is all too often tomorrow's revered politician. The only difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter is whether or not you manage to win your battles...

The British Army mostly came home as the 1960s began, though there were still some overseas bases, most notably in Akrotiri, Cyprus and in Berlin. Conscription was abandoned. The Teddy Boys all got jobs as stockbrokers and something very special was starting to happen in Liverpool.

The history of rock and roll divides quite neatly into three distinct periods. Before the Beatles, during the Beatles and after the Beatles. Nothing else matters. The Beatles were the ones who made the new music grow up, and in its maturity they showed us that even though the music's beginnings had been crude and possibly even simplistic, it was nevertheless capable of displaying subtlety and sophistication. Both musically and lyrically the Beatles turned rubbish into art and nothing was ever quite the same again.

Meanwhile, the brief tranquility that started the new decade didn't last very long. Soon there was another war

going on behind the scenes. But this one was fought in the jungles of Vietnam and it wasn't our war, it was America's war. We still had the moral outrage that almost any war engendered in us in those days. At that time and in that place it seemed axiomatic that war was immoral, and the Vietnam war was perceived as more immoral than most. But that moral outrage was tempered perhaps by the lack of a physical outrage. None of our soldiers were coming home dead in boxes. The same could not be said of America – there the war was extremely divisive, there was revolution in the air and sometimes even in the streets and amazingly the voices of the people

were heard and they actually managed to bring down a government. President Johnson listened to to what was being said, realised what was likely to happen if he ignored those words, and wisely he refused to stand for a second term. He disappeared into obscurity and a bitter retirement.

And all the time the music played. It was hugely important for after all it was the chronicle of the times.

As the 1960s drew to a close, I was studying science at university, but only on the outside. On the inside I had an artistic soul. I was blotting paper soaking up cultural ink. Bob Dylan's incomprehensible songs moved me almost to tears. Considered objectively

his lyrics made no sense whatsoever. But that was never the point – they weren't meant to be analysed. They could only be understood subjectively and emotionally and on that level their impact was huge. “Country Joe” McDonald taught me that political protest could be bitter, harsh and hilariously funny at one and the same time. There will never be a better anti-war song than his *Feel Like I'm Fixing To Die Rag* – Whoopee! We're all going to die! And Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, Buffy Saint Marie, Neil Young and Paul Simon proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that lyric poetry was still alive and well, albeit in a slightly altered form.

In England, this new sophistication manifested itself on John Peel's radio show. Peel was a man of eclectic taste. Avant garde atonality rubbed shoulders with experimental jazz, traditional folk music and the heavy thumping rhythms of hard core rock, sometimes all at once in a single song!

It was John Peel who introduced me to Marc Bolan and Peregrine Took (yes, really!) in the guise of Tyrannosaurus Rex. Of course this was long before Bolan metamorphosed into T. Rex, sold his soul to the devil, and died young, handsome and rich, a casualty of, and the epitome of, glam rock!

It was on John Peel's programme

that I first fell in love with the inane caterwaulings of The Incredible String Band, and it was there that I followed the bewildering array of lineups who always called themselves Fairport Convention and/or Steeleye Span despite the fact that they were made up of completely different people almost every time they appeared.

It was starting to become clear to me that I was looking for two things from my music – I was falling increasingly in love with lyrical sophistication but at the same time I wanted the accompanying music to be as subtle as the lyrics. I was losing patience with musical simplicity. I was becoming bored by the banal. I

certainly understood the crude attraction of the hard core rock and roll that evolved from Bill Haley's small beginnings – and those savage rhythms could still get under my skin in small doses. But all too soon my attention would begin to wander. The sound and the fury signified nothing to me any more. I wanted something other than sheer raw exuberance.

I found what I was looking for in folk music. The British folk heritage is a very rich one. Some of the songs tell stories (and we all love stories), some of the songs are bawdy jokes and some are sad refrains. Some are full of bizarre surreal images and some are straightforward dance tunes. That's a

very large pool to splash around in. No matter what your mood, there will always be some music to suit it. Political statements sit comfortably alongside love songs and the events taking place in the world are encapsulated in wry couplets.

Many of the contemporary musicians that I was coming to love seemed to feel quite at home in that tradition. Paul Simon had a huge reputation in British folk music circles long before he hit the big time in the world at large. Even Bob Dylan, who was just embarking on the very first leg of his perpetual world tour, would occasionally pop in to some of the larger clubs when he happened to be in

town. I found I was listening more and more to people who described themselves as folk-rock musicians; though sometimes they got pompous and called themselves progressive-rock musicians instead. But I found it always amounted to much the same thing in the end.

I spent the 1970s travelling the wilds of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire seeking out folk clubs in the small back rooms of dingy pubs in tiny villages. The folk clubs were a young man's paradise. There was always lots of beer of course, and there were always lots of girls as well. Unfortunately most of the girls wore knitted jumpers and seemed to think

that the answers to life the universe and everything could be found in astrology and homeopathy and if all else failed, they could always go and hug a tree. But you can't have everything and, on the positive side, they generally showed a very pleasing willingness to take their knitted jumpers off for me with the absolute minimum of persuasion on my part. And there was music as well! Icing on the cake!

Well, that was then and this is now. These days I'm older and more cynical. These days it seems to me that, by and large, all art aspires to the condition of muzak, to mildly mis-quote Michael Moorcock, and certainly when I hear soppy strings playing Beatles music in

hotel lifts I do sometimes wonder if it was all worth while.

What once seemed new and dangerous, and even revolutionary now seems to be mainstream and harmless. The times are just as turbulent today as ever they were in the past. New armies are fighting the old wars all over again on some of the same old battlefields, and the same propaganda is generating the same kind of headlines that I was reading in my newspaper fifty years ago. It seems that nothing much has changed in any fundamental way.

That doesn't invalidate the music of course. But perhaps the music is diminished by what some might perceive to be a failure of intent. Or,

more likely, perhaps it never was as important or as clever as once upon a time I thought it was. It seems clear that neither I nor the world ever really learned anything that mattered from it.

I've never stopped listening to music of course, and I never will stop listening to it. Old music, new music even Morris Dancing music; it all has its place in the pantheon. I still love it just as much, and it's still very important to me. But I no longer think it's important to the world, and nowadays I get the sense of things passing me by.

Perhaps I'll let Jethro Tull have the last word. It's very hard to express what I've been trying to say succinctly,

but I think that Ian Anderson
beautifully summed up the decades of
my life, the songs that I listened to and
the contradictory, turbulent times that
generated the songs, when he stood up
on one leg, tootled his flute and sang:

So you ride
yourselves
over the fields
And you make
all your
animal deals
And your wise
men don't
know how it
feels
To be thick

As a brick.

Alan Upgrades His Unmentionables

Once every thirteen years I buy new underpants whether I need them or not. And every quarter century I buy new socks. It's a timetable that I stick to quite religiously because I strongly suspect that the universe will come to an end if I don't. After all, my gradually shattering underwear is living proof that I am single-handedly making a massive contribution to the increasing entropy of the universe. This

makes me feel warm inside. The universe needs me...

Most mornings the cats watch me get dressed and sometimes they are moved to make comments. I was pulling on a particularly raggedy pair of pants one day when Bess said, “You appear to be wearing a hole with an elastic waistband. And the elastic has perished. Why would you want to do that?”

“There’s not much I can do about it,” I said. “I won’t be able to buy new underpants for at least another three years. So meanwhile, I’ve just got to put up with the general disintegration. However I must admit that the erotic holes in these particular pants are

leaving less and less to the imagination.”

“I don’t think you need to do anything,” said Harpo. “Those underpants make it so much easier for me to bite you on the bum. Let me show you.” He bit me on the bum.

“Ow!” I said. Drastic action appeared to be called for and so I ignored my schedule and headed straight for the underpants shop where I bought a packet of six.

When I got my new underpants home, I unpacked them and attempted to put a pair on. To my horror I discovered that the operating system had been significantly upgraded since I last bought any underwear and the new

user interface was completely non-intuitive. Since the documentation was conspicuous by its absence – there was no operating system manual included with the garments – I simply couldn't think what do do with them.

Earlier releases of the operating system had the label on the outside front of the mechanism. Orientation was simple – just point the label at the wall, step into the underpants, pull them up and Robert's your avuncular relative! But when I tried that with the newly purchased pants I experienced a sickening trans-dimensional hyperspatial shift and it quickly became clear both to me and to my audience that I was now wearing my

underpants back to front.

“Oops!” I said.

“What’s wrong?” asked Robin.

I explained the counter intuitive nature of the user interface and the serious lack of documentation.

“Hmm,” said Robin. “Perhaps they’ve shifted the paradigm and adopted the female use-case.”

“I’ve always hated paradigm shifts,” I said. “Somebody once shifted a paradigm into the doorway at the office. I tripped over it and bruised my deliverables when I arrived at work. Tell me, how does the female schema leverage the strategic synergy of the dressing experience?”

“Ladies underwear always has the

outside label on the side rather than on the front,” Robin explained. “It reconceptualizes a holistic but, nevertheless granular, adaption of transformational theme areas that enhances the performance based mechanistics without having any adverse effect on the integrity of the model-based client-focused core competencies.”

“Really? I didn’t know any of that. I seldom wear ladies underpants. They don’t have enough willy room.”

“The lack of bandwidth in the organ space is indeed a disempowering metric of deleterious cross-functional performance related matrices,” agreed Robin.

“I wonder which side the label is supposed to be on?”

“Dexter focused informational embroidery is seldom implemented as an infrastructural mechanism,” Robin explained. “I suspect that sinisterial methodologies are most likely to succeed as an enterprise-wide strategic implementation of service schemas.”

I followed her advice to the letter. Lo and behold! I was successfully wearing underpants again. And the moral is: always minimise your therbligs.

Once I was dressed, I began to consider the problem of packing a suitcase for the weekend. Robin and I were planning on attending a science

fiction convention and it was necessary to decide what to take with us. I threw things into a suitcase and so did Robin. We set off and checked ourselves into the convention hotel. Arriving safely in our room, we began to unpack again and that was when I made a terrible discovery.

“Oops!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Robin.

“I think I must have been traumatised by my underwear experience,” I said. “I completely forgot to pack any underpants. And what’s more, I didn’t pack any socks either.”

“Well the shops are still open,” said Robin. “Why not go out and buy some

more underwear and socks?”

“But I’ll be thirteen years too early,” I pointed out. “And I’m not due for new socks for at least another two decades.”

“I think the universe will forgive you,” said Robin soothingly. “Just this once. After all, your only other alternative is to spend the entire weekend wearing the same underpants and socks that are currently adorning your nether regions.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” I said. “I can enter the masquerade as a mobile aromatherapy machine. Come one, come all; fix anything that ails you with the healing power of AlanSmell(TM).”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea at all,” said Robin gently. “Not everybody has as poor a sense of smell as we do. The aromatherapy you will be offering could easily be construed as a less than delightful experience.”

“Good point.”

Robin and I discovered many years ago that neither of us has much of a sense of smell. This, we are firmly convinced, is the secret of a happy marriage. We are seriously considering setting ourselves up as marriage guidance counsellors. We could make a fortune out of nasalectomies.

Meanwhile, underpants and socks were calling to me from the shops in the central city. I went exploring and it

wasn't long before I found a packet of pants and a clump of socks. I paid \$46 to a bored cashier by simply waving my credit card in front of the machine – it's called payWave. Note the trendy capitalisation – what could possibly go wrong? PINs are not required with payWave and neither are signatures. All you do is pass close to the machine and money is automatically debited from your account. Several people walked past me while I paid, and presumably they too were charged the cost of my underpants and socks as the cards in their wallets came within the sphere of influence of the active payWave machine. I began to contemplate the advantages of building

a Faraday Cage around my hip pocket. Or perhaps a tinfoil condom would be more effective...

I returned to the hotel and examined my purchases. The underpants proved to be old stock which still had the original Mark I operating system, the one with the forward facing label on the front. I was much relieved. The socks, however, were something else again. They appeared to have been born with a genetic defect in that their lower leg area was completely absent. Each sock was simply an ankle attached to a foot. I put them on gloomily – it appeared that I was doomed to suffer a weekend of nether area chills as the draughty

weather took advantage of my lack of limb protection.

“They look just like the things that my dad puts over the business end of his golf clubs,” said Robin. “They keep the clubs safe and warm and protect them from scratches and predatory insects.”

“Perhaps I could pretend I’ve got a club foot?”

Robin regarded the short ankle socks thoughtfully. A slow smile spread itself all over her face. “I think we are seeing another paradigm shift,” she said with a mischievous grin. “Socks are the new willy warmers.”

Alan's Adventures With Arthropods

“What can I get you?” asked the lady behind the bar.

“I’ll have a pint of your best quaffing ale, please” I said. She reached for a glass and began to pour my beer, being careful to put a nice head on it so as to trap the full flavour in the glass. My dry throat ached with anticipation as I watched the golden fluid rise up through the pint pot. My fingers twitched, eager to hold the glass. She shut off the tap just as the foam began to crawl over the edge.

Beads of moisture glistened and ran down the side of the glass. I reached thirstily out for it, but she put it to one side, picked up another and began the whole operation all over again.

I stared in horror at my abandoned pint. “What was wrong with the first one?” I asked.

“Just as I finished pouring it, a fly flew in from nowhere at all, dived head first into the glass, splashed around for a little bit and then drowned. Didn’t you hear the pathetic gurgles as it splashed around in its death throes?”

“No,” I said. “I was concentrating too much on the perfect pint you were pouring for me. Can I see the fly?”

She handed me the original glass. A

small black speck floated forlornly in the foam. She handed me my fresh, flyless pint and I took a deep and extremely satisfying swallow. “What will happen to the original?” I asked.

“Oh I’ll give it to the landlord,” she said. “He’s not fussy and if I don’t tell him about the fly, he’ll probably never even notice it. He tends to close his eyes and drink his beer in one continuous gulp. He’s a philistine. As long as the fly doesn’t tickle his oesophagus on the way down and make him cough he’ll be perfectly OK with it.”

“I really think you should tell him about the fly,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” she

retorted and trotted off in search of her thirsty boss. I sipped my pint and mused about the idiosyncrasies of arthropods.

Wavy music and eerie lines...wavy lines and eerie music...wavy music and eerie lines...

I don't use my microwave oven very much. Mainly I consider it to be just a convenient mechanism for defrosting frozen stuff and for reheating already cooked stuff. However it has one indispensable feature – it has a countdown timer buried somewhere in its complicated controls. I use that almost every day in order to keep track of the savoury sauces simmering on the stove.

One day I walked over to the microwave to press the timer button. As my finger floated towards the control panel I noticed that I could no longer see the glowing digits that told the time and which helpfully decreased themselves sequentially when the timer was activated. There was a blob obscuring the digits and several thin wavy lines spread out from it. My first thought was that the glass over the digits was cracked. I diverted my finger from its journey to the timer button and rubbed it across the glass. I couldn't feel any cracks so I looked a bit more closely and counted very carefully. There were eight thin lines radiating out from the central blob.

And now one of them was waving at me...

Oh my goodness.

“ROBIN!!!”

Robin wandered into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Too overcome for words, I just pointed at the microwave. Robin squatted down and examined it closely.

“Well I never,” she said. “There’s a spider trapped behind the glass. It looks like it’s sunbathing in the glow of the clock digits. I wonder how it got there?”

“More to the point, can it get out and start nibbling on whatever I’ve got going round and round in the chamber? I’m not sure I fancy eating spider

leftovers for tea.”

“I doubt that,” said Robin. “The chamber is all sealed off. Look how thin the spider is. The poor thing is probably starving to death. There can’t be very much for a spider to eat deep in the bowels of a microwave machine. Can’t you be a good Buddhist and unscrew everything so you can let it out?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not dismantling the microwave just to release a skinny spider. It got itself in there, it can get itself out or die in the attempt.”

“Perhaps it crawled in through one of the ventilation holes in the back when it was a baby,” suggested Robin. “But now it’s grown too big to get out

of the holes again.”

“And just what do you suppose it lived on while it was growing so big?” I asked.

“I imagine it probably fed on its brothers and sisters,” said Robin. “It’s very unlikely that it went in there alone. Doubtless it’s an extremely persuasive spider, and it must have convinced its whole family that they would all have a great adventure if they went exploring inside the microwave. And because they all came along, it knew that it would always be home in time for tea. What a cunning spider!”

“Yes,” I said, “now that you come to mention it, I vaguely recall hearing faint screams of agony coming from

deep inside the microwave for the last couple of weeks. I think you've hit the nail right on the head. Those screams must have been the sound of the spider feeding.”

I decided not to use the microwave timer any more. There's also a mechanical timer built into the cooker. It's not as accurate as the timer in the microwave because its cogs are clogged with grease but it will do in an emergency, and there was no doubt in my mind that this was an emergency. I refused to go anywhere near the microwave oven as long as the spider was living in it. I was scared that the microwaves might have given it super powers and that when it saw my finger

approaching for a quick poke at the controls it would shatter the glass and come roaring after me, eager to suck the marrow from my bones. No thank you very much.

For the next day or so the spider hung around and bathed in the eerie glow of the clock diodes. Then it crawled back to wherever it had come from and vanished from view deep into the bowels of the machine where presumably it eventually starved to death. It wasn't long before the faint but unmistakable smell of rotting spider permeated the kitchen. Robin sniffed appreciatively.

“Are you cooking curry for tea?” she asked.

The End