



Coffee Klatch Curmudgeon

John C. Nash

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Coffee Klatch Curmudgeon (or maybe it should be Klatsch) is an ongoing collection of works of fiction and semi-fictitious memoirs. They are a subset of the author's short works that concern domestic and social themes rather than action or historical ones. The apparent memoirs are reconstituted vignettes based on multiple sources. Similarly, the material is voiced by a man who is clearly of retirement age. Where he lives, his domestic situation and his wife Jackie are all composites of a Canadian urban or suburban lifestyle of someone who was born in the UK and raised on the western side of the Atlantic. We never learn his name, his particular religion or politics, though it is clear he has strong opinions founded on a pragmatic but mainly charitable character. In short, an everyman Canadian senior.

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SCWG the writers owe a debt of gratitude to "RJ" Partington, the group coordinator. Personally, I am deeply appreciative of RJ's efforts. He also organized that a group of editors-in-training from Algonquin College would review some of our work. Spela Sraka kindly agreed to edit this collection, and her attention and professionalism have much improved the work. My sincere thanks.

I hope you enjoy reading these short pieces and may, in some instances, find in them inspiration and hope.

John Nash Ottawa, 2020, 2021
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Late

The other day, I somehow found myself at coffee with a few old cronies.

"Found" is probably not the right word. Maybe "discovered" or "woke up to the fact" would be more apt.

I'd taken my morning walk right after breakfast because it was sunny, but after about 20 minutes some clouds rolled in and then a light drizzle started to fall. So the coffee shop looked really attractive. It smelled attractive too as I came in the door.

I ordered a latte and found a corner where I could relax, sip my drink, and watch the people. I pulled out a book. I was re-reading Graham Greene's "The Ministry of Fear". Dated now, with its grey and sinister setting of London during the Battle of Britain and the early Blitz, when it was believed there were all sorts of German spies about.

Though I knew the story, I still enjoyed the plot twists surrounding the hero, who has served a sentence for the mercy killing of his sick wife. A murderer as hero, and a genuine one at that. And the wistful ending where he remarks "It seemed to him that after all one could exaggerate the value of happiness ..." as he takes on new responsibilities in the form of a young refugee woman who has fallen in love with him despite age difference and his reluctance.

My minor reverie was destroyed by Alvin who plonked himself down opposite me.

"You're late!" he accused.

"I hadn't noticed," I replied coldly. I had been quietly enjoying my solitude and my coffee. And besides, it was only by chance I was here, so how could I be late.

"You're supposed to fill in for Joe, who died last month. Didn't see you at the funeral either," he added with a second dose of reprobation.

At this stage, I realized that Alvin didn't remember that Joe and I were never more than acquaintances. And, more to the point, that I'd been in Florida until a week after the funeral. At our age, you can't be flying back for every funeral or you'd never finish a round of golf. Assuming you play, of course, which I don't.

I was trying to think how to avoid riling Alvin, at least any more than he was, when Marcy arrived at the table and said to Alvin, "Move over, you're in my spot."

Marcy is a lot like the *Big Bang*'s Sheldon Cooper, though probably it's the other way round. She defined the concept of "my spot" sometime shortly after Confederation.

To me she said "You're late. We like the table over there."

Now I was starting to wonder what was going on. I said, "I wasn't aware I was supposed to be here at all. I just happened in here today because it started to rain during my walk."

"Jeff told me you were going to get here every Tuesday and reserve our table," Marcy retorted.

Before I could formulate an answer or a further inquiry, Jeff himself sat down.

"You didn't get our table!" he accused.

"He was late," Marcy and Alvin said in chorus.

I was about to protest, but realized the table they thought I was responsible for occupying early was actually empty.

"We could move," I ventured.

"We're here now. But you should get here on time."

"What time is that?" I asked.

"9:30, so we have the table when we all get here at 10".

"What time is it now?" I asked.

"Dunno," said Alvin. "Don't wear a watch."

"My phone's at the bottom of my purse," Marcy said. The coffee shop would have to hire a front-end loader if she decided to look for it.

"I left home at 9," said Jeff, then trailed off. He lived 200 metres away, and even with his cane, could cover the distance in five minutes.

I'd looked at my watch about 10 minutes ago and it was 18 past 9. I thought of preparing an argument, but we'd all be dead by the time the case reached the Supreme Court. However, I asked, "Was someone supposed to tell me I was the person to reserve the table? I didn't get any message."

"Joe said he was going to phone you. Told me the day before he kicked the bucket," Alvin said.

"I doubt he had my number. I shut off my land-line last year," I said.

"Said he had it," Marcy grumbled.

"Not like Joe not to do what he said," Jeff added.

"Hmffff," Alvin contributed.

It seemed to me that, after all, one could exaggerate the value of company

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Anniversaries

For the last year, I'd somehow become a member of an informal coffee klatch.

You may remember that I told you how I'd wandered in to the local morning coffee place. Jenny, the young barista there, makes a latte the way I like it. Hot, no foam. Probably too milky for most folk. And they do a mean breakfast bagel that I like, though I sometimes have to have a tiny serving of cereal so my wife doesn't get suspicious. It's not like I don't enjoy her company, but I like to read for half an hour or so in the morning, and somehow a great latte goes so well with reading. And the bagel just completes the pleasure. To assuage my conscience, I walk to the coffee shop, a brisk fifteen-minute walk by the indirect route.

Alvin, Jeff and Marcy were the other members of the coffee klatch. Well, the members actually, along with Joe, though Joe had died, but not before apparently spreading the word that I was the person who would reserve a table – a particular table – for the group. However, while spreading the word, he left me out of the need-to-know list, and then – very inconsiderately I thought – died.

This morning wasn't supposed to be a coffee morning, so I fully expected to have a clear half-hour of reading. Possibly even get a full hour. I got my latte and bagel and settled in to one of the bench seats against the wall. Marcy generally sat here. It was a good place to sit and watch, and it was kind of in a corner where you could get really comfortable. I can see why she always claimed it as "my spot". The rest of us sometimes called her "Sheldon" as a result.

I'd finished the bagel when Alvin came in. He didn't see me until he'd paid for his coffee and cinnamon bun, but then came over with a hearty hello. I suppose I'm a bit of a social coward. I could've been truthful and told Alvin I was reading and wanted to enjoy that activity in solitude. But I didn't, of course, and simply said "Morning Alvin".

Alvin said, "It's not our usual coffee morning, but it's the anniversary of Joe's death. I'm glad you got the email from Marcy."

In fact, of course, I hadn't got the email. Marcy always accepts the first email recipient suggested by her address book program, and my name sorts to fourth or fifth on the list of suggested targets. I've never got an email from her, as it turns out. Marcy assumes I get them all, which is naturally a significant problem, though, as usual, I did not disabuse Alvin of

his misunderstanding.

Instead, I asked, "Is there anything special planned?"

"No. Not that I know about."

I said, "I feel a bit of a fraud. I only knew Joe as a very casual acquaintance. Never got to know him as a friend. Didn't even know what he did for a living."

"He was a clerk of the small claims court. Very proper and sober. Probably a reaction to his father."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh. Didn't you know? His dad was a first mate on freighters. Not tramp steamers but those of well-organized steamship companies. Wouldn't have been anything to write home about, except he somehow managed to acquire three wives. One in Southampton, England, one in Halifax, Nova Scotia – Joe's mother – and one in New Jersey."

"Busy guy," I volunteered.

"Yeah. Had five kids. Had to remember all the names and birthdays and anniversaries. That's what caught him out. He mixed up the anniversary date of Mrs. Halifax and Mrs. New Jersey. The latter rewarded him with the order of the cast iron skillet. He took off with a very bruised face, but the British authorities caught up with him as he disembarked in Southampton. The Southampton wife was number 1, and she got what little pension money there was when the much-married sailor was incarcerated for bigamy. Actually trigamy, I suppose."

"Must have been hard on the others," I said.

"Yeah. In the mid-fifties, Joe was under 10. Said his mother had to do a couple of jobs to put food on the table. And he said there was always someone who'd make snide remarks that his mother hadn't been married. You know, because the marriage wasn't valid."

"Never knew that. Quite a story."

"Odd, though. Joe's half-siblings all came to his funeral. They were all still alive. Seems that sometime in the mid-70s one of them tracked down all the others. And somehow they all got along. By then the father had died. Dropped dead one morning in the prison laundry. Heart attack."

I wanted to ask more, but Jeff and Marcy came in. I quietly shifted to another chair, then got up and ordered a second latte. I hadn't been a friend of Joe's, but I didn't begrudge him an anniversary. If his father had remembered anniversaries better, who knows how the story would have been told.

John C. Nash ©2020-06-24

UnCoffee

You may recall I've somehow been conscripted into a local coffee klatch. I say "conscripted" because I never intended to join the group, made up of Marcy, Alvin, Jeff and the late Joe.

True. I sometimes sat with them when they had their sessions at the local coffee house. Or rather, they started sitting with me. Someone assumed I was a willing participant rather than a random bystander.

I was going to say "innocent bystander". But you know, bystanders are rarely innocent. Often guilty as hell. Some of them can hear the scrape of fender scraping paint off another fender at over 500 metres. And then they all gather round to gawk and gloat and gossip.

"Driver must have been drinking."

"Really, but it's only ten past nine in the morning. Is he a drunk?"

"Dunno. But he'd just come out of the coffee shop."

Well, I say it's more likely the ravages of a low-fat soymilk latte with an imperfectly installed plastic top that the driver was trying to juggle while starting to move in his new standard transmission sports car. If he's unlucky, he has the triple penalty of new car damage, insurance payouts and unserviceable personal sports equipment due to hot liquid in lap.

But I'm off on a tangent here. I was going to tell you about the latest coffee klatch woes. Of course, there hadn't been any meet-ups for a while with the pandemic lock-down, but recent changes in regulations allow the coffee shop to have a couple of tables open, and it helps that the front of the shop has an old glass garage door, so it can be opened up. I got an email from Alvin saying they'd meet at the coffee shop at the usual time. There was a silent command that I was to get there early to grab "our" table. However, I chose not to reply. I don't mind the assumption that I'm an unofficial group member, but it's a bit over the top to impose work duty.

I did, however, decide to be a bystander, as I had been past the coffee shop and knew Marcy's "spot" was one of the tables blocked off from use to provide appropriate physical distancing. The new mask regulation meant actually drinking or eating would be difficult too. The public health authorities should have had a year's training in improv comedy so they could get their act together for writing coherent regulations more quickly.

It was easy for me to lurk in the park across from the coffee shop. There was a bench – we're allowed to sit on them now, unlike a month or so ago

– that was partly hidden by bushes. I took my book and was reading and keeping an eye out for the arrival of the group members.

Alvin got there first, with Jeff just a minute behind. They stood about indecisively, then Jeff sat at a table for 3 near the open front while Alvin went to the counter. He was just getting his order when Marcy showed up. I could lip-read

“They’ve blocked off my spot!”

This was clearly followed by some grumbling and general complaining. Then Marcy clearly said something about there only being three chairs. And you weren’t supposed to move chairs around. That was part of the new regulations. Marcy was concerned that I wouldn’t be able to sit with them. So they all got up and moved to a table at the back which had 4 chairs, all well-spaced.

I was starting to get thirsty. And the barista in this coffee house does a latte just how I like it. With the lock-down, I was a bit concerned that they would have trouble staying in business, so I put a chunk of money on account and arranged that I’d phone in an order – always a latte extra hot and no foam and a chocolate croissant. Before they were allowed to have tables, they’d modified the counter a bit and set up a small hatch to deliver take-out to the side-walk. And one day it wasn’t too busy and the barista – Jenny – saw me on the bench and before I could get to the take-out window, she’d brought it across. Great service. I told her to take a buck a time out of my balance and to let me know when I got below twenty bucks.

And today she spotted me after I phoned my order in. So Jenny brought me my order, and I saw Marcy get up and come to the front of the shop to see where Jenny was going. I could see steam coming out of Marcy’s ears.

I waved. Then I thanked Jenny and sat to enjoy my croissant and coffee.

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Future Perfect

By the time you read this, someone will have passed on.

That's an example of the future perfect tense. It's about an action completed or perfected before something else happens in the future. Apparently, in English, it pretty well has to have the words 'will' and 'have'.

I've been thinking a lot about those two words lately, and about a perfect future. With this pandemic rigmarole, I'm not getting to enjoy the local coffee shop as much as I usually do. And despite the fact that they can be annoying and give me a bad temper, I miss Alvin and Jeff and Marcy, of whose coffee klatch I am a co-opted member some of the time. With Covid, it's really awkward to have a sit-down with coffee. Oh, the rules now say you can do it, but the different precautions with masks, hand sanitizer and where you're allowed to sit etc. take a relaxing activity and make it stressful. Easier to set up chairs well-apart on someone's deck. Until it rains of course.

It was when Joe passed on that somehow I was nominated – without my approval or notification – as the person to reserve the favoured table at the coffee shop. To use a modal perfect tense, they should have sent me an email with an imperative future perfect instruction: “Before 9:35 a.m., you will have occupied a seat at our favourite table and warned off any other patrons.” I would still have ignored the directive, if only to see how Marcy would react. I'm mostly considered a nice guy, but I've been channelling my inner curmudgeon lately when people make assumptions about what I'll do for them.

Which brings me back to the words 'future' and 'perfect' and 'will' and 'have'. You see my wife and I don't have kids, but there's a relative who does and who has expressed the sentiment that family should always come first. This sentiment is recast in a larger mould and in stronger metal the more money another relative might possess upon expiration.

So I'm trying to think of the right wording for my will to express that perfect sentiment for the day in the future when certain expectations will be dashed. A future perfect sentence like: “By the time the reading of this will has been completed, my money-grubbing family will have gained the knowledge that you should never depend on a legacy you don't have in your own bank account.”

J C Nash ©2020-09-10

The Bridge

My bus was late. Very late.

There'd been an accident and it took police an hour to clear enough of a lane that we could move forward and the bus could continue.

Fortunately, nobody got too loud or strident. There were occasional murmured exchanges about supper being ruined or plans disrupted, but most people simply turned to their phones and called or texted to say we were stuck, and later on to say we were now moving.

I had no plans, save a slightly trashy novel I was reading. My wife was away to visit her sister for a week, and sometimes it's nice to have a bit of unstructured time.

By the time the bus got to my stop, it was truly dark. We'd just put the clocks back for the fall adjustment to standard time and the evenings closed in early.

My house was a few blocks from the stop, on the other side of a small creek. The road had been there a lot longer than the houses, and the bridge was narrow, so there was only a sidewalk on one side of the two traffic lanes, which meant I had to cross the road to avoid being in the path of vehicles.

As I approached the bridge, I noticed the street light that was supposed to illuminate it was out. This meant the narrowest section of the road was unlit. Well, not a big problem. There was a bit of light from the front porch of a nearby house.

Then I noticed that there was something on the sidewalk at the far end of the bridge. By now I was at the start of the bridge, and it wasn't a long structure, so maybe 30 feet away was something shadowy. I stopped to try to make it out and realized it was a fox, sitting on its haunches, looking at me.

In this area, foxes can be rabid, so it's worth paying a bit of attention.

I looked at the fox.

The fox looked at me.

I was about to cross the road and walk on the roadway when I heard a car coming. There was a flash of the reflection of the car's headlights in the fox's eyes, and he disappeared around the railing of the bridge and down towards the water, possibly under the bridge deck.

I let the car pass, then carefully made my way across the bridge. After I'd got about 20 yards, I heard a soft barking noise and looked back. The

fox had returned to his post on the bridge.

For whatever reason, I called out "Goodnight" and there was another soft bark in reply.

J C Nash ©2017-03-15

No way to know

I've not seen Sharon for over a year. Not since we met for a brief lunch at my local coffee shop late in the previous winter. A drizzly day a few degrees above freezing.

We greeted, then ordered our sandwiches at the counter, and I went to the toilet to try to sort out my underwear. I'd just had an ultrasound and somehow got, as the Brits say, "my knickers in a twist". When I came back, the sandwiches were on the table and Sharon had already started.

I'd known her for 25 years. Not a super-close friend, but someone who had been part of a volunteer service group I was in and who sometimes joined in theatre or other outings. There'd been occasional social events where we'd invited her, rarely the other way round. A couple of times I'd helped with some household fix-it jobs. And most of the time we'd known each other there'd been phone calls or coffee every month or so.

Lately, the gaps between contacts were longer. And the conversation was gradually more difficult. Now retired, I realized that she'd rarely said anything about how she spent her time. And I couldn't think of any mutual acquaintances.

"How are things?", I asked.

"Oh. Fine."

"Been away at all? We had our regular month in Florida. Then a week in the Dominican Republic for a bit of sun." I prompted.

"No. Haven't wanted to."

"Been keeping busy?" Perhaps she'd respond to an unstructured question.

"Yeah. Lots to do," she replied, but then went silent.

I ate my sandwich. Somehow the person I'd known as companionable and friendly was gone. Sharon almost seemed resentful of my presence.

Was it envy that I had a spouse with whom I could share things? She'd broken up with her partner about a quarter-century earlier in a way that implied a fearful hurt and anger such that his name was never spoken. Indeed, I'd never heard him named.

To break the silence, I prattled about our Dominican holiday.

"We were in a resort in Santa Domingo which was 90% Russians. None of them seemed to know any language except Russian so we couldn't talk to them.

It was sort of interesting that the men all wore speedo-type bathing suits and the women all wore bikinis, even the older women with far too much middle. Obviously quite fancy outfits, but really only nice on the younger ones.”

“Well, I guess that’s top of mind for you,” Sharon replied.

I didn’t know how to respond. My comments were about the apparent national uniform of beachwear. While I find it pleasant to look at an attractive woman, it isn’t an obsession. And I’d been making an observation on the group behaviour, not particular people. But I sensed that Sharon disapproved. Considered my interest to be inappropriate. I had no way to know which way to take her response.

The last bite of my sandwich saved me from having to react immediately. Somewhere, the warm water in the sink of a nice, gentle friendship had leaked away. Sharon had some family history of Alzheimer’s. Was the lack of communication a sign of that? Or had I done something to offend? The old commercials about body odour or halitosis came to mind. An inadvertent nose picking or some other social atrocity?

I considered carefully what I should do. In the half-hour or so since I’d greeted Sharon, there’d been absolutely no transfer of any information of substance about her current life. No vacations, projects, outings, books, shopping, theatre. Nothing.

I’m not one for agonizing over these things, though I am willing to give the lion’s share of effort to maintaining social connections. But there comes a time where my patience runs thin, and then there’s a danger of saying or doing something that is difficult to unsay or undo. I considered being very blunt and asking what was wrong. Couldn’t see there was any percentage in that. So I looked at my watch and said,

“Must get along soon.”

“Yes. You’ve probably got things to do.”

“Nice to see you again.” I lied, knowing it hadn’t been nice at all.

John C. Nash ©2017-08-16

Distortion

“Please leave your message after the beep.”

I guess most people alive today have heard that recorded instruction. But it’s really pretty modern. Any pensioner today was born before reel-to-reel tape recorders were affordable outside of the broadcast and music industries. 8-track and compact cassettes didn’t appear in stores until well into the 1960s. Before that, there were a few specialty recorders using wax cylinders for dictation or steel wire for espionage.

Trouble is, once recording became easy, so did making a copy, though it wasn’t necessarily a very good one until we started digitizing the signal and could just copy a file.

I used to take the signal from a turntable that played vinyl LPs and patch it into my Grundig reel-to-reel player. Still had to hope the tape had consistent coating and had to wind it forward all the way then back again to get it tensioned evenly. Took about 5 minutes just for that. And then hope that there was no dust or other debris or scratches on the vinyl. Moreover, recording was carried out in real-time – pun intended – and making a copy required the same amount of time as listening to the LP.

LP – there’s an expression that still gets used and has no relevance to today’s technology. But it did have the advantage that you could pick out the tracks easily just by looking at the surface of the vinyl record in a good light.

You still needed good amplifiers and decent cables or things wouldn’t sound right. Wow. Flutter. Distortion. Saturation. We got used to a lot of not-so-good sounds.

Worse were the folk who were convinced they knew what they were doing. One time this fellow Nigel jumped into a conversation I was having at the coffee shop where I said I was looking to find a couple of tracks of a fairly rare album.

“I’ve got that. Why don’t I make a recording for you?”

It sounded like a good offer. Two weeks later, he gave me a cassette – he’d bought one of the first consumer cassette tape decks. So did I.

So I played it. Every fault imaginable was present, including one passage that sounded like the recording studio was under water. I figured I’d keep looking for a better copy, but when we happened to meet again at coffee a few weeks later, I thanked him – he had, after all, made a cassette for me –

then asked how he'd made the recording.

“Oh. The usual way. Just put the mike in front of the speaker of the record player. Only I did have to use a tissue to wipe the record. I'd been eating a croissant with honey and it was flaky and some crumbs and a drip of the honey got on the record. I think I got it all off, though.”

J C Nash ©2017-11-15

An Everyday Miracle

People talk about miracles, but they can miss seeing them when they are right in front of them. We know some things are ever-present but invisible like bacteria and viruses, but I'm not talking about that sort of thing. It's that glue of emotion that keeps people going that I figure is the challenge for most folks to notice.

Of course, our society doesn't like to admit to things like love, affection, commitment, and loyalty and things like that. Take my friend Jerry. Split up with his wife after about ten years, banged around like ping pong balls at an Olympic table-tennis tournament for a few, then suddenly has this woman Ann living with him. Been together now for over three decades.

They made a big fuss that they weren't getting married. Then the other day I heard him talking to someone down at the coffee shop about "my wife". And Ann's sort of the same. "Oh. I can't stand all that nonsense about marriage." But then, "We've got to go to help our daughter with her first child. Grandparents have to spoil the little ones."

And Jerry says he hates cats. Says "A natural habitat for cats is in a weighted sack at the bottom of the river." But Ann brought at least four cats with her when she moved in. And when Ann's oldest moggie finally catches the big mouse, what does Jerry do but go out and bring home the cutest black and white kitten imaginable. But he still says he hates cats.

So there are no miracles. And no love. And no affection. And no commitment. And, of course, no loyalty. Tell me another one.

J C Nash ©2017-11-21

Library Shelves

It used to be that libraries had acres of bookshelves. Since computers started to be common, the floor space allocated to shelves has shrunk a little each couple of years, with the desks and computers taking more space, along with areas for community meetings and children's "discovery" zones. For "discovery" read "mainly play".

Back in the middle of the 20th century, libraries were quiet. Supposedly, the librarian would shush people, but I can't recall an instance. No deity was quite so powerful as the one that decreed "Thou shalt be quiet in the library".

When everything was paper-based, we even had what was called "Compact Shelving". The shelves were on rollers so six or eight shelves had just one space for getting in between for selecting or re-shelving books. There was a wheel or lever to move each shelf over to open the space as needed. Of course, the savings in space were offset and more by the reinforcing needed for the floor.

Compact shelving was useful if you didn't want to be found for a while. One librarian with a habit of shelving empty whiskey bottles had a special shelf where he could drink or sleep. Rumour has it someone moved the shelves one day and he couldn't get out. This rumour grew over time and re-telling so that he wasn't found for two years because the alcohol had pickled him so he didn't smell. As a fact, however, I can confirm finding 19 empty whiskey bottles when we had a contract to figure out which books and documents had gone missing to make the space. Oh. I forgot to mention that the library was for a classified collection of NATO military stuff. In true SNAFU fashion, we were to report everything we could **not** find in the library. Well, we didn't find any gold, or money, or dead KGB agents. Or any whiskey, I might add. And a lot of catalogued and supposedly secret items weren't there and had no destruction certificate either, dating back as far as the end of WW2.

Besides shelving and quiet, I miss the smell of books. Long rows of buckram or – in special libraries like that of the Supreme Court – leather. There used to be, maybe still is, a budget just for binding the Justices' books. And the whole library, a complete floor of the Supreme Court building, is for fewer than 40 named users. Just the justices of the Supreme and Federal courts and their researchers. Now that's an exclusive club.

It'll be difficult to re-create that old-fashioned library ambiance. The

librarians or their assistants will see me bringing in chains to make a section resemble the Hereford Chained Library. And I can't really afford all the leather and gold to do a mini Duke Humphries Library or a Codrington as in Oxford, or the modest collection Jefferson donated to the Library of Congress.

Last resort, maybe I'll make a speech about the loss of the old Carnegie-style libraries. Here goes.

What? You want me to shush? Well, I never thought that would happen.

J C Nash ©2017-11-28

Christmas Spirit

If you live in Ottawa, you know about the Byward Market. Sure, it's a market that has produce and maple syrup. And it's all supposed to be local. Yes sir, local from the big wholesale warehouse where the trucks come in from California and Texas and Mexico. And lots of restaurants and bars and cafes and more bars. There's also several shelters for folks down on their luck, plus a fair amount of street enterprise in what economists euphemistically call "the informal sector".

I'm not a frequent visitor to the Market area, but I happened to attend a lecture at the National Gallery, so the Market was on the way to my bus stop at the Rideau Centre or whatever it's called now. Mid-December, there was a bit of wispy snow, not too cold, and folk were around in the late afternoon gloom. They were mostly like me, getting from A to B, but possibly doing a bit of shopping. There's a couple of bakeries and ... my waistline pinching against my belt reminded me to keep walking.

In the entrance to one of the shopping passages, there was a gal with a collection kettle and a belt of small bells that she was shaking to get folks' attention. Looking over, I realized that her outfit wasn't exactly conventional. A red tunic edged with white fur. But it was kind of short. Like so short that only a very fine line of fur fringe concealed the tops of legs covered by net stockings. Shiny black boots up to the knee. And the top of the tunic had a plunging V showing, well, a lot. Voltaire's description of Canada as "quelques arpents de neige" might almost have been appropriate for the area of white skin showing. Looked like she was trying to solicit for more than charity.

Though bemused, I kept walking, then heard a voice behind me call out to her, "Hey Carrie. You really going to make sure that money gets to the Sally Ann?"

"Course I am. Every penny in the kettle goes where it's supposed to. But if someone wants to make a separate donation, I'll be happy to work out an arrangement."

J C Nash ©2017-12-12

Dumpster Diving

If you follow the news, you might think Mr. Trump is the world's biggest problem. Or the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Or the faction-du-jour of extreme Islam in the Middle East. Or global warming.

Not me.

I think it's trash. Real trash, digital trash, verbal trash, any trash.

We're buried in it. And there's folk out there going to make us pay.

If you watch a dumpster outside of an office building, there are people diving in to see what they can find. Usually, folk who are homeless or poor, living on the edges of society. But the other day I saw a guy who lived on a different edge. Diving into a dumpster downtown of an evening. Dressed like he was homeless, but he should have checked his shoes. Too nice!

He found something. Looked like some papers. I hung back in a doorway out of the light and watched. He picked up a backpack and walked away. I followed.

The diver walked several blocks to a coffee shop. But he didn't know this was one of my favourite places, and I'd already hacked the wifi. I waved to the barista and called out

"My usual when you've served everyone else, Jenny!"

and set up my laptop. By the time my diver had got his coffee and set up his own laptop, I was watching the wi-fi traffic and picked off his log-in. His traffic would now be logged. Might not be easy to figure out, but all the data would be there.

Jenny brought my coffee as I poked at my keyboard to deal with some junk email while watching the progress of my target in a small window I had set up on my screen. I didn't need to watch – the real work would come a bit later when I got home.

Later that night, I teased out that my diver was fooling around with invoices, submitting fake ones similar to those he'd dug out of the dumpster, but changing the destination electronic payment number. This should not work if the accounting staff were on the ball and took the time to verify this. It's a small but important step in the process. Or even if they had the payment destinations pre-set in their systems. Possibly our diver had an accomplice.

I saved off the fake invoices he'd submitted electronically and went to bed.

The next morning I phoned the company and asked for the CEO. Of course, I didn't get very far until I said I had information that they were the target of a fraud and that I would only talk to the CEO. I left the number of my security company. It's reasonably well-known, but actually the so-called office is just a phone in my basement. I never meet face to face with any of these folk. I just tell them my fee is 25% of the amount I save them to a reasonable limit – they will generally tighten up their procedures after a few days. I hint that if they don't like my terms, their insurance providers and investors usually like to know how sloppy they are. Nobody wants to seem careless about money.

A few days later I saw a small news item that two men were arrested for attempting fraud on a local company, and that one was an insider. No details were given. And no mention of watching what you put in the trash.

J C Nash ©2018-2-21

Coal

Last Christmas I was at the home of some friends where some grandchildren were visiting. I've a white beard and was – on this occasion – wearing a red coat. A small girl, likely 4 years old, watched me very carefully for a long time, before coming over and asking

“Are you Santa Claus?”

I replied that I wasn't, but that I probably looked quite a lot like him. Then she said,

“Grandpa says that we all have to be good, or else Santa will only leave us a lump of coal in our stockings.”

Not knowing what to say in reply, I responded,

“Yes, I suppose that's what he does if children are naughty.”

“Is coal bad?” the little girl asked.

That was a big question, of course, but I'm sure not what she was thinking.

“Have you ever seen a lump of coal?” I queried.

“No. What is it?”

In as simple a way as I could, I explained that coal was like soft rock that could be burned. The expression on the little girl's face showed me that she regarded this as a big fib.

“Have you seen a barbecue that burns charcoal?” I asked.

“Uncle Joe has one. Daddy says it's too much work. We have a gas barbecue.”

“Well, coal is very much like the briquettes for Uncle Joe's barbecue,” I explained.

“So you get it at the supermarket in a bag?”

I was getting in too deep here, so I said that now it wasn't sold much anymore. The arrival of some other children – cousins I think – provided a distraction, and I was quickly abandoned with my whiskey in a comfortable armchair.

Where would I get a lump of coal? And would it be lignite, bituminous or the wonderful shiny, hard anthracite? Where did those memories come from? As a child of transatlantic parents, I remembered coal fires in England. The newspaper, the small sticks of kindling, careful placement of modest lumps of coal – black fingers from this of course. Then lighting the match, and, if the chimney didn't draw well, holding a newspaper over the front of the

fireplace to force the draft through the bottom of the fire. Until, inevitably, the newspaper caught fire – sometimes with a spectacular sudden ignition – and had to be thrown in the fireplace to avoid setting the house alight.

“I was reading that paper!” someone would complain.

Of course, you could cook on one side and freeze on the other with such fires. The rooms never quite warmed, with most of the heat going up the chimney. In Canada, back in the 50s, there were still coal merchants for the diminishing number of houses where the big octopus convection furnaces burned it. Some such houses had a coal bunker fed via a chute from the sidewalk that had a small iron cover. The coal hole. Sometimes the foil for pratfalls in silent movies.

And the smoke. A particular smell. It caught me by surprise recently at an outdoor museum where there was a blacksmithing exhibit. I could smell the coal burning from a long way off and it triggered a lot of rather fuzzy memories of places and times, but I couldn’t put any events to them.

Fortunately, though I was in England in December 1952, I escaped the worst of the London pea-soup fog that coal smoke created, killing anywhere from 4,000 to 12,000 depending on how one attributes the fatalities. But there wasn’t sufficient infrastructure for electric or gas heating. So people put up with the dirt of the coal, of the ashes, and the smoke. They had to brush off smuts from steam locomotives and sweep out coal bunkers and sheds, combining the coal dust with a bit of cement powder and moulding a burnable brick in an empty sugar box. One could not afford to waste it.

And keeping warm was more important than keeping clean. A Dutch woman told me her parents wanted a bigger apartment – she said “house”, but to the Dutch, that means one’s dwelling unit. In the post-war time of reconstruction, housing was scarce, but an elderly brother and sister wanted the small apartment of this lady’s family. Possibly the smaller apartment was located closer to where the elderly couple wanted to be. With much back and forth over some period of time a swap was worked out. But the memory that stuck in the mind of a young girl was that the new apartment had a shower stall in the bathroom that was full of coal when they moved in.

But was coal bad? I sipped my scotch and wondered, drifting off into a bit of a daydream as the buzz of the party washed around me.

Was coal bad? If you were a miner who got crushed or got black-lung, then yep. Pretty bad. If you lived near a coal-fired power station, the ash was more radioactive than the waste from a nuclear reactor, and when Con-Ed stopped using coal for electric generation, New York’s air got a lot less radioactive. Those living near the MacKenzie River, of course, are sometimes losing the land beneath their feet as the permafrost melts from global warming.

On the other hand, coal fires let people keep warm in winter, especially in

Britain during the Industrial Revolution after the forests were cut down. The Christmas Entertainment "Round about our coal fire" from 1730 suggests a coal fire was an attractive idea. Richard Bride published a dance by the same title in 1766, stealing a variation on a tune "Old Simon the King" to provide the music. Today, we don't heat houses that way, but we couldn't make modern metals, particularly steels, without coal. And there are lots of chemicals that come from coal that would be hard to make otherwise.

The little girl came back into the room and walked over to me.

"Mommy says that you're going to hand out some presents. She said you were Santa Claus's brother."

Well, a bit of fiction I would go along with. As I got up, I noticed the little girl's eyes. They were black. Black as coal.

J C Nash ©2018-2-21

Fog

Charlie was always trying to make it big. Tried all sorts of ideas. Some made a bit of money for a while, but eventually, his enthusiasms waned and then he'd kind of lose interest and things would fall apart on him.

Back in the 80s, he got it in his head that our little bay on the east coast of The Rock was going to be a big tourist destination. Since I was from away, he came charging round to bend my ear.

"Hey. I need to talk to you about setting up a resort here," he yelled as he barrelled into my cottage one morning. I was just settling down to my coffee before getting to some serious writing. That's what I do down in Baie Brouillard. Go there to write, that is. Spend about 4 months a year there if I can. I don't mind that the view is very sporadic, and it's quiet enough for me to get some work done.

Charlie didn't speak French. If he had, he might have got a hint from the name of the place that it wasn't going to be a great location for tourists. Sure. When you got a sunny day – usually mid-winter when it was a good few degrees below freezing – you got the most fantastic view of the bay and some islands, and often some icebergs drifting on by. Sometimes a whale or some dolphins. Great sight.

"What do you think will bring in the tourists?" I asked, kind of innocently.

"Why the view, and the fish. Some of the women in the village fix the best salt cod in Newf'ndlan."

"How'll they get here?" I prompted.

"Why, until we get really goin', I reckon Jimmy Bryant can bring them in in his van."

I nodded and mused a while. Jimmy's van was the main transport for fish to St. John's. Charlie may have suffered some childhood accident that killed his sense of smell. With a west wind, the cats in Ireland might have taken notice of that van.

"Where'll they stay?" I asked, continuing my interrogation.

"There's the old convent that's going to come up for sale. I've done some handyman work there. In pretty good shape, but the rooms are a bit small, of course."

I must say, I hadn't thought of re-purposing the convent, but then I didn't know it was going to be sold. Was on a nice bit of property, if only

the mist – nobody said fog 'round the Bay – would clear so you could see.

Anyway, I wasn't going to argue with Charlie. His enthusiasm wasn't to be denied. I'd done what I could to get him to think about things, so I offered him some coffee. He declined, wanting to get on with the big plan.

So he arranged a 1-year lease on the convent and got some folk roped in to get the place more or less set up, though it looked pretty amateur when my curiosity got the better of me and I went round to take a look. He put some ads in a couple of magazines. There were a few phone calls, but he missed some because he was off fishing and his answering machine only had a short tape. Out of these, he got a booking for September. It was then late April. Not good.

Then fate turned up a flush hand. The fog rolled in, and a ship carrying Sri Lankan refugees put a whole lot of folk ashore in the bay, not knowing quite where they were landing them. So there was nowhere near to accommodate them, but Charlie stepped up and had them in the old convent. And then he managed to do a deal to get paid for this at good enough rates to cover his costs. In fact enough to cover his costs and his rent for the whole year. He regretfully cancelled the September booking and took a holiday in Italy himself. By the time he came back, of course, he was onto another great scheme.

J C Nash ©2018-06-14

Summer Solstice

“Oh. It’s June 20. What’re we going to do for the Summer Solstice?” Jackie asked in an excited, demanding voice.

I didn’t really want to answer. My coffee was just at the perfect temperature to drink, and my toast had that perfect layer of really good marmalade. Also, I was in the middle of reading an op-ed piece in the newspaper that tried to argue that Canadians were responsible for getting Mr. Trump elected in the US of A. I was having a very difficult time trying to decide if the author were insane or viciously cunning in emulating his subject by being obnoxiously annoying. Or was it annoyingly obnoxious?

Risking a potentially violent divorce, I responded, “Hadn’t given it any thought.”

This was true, but husbands are not allowed to NOT give things thought. Even if you haven’t thought about something, you should never admit that.

Especially – and that should be underlined – since Jackie had started reading up on the Wicca. Was even thinking of trying to find a local coven. This didn’t bother me, at least as long as my coffee and marmalade weren’t affected. If religion got in the way of that, I might start a terrorist cell to eliminate the threat.

“How about a big bonfire and we’ll invite people to jump through it like they did in medieval times?” Jackie proposed.

“City fire ordinance. And we live in a condo apartment – no fires on the balcony. No jumping there either.”

“Oh. You’re no help. And I was counting on your support.”

Jackie does that. Counts on my support, even when I’m really as supportive as the French Resistance were to the Wehrmacht. I grabbed a sip of coffee while I could, and almost made it to a mouthful of toast before Jackie said, “We’ve got to do **something!**”

I didn’t want an unhappy wife. That’s never good for any man’s health and wealth. Health because he’ll be nagged and get an ulcer or a heart condition. Wealth because unhappiness is often treated with retail therapy. Expensive retail therapy.

“You know, our balcony gives a really good view of the sunset. We can see the sun set into the lake.” I said.

“True. What were you thinking?”

“Well, the weather forecast is for a fine evening, not too hot or humid.

We got that nice bottle of wine from Joe and Martha, and I happen to know there's some smoked salmon in the freezer. We could have a sunset supper on the balcony to celebrate the solstice, even though it will actually take place in the morning I think."

"That isn't what I had in mind, but it would be rather nice. OK." Jackie responded.

The apartment was suddenly a placid and comforting place. My wife was again the woman I love. Indeed, her next words were: "Another toast and marmalade?"

J C Nash ©2018-6-21

Pencils

Pencils – and here I mean the traditional ones which we say have a “lead” – are pretty important for some writers and artists. Me, I like having them around, but I can’t say I’m a big user. More a collector. I’ve a box of several hundred of them, and my wife is always after me to throw them out.

“You’re never going to use them! That whole shoebox is full of them.”

“OK. I’ll throw them out if you toss those three steamer trunks of sewing material you have in the guest room.”

“Never! I might need that to make an outfit or some new curtains.”

And my pencils are safe.

When I was a kid, workers of all types always had a pencil either in their pocket or perched above their ear. And they’d use a pocket knife to sharpen them. Apparently, some wartime bureaucrat avoiding front-line military service worked out that rotary sharpeners wasted 20% more pencil than a pen-knife. Odd that. Using a pen-knife to sharpen a pencil. I think it came from when quills were used as pens. Had to keep refreshing the writing end as it got damaged.

And folk would lick the tip of the pencil to make it write darker. Don’t know if that worked. Teacher would yell, “Nicholas Smith! Stop sucking that pencil. Don’t you know that lead is poisonous?”

But of course it wasn’t – isn’t. It’s just graphite and clay. Probably not a great thing to ingest, but not going to kill you. Now when I was a kid, there were some other kids who did get sick, but they chewed the barrel of the pencil and got lead poisoning from the paint.

It was, however, a big deal to have a propelling pencil. These were the old design of mechanical pencil where you turned the top in a torsive movement to move the lead – the needle of graphite and clay – forward. When you exhausted one you had to slip in another and twist it all the way back. The modern clutch type mechanical pencils are way easier to use.

Naturally, you need to have the right size leads. My solution was to have lots of packets of different sizes and they’re all in the shoebox too. Sometimes I dig out a pencil or two with serious intent of using them. Maybe a special thick carpenter’s one with the oblong cross-section so they don’t roll when you set them down. I even have a special sharpener for those. So I get all set up, then I end up at the other end of the house and use a cheap ball-point pen for carpentry instead.

Doesn't matter. I enjoy having my collection. It doesn't take up much space, and maybe one day the steamer trunks will get moved out so I can set up a model railroad in the guest room.

J C Nash ©2018-07-19

The Letters

Sometimes one ends up with jobs that nobody else will do. That happened with Rupert. His wife died of heart failure when he was about to turn 80, and she was maybe a year younger. He rather lost the will to live, and a year later we buried him.

There were distant family. They were literally living a long way off. I was really just a neighbour, but the family asked if I would be willing to clear out his house and dispose of everything. I could keep the proceeds of any sale of contents, as one of the cousins had already been through the place and removed anything that looked to be of value. Not that Rupert and Andrea had a lot of valuables. Lots of books and mementos. Not much else. I took on the task because they'd been friends. Not close, but I liked them.

They arranged a letter of authorization from their lawyer. Just in case, I checked with my own lawyer. She said it was OK to proceed, so I started to organize things.

As I suspected, the contents weren't very valuable, and I ended up spending more than I recovered to clear the place. Kept a few items to remind myself of Rupert.

There was a filing cabinet of papers. That took a while to go through and empty. A lot of old bills. I put the last years in a box to send to the executor and tossed the rest. Put any photos that were labelled or organized in another box for the family, but would send it via the executor too. Have to ask him to refund the shipping.

As I was closing the filing cabinet, the bottom drawer would not move freely. I pulled it out and tried again. Something was blocking the movement. I removed the drawer and found a manilla envelope about 4 cm. thick. It was old and dog-eared and was addressed to Rupert at an address I didn't know.

There was a pack of letters inside, bound with a ribbon and there was a typed note folded on the top marked:

TO WHOEVER FINDS THESE LETTERS

I guess that was me. So I read on.

I don't know who will find these letters if I haven't

destroyed them before I die. If Andrea is reading this, I hope she will continue to read to the end, for this is my attempt to explain and apologize for mistakes I made.

Decades ago, in the tumult of building our lives, we somehow failed to share our ideas, spoke past each other rather than to each other, and with a terrible miscalculation thought that we had lost love and caring and affection and purpose. That we recovered and found a new way is the biggest miracle I can imagine, and one for which I am forever grateful.

I must also say sorry to the author of these letters, though she is almost certainly long dead. At a time when I thought one flame was dying, I allowed another to spark into brightness. When I felt at my lowest and least valuable, I was shown another way to regard myself.

But I haven't kept the letters to remember that person. No sentimentality or wish to give my spirits a boost. I have kept them as a signal to work every day to make things better with Andrea. To avoid the miscommunication, the petty angers and the leaps to false conclusions that chip away at a partnership. To never forget that it is effort every day and a continuing avoidance of "taking for granted".

These letters are mainly banal, a conversational record of how a person tries to make life work after disappointments. There is a tone of affection. To me, it is also an accusation. An unmeaning accusation perhaps, but I can sense the sadness and loss.

All I can say is that I am sorry for my mistakes, and sorry and sad for the mistakes others made because I did not properly understand my own life. I ask forgiveness, but will be unsurprised if it is withheld.

I read a few of the letters. They were exactly as described. Wondering what to do, I took them home. That night I tried to find any record of the person who had written them. Eventually I found an internet site that claimed to have an obituary for the name. It was a newspaper site, and

after investigating a bit to make sure it wasn't a scam, I paid the few dollars and got the obituary. Rupert was right. The lady had died many years before, though it seemed she had managed to find a life of some purpose and happiness.

With some reflection on my own life and loves, I carefully shredded the letters.

J C Nash ©2018-08-06

Alignment

I was, as they say, “resting comfortably” after surgery.

Of course, that meant I wasn’t resting and I was far from comfortable. Surgeons, if they are any good, wield sharp, often hot, objects with firmness and force. They leave you cut, bruised, and generally cranky. There was a dull ache from around the incision area, and every so often a sharp twinge if I moved or my innards did some rearrangement.

I looked at my watch. There was enough light from the hall – the nurses never seemed to get the door closed. Just after 2 am. The hands were almost aligned.

What was that problem from school? Ah yes. What is the time when the minute hand is perfectly aligned with the hour hand after X o’clock? Noon or midnight were easy. The answer was noon or midnight. But for the eleven other hours, there were odd times.

How would I do that? Let H be the hour, that is 1, 2, and so forth to 11. After 1 o’clock, the hour hand was just past the 1, and the minute would be at least 5 minutes after the hour. OK, so we could say that the minute would be $60 \text{ times } H + X$ minutes, and the hour hand would have moved ... what?

Well it moved at $1/12$ the speed of the minute hand, so $(60 * H + X)$ over 12 in minute positions.

There was an equation, but I needed to get it in my imagination. While the minute hand moved X minutes, the hour hand moved the aforesaid amount to the same angular location. So $(60 * H + X) / 12 = X$ or, better, $60 * H + X = 12 * X$ or $11 * X = 60 * H$ or $X = 60 * H / 11$ minutes.

Neat! This would be the time after H hour when smoothly moving hands would align. My watch hands appeared aligned. Therefore 120/11 minutes past 2, or just before 11 past 2.

But what about the seconds? $1/11$ of a minute before 2:11, or 5.454545 (repeating) seconds before that minute.

Oh. But this watch moves the second hand in 1-second intervals. We’ll only get a perfect alignment at noon and midnight.

For a little while, I’d forgotten the ache. Well, not “resting”, but a little more “comfortably”. At least for a very little while.

John C. Nash ©2018-08-16

Caffeine and Sugar

Before Jackie and I moved to this neighbourhood and into a house more suitable to our retirement, I used to meet up with some guys in the old area for coffee. I remember this one morning when George walked purposefully up to the door of the Community Coffee House. Our group of old codgers met there every Friday morning to discuss our aches and pains and figure out how the world should be ruled. George liked to be first in line. He grabbed the door handle and pulled, but nothing happened.

“What the hell...!” he exclaimed.

The rest of us caught up to him, puffing a little. George seemed to be the fittest of our group. He probably wasn’t, just the most addicted to coffee in the morning.

“It’s locked,” Luciano said, stating the obvious.

There was no note of explanation. Gina, who ran the place, wasn’t inside as far as we could tell with the lights out.

“What’ll we do?” Tony asked. “I really need my coffee. And I didn’t have breakfast so I could have one of Gina’s chocolate croissants.”

This was getting serious. More than half a dozen caffeine-deprived, sugar-seeking seniors were loitering in the shopping plaza. Might lead to a disturbance.

Just then, a grey minivan pulled up and a youngish woman got out, leaving a child in a safety seat in the back. She walked over with a sheet of paper and taped it to the door. However, before we could read it, she said,

“Gina says she’s sorry, but her mother fell and has broken her wrist, so today the coffee shop won’t be open. I’m her neighbour and I offered to put up the note, but I have to get back. Gina’s Mom usually looks after the kids, and Gina has to get her Mom in for another medical appointment. But she knew her Friday group would be here, and wanted to let you know.”

“Thank you for doing this. And let Gina know we’re thinking of her and her Mom,” Luciano spoke for all of us.

The neighbour-lady hopped back in the minivan and left. We milled about a bit, wondering what to do.

“Could get a coffee at the McDonald’s,” I suggested, “though the pastries are pretty much like cardboard.”

There was mumbling agreement. Everyone looked saddened, though whether for Gina or for the lack of coffee and pastry was hard to tell. Gina’s

Mom sometimes came to the Coffee Shop, and Luciano used to flirt with her. Might have been more than flirting if the rest of us and Gina hadn't been there.

We ambled off towards the McDonalds. It was about half a kilometre away. I detoured to the local dollar store and bought a sympathy card. We could all sign it while we drank our coffee. It might actually displace some of the inevitable grumbling.

J C Nash ©2018-08-23

High Fenation

They don't teach English grammar like they used to. Of course, every generation complains about subsequent ones when it comes to how things should be done. But really, I ask you, how can we accept the impossible spelling, thoughtless punctuation and absent grammar that the Twitter twits and Facebook fogheads produce?

We were staying in a holiday apartment in Florida recently, and we wanted to use the shower, but it didn't give any hot water. We emailed the owner and got back a message

Switch undern

eat

h sink.

Maybe the owner was a fumble fingers. But maybe not.

My niece had a son. She thought Abraham Lincoln was a great man, so named her boy Linkin. That's L I N K I N. I think she checked the spelling against the internet contact site Linked-In.

Of course, there have been plenty of examples of crazy spelling over the years. In the 14th century, one of the many John Napiers in Scotland supposedly spelt his own name four different ways in the same document of only a couple of pages. Dutch printers brought to England by Caxton to establish his printing house added the letter H to some words. We still have ghost and, appropriately, ghastly.

So maybe we shouldn't worry. Isn't that right? Spelled, of course, WRITE.

...

J C Nash ©2018-09-13

Evaporation

There are awkward moments in life that we'd rather never happen. Mostly these are in social situations where we manage to get one foot in our mouth so far the knee is blocking further entry. Sometimes, however, we're on our own and the sense of discomfort and unease is just as acute.

The other week I was doing some cleanup. You know, that eternal job of sorting and moving and tossing things out. Then getting some of them back. Rearranging the piles and boxes and envelopes of all the treasures and trivia of our lives.

I'd been tidying a drawer of old mementos and was pushing the drawer closed when I sensed some resistance. My wife's method for dealing with this sort of situation is to pull the drawer out and ram it back hard. There's a couple of chests of drawers for which I've had to renew the backing sheet. Usually it's just masonite, or even glorified cardboard nowadays. My approach is to lift the drawer out and find what is causing the trouble.

In this case, I had a bed handy where I could place the drawer after removing it from the chest and found an old letter scrunched up behind where the drawer had been. Pulled it out and put back the drawer, then straightened out the letter. Wow. It was from about 40 years ago, from a friend called Vivian who was a classmate in University. The letter was from the time we had just graduated. She'd gone back to her home town after graduating and was working in her father's retail business. And not just to be gainfully employed. Her interests were more than banausic. Eventually, she took it over and made it really hum. Smart lady.

The letter was friendly but mostly pretty banal. We'd been lab partners and sometimes would go out in a crowd, but had dated others. Still, we had a pretty good rapport. Then I turned the page, and read

It's a bit awkward, but I feel I should tell you that Liz is a bit unhappy you've been stopping by rather frequently. You and I know that you're just being friendly. You even told me you don't find her very attractive as a woman, but like to chat with her because her background is so different from yours. However, I phoned her the other night -- she still has some of my stuff that wouldn't fit in my cases and we have to arrange to pick it up sometime. In fact, maybe you could do that for me since it's more likely either you or someone you know

will be coming this way during the summer -- I'll let you know. Anyway, because of her rather fundamentalist upbringing, she considers your visits to be tantamount to courting, and you don't belong to the chosen few. So you may want to avoid going round to see her. Sorry to be the wet rag on that. Most gals would welcome the companionship of someone who treats them as you do.

Well, it wasn't the awkwardness Vivian mentioned that gave me a cold shiver. The problem was that I could not remember ANY Liz. None. An empty glass.

Yet here I had written evidence that I'd socialized with someone on several occasions, and done so enough to make them uncomfortable that I might have intentions that could not be fulfilled.

I scoured my memory. Went through an old address book. Tried to picture what I did and where I used to go that long-ago summer. Nothing!

Finally, as it was getting towards supper time, I poured myself and my wife a glass of scotch. We like a small one from time to time. When she came in from the garden, she saw the glasses and smiled.

"What's this in aid of?"

"Thought you'd like one with me."

"Sure. I'll not say no. What shall we toast?"

"Not letting the good stuff sit around long enough to evaporate," I said, wondering if I had.

J C Nash ©2018-09-19

Sandwiches

We'd had a busy day searching for some old addresses in Geel in Belgium. The pronunciation is something like "Hail" with a guttural H. Jackie had some great-grandparents who'd lived there. Unfortunately, though we found the addresses, whatever had been there was replaced by modern and uninteresting buildings. We saw a plaque about the Battle of Geel, part of the big push in September of 1944, and apparently fairly bloody on both sides as the Brits and Germans traded territory several times in a few days, in particular, the center of town.

Around lunch, we were somewhat out of the center, near Sint Dymphna church, a quite massive ecclesiastical structure, when I saw a sign for a little restaurant with an odd name, Quadratura, and the welcome words Belegde Brodjes, which means sandwiches. Turned out the couple running the place knew how to get anyone to abandon their diet with some really nice offerings. We needed the kilometre walk to the station afterwards, just to silence the accusations of our consciences with regard to body mass goals.

On this railway line, there wasn't electrification, so the train to Antwerp was a diesel railcar set. We found a seat – it wasn't crowded at this time of day, but there weren't too many empty ones.

In a few minutes, we heard the triple-language request “Kaartjes, billets, tickets” and then saw a small African man in the uniform of Belgian rail, which of course has two versions of its name for Dutch and French languages, with the B in an oval frame as its logo. He punched our tickets then moved on.

With the two men in front of us, there seemed to be a problem. Our railway inspector asked them for their tickets in Dutch, then French, then English. They either spoke or understood none of these or were pretending not to. They looked vaguely middle-eastern but were wearing the universal T-shirt and jeans.

The inspector got on his walkie-talkie. Within a minute, a large European man in an orange uniform was there. The contrast in size with the ticket inspector was stark, and there was a sad irony in the mixed skin colours of the two railway staff and the unfortunate passengers. The large man asked about tickets, again in three languages. It seemed English would offer at least some level of communication. Tickets were produced, but the security officer – at least we assumed he was that – said these were for a station well

before Geel.

Money? None.

Identity papers? Also none. “So. Illegals.” This said in English.

Also, “Do you have any weapons? Knives?”

That made us jittery. Hadn’t thought of that possibility.

“Please go to the end of the wagon.”

The men got up and with the inspector in front of them and the security officer behind, proceeded to the vestibule at the end of the car. Once the door was closed, we didn’t hear any more of the exchange, but we were now only a couple of minutes from Antwerp.

By the time we got out of the train, we saw there were several police and another security officer in orange garb surrounding the two men.

Jackie said, “Welcome to the world of international migration.”

J C Nash ©2017-07-19

Portable Meals

Etymologists generally attribute the word “sandwich” to John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, who – depending on whose anecdote is to be believed – wanted something to eat that would allow him to keep working on papers or else keep playing cards, in either case, without using a fork nor getting his hands and hence his papers or his cards greasy.

Reality, of course, puts a lie to this story of invention. There were plenty of precedents of using bread to package other food in many earlier societies and even in England in centuries prior to the famous First Lord of the Admiralty. However, people love to put names on things, especially names they invent.

Sometime in the early 80s, I was at a reception in Boston. I’d been there to give a talk on some aspect of computing, invited by a colleague at one of the several universities there. I won’t say which, as there aren’t that many female computer scientists, and this lady’s motives turned out to be, shall we say, social rather than professional. Perhaps I was too proper, and the relationship faded quickly, but I avoided marital complications.

The reception party was, however, mildly entertaining, and the wine and food turned out to be rather good. I got a well-filled glass of Pinot Grigio. Then, as I approached the buffet, which had a number of sandwiches made from baguettes, two people were having a spirited argument.

“I don’t think you can call them subs,” said a small woman academic who seemed partly oriental. “Subs need soft crust rolls, and these use baguettes. But you could call them grinders or hoagies.”

“I always understood it was the shape that led to the name “sub” or “submarine”. In some parts of Pennsylvania I’ve seen “zep” for “zeppelin” for the same reason. Even “blimpies” in New Jersey. And what about po’ boys or heros or wedges or banh mi?” her opponent, a young long-hair with a goatee rejoined.

“They have lots of names, but I’ve been contracted by the army to provide a standardized nomenclature for the cooks. The branch of the military I’m working for doesn’t want any misunderstandings. Guys with guns can cause a lot of trouble if they don’t get the right sandwich. So I think I’m now the pre-eminent authority on the names,” said the woman archly.

“Sorry. Might I be allowed to get a baguette?” I asked with my best Canadian courtesy.

“All right,” said the woman, “But you can’t call it that here, because baguette is a French word.”

I made a quick move and got the last smoked salmon one. To a hungry man, the name is far less important than the content. At the same time, I got a roast beef and a ham and cheese, then moved to get some potato crisps and some vegetables. Behind me, I heard the man say,

“I guess it doesn’t matter what we call them once they’re all gone!”

J C Nash ©2018-10-18

Pain

I wasn't very enthused when my wife booked us on what was listed as "Outstanding archeological dig holiday in glorious Greece". It was expensive and described as an "authentic experience". This smelled strongly of what G. K. Chesterton implied when he reputedly defined "Adventure" as "An attitude to discomfort". That isn't really the quotation. You can look it up thanks to Google or other search engines on the Internet. But the shortened form here is, to use an old word, pithy.

It turned out worse than discomfort. The accommodations – \$200 per night per person – were in small tents. The ensuite was a hole in the ground with a screen around it. Food was, well, grease. Spelled with an E and an A, not 2 Es.

"Glorious" turned out to mean 20 mm of rain per day for two days. This washed out a good deal of the dig site. On the third day – and this wasn't Easter – the sun did put in a weak appearance, so we mustered what semi-dry clothing we could and traipsed down to the dig.

My wife and the husband in another couple were the big enthusiasts. Jim – I won't use his real name – was charging ahead and slipped on the muddy ground. Halfway down the side of a trench that had half washed out, his shin connected with a cross-shaped piece of wood sticking out of the side of the slope.

His "Ow!" was followed by some expressions that even today's community standards might not tolerate. Well, the connection between the object and his shin had made a rather loud knock that even sounded painful.

My wife, however, did not react to Jim's distress. She slid down the slope to the level of the object, muddying what I call her "designer shorts for overly enthusiastic amateurs of archaeology". Usually, I would be ordered to use a few acres of paper towels to wipe and polish any restaurant seats before she sat on them in this garment.

"I think it's a xoanon," my wife said, squinting at the cross-shaped piece of wood.

"I don't care what it is," Jim screamed, "My frigging leg feels like it'll fall off. And there's blood all over my socks."

All over would be an exaggeration. But there was a definite contusion and there was a trickle of blood. Given the mud, he'd need some attention to the injury.

“But we must preserve this,” my wife persisted.

By this time, one of the so-called Archeological Guides had come over. She and my wife oohed and aahed over the object. They were on the other side of it from me. I took out my phone and zoomed in on the object and their faces behind. Dead centre of the cross – I suspect it was a wooden toy sword – was "Made in China". I took the picture.

J C Nash ©2018-12-13

Bookish

You can read too much. Or rather, you can read for too long.

When you start to fumble with the pages and are woozy when you stand up, it's time to go for a walk. Or pour yourself a finger of Scotch. Unless your better half is around. Then maybe put on the kettle for a cup of tea. And don't forget the shortbread when you carry in the tray. You want to be out of the room before she asks if you did the dishes yet.

Not a lot of books have that effect. I'm talking about those that just HAVE to be read to the end. The ones you can't put down. Where the atmosphere they conjure congeals. Perhaps a bit thicker than the London fog described by T. E. Lawrence as "Somewhat caliginous, but not altogether inspissated" in response to a question from an academic colleague who had no sense of the difference between erudition and conversation.

So my advice, when confronted with a book that drags you into its quicksand, is to make sure the dog has drunk a lot of water and will insist on being taken out for a walk. Or, if it's nice out, take the book along. The dog won't mind if you sit on a bench and let him or her fraternize with the other dogs. Else you're just going to have to do those dishes.

J C Nash ©2019-01-03

Spittoon

Somehow the other morning, I woke slowly out of a dream where I was on an old British double-decker bus. The last, and really the only thing I registered from the dream was some gold lettering above a window that said:

“No Spitting. Fine 70/-”

I’ve no idea why that came to mind. Spitting has gone the way of the dinosaurs, except perhaps in some baseball dugouts, where chewing tobacco is apparently still used and public expectoration is tolerated. The spittoon or cuspidor doesn’t seem to have survived as a commonly available target for this activity.

It started me thinking of other signs and notices that are no longer around. Well, **Public Telephone** for one. Haven’t seen one in the street for a very long time. Can’t recall seeing one even in an airport in the last couple of years. Right now there are more signs for **Public Access Defibrillators**.

These thoughts were still hovering somewhere at the back of my mind when I went for my morning walk. I generally just toodle around the neighbourhood, using some of the recreational paths when there’s little chance they’ll be muddy or too bug-infested. Somehow, I decided to tour a crescent I usually ignore. Halfway down, there was an attractive picket-fenced house. On the gate was a photo of a dog. I half expected "Beware of the dog". Instead, under the photo, there was a list titled "My score this year", with strokes for the counts. It listed:

- delivery persons 4
- Bell, Rogers and renovation pitchmen 8
- religious zealots 3
- burglars 2
- balls 10
- MPs and MPPs 1 + 1

I considered whether it was worth making an offer for this excellent canine. Then I re-read the sign and walked on.

Sleight of Hand

The park was busy. It was late summer, a week or so before school restarted. Lots of kids were playing on the swings and splashing in the wading pool. Several old guys were playing checkers on the tiled tables that were fixed under the trees next to the play area. Some parents were sitting on the benches. I was there to eat my lunch. I'd been trying to find a code bug in a program our company sold. Getting frustrated and bug-eyed, I decided to go eat.

At the other end of the bench was a fairly old man. Probably in his eighties. He'd brought a small folding stool or table about 14" square and set it up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him take out some cards and start to shuffle them and do some riffs. I think it's called cardistry. He also set out some coins and small objects.

As I ate and watched the passing scene, I realized from my side vision that objects were appearing and disappearing. And some kids were beginning to gather. They were induced to join solely by the action of the man and his cards and coins. He said nothing.

By now there were about ten kids around. The man rolled up his sleeves, then presented his hands palm-up – appaumé – and held them there a few seconds. Then he kind of dog paddled and cards and coins appeared in his hands at each cycle and he dropped them on the table.

“Magic! Real cool,” one kid said.

The man spoke. “No, son, not magic. Sleight of hand. And you spell that S L E I G H T, not S L I G H T. A real odd word. Or you can call it prestidigitation or legerdemain. Prestidigitation for fastness of the fingers, or legerdemain as a maladaptation of the French "leger" and "main" for lightness of the hand. It's all just speed and coordination.”

With that, he proceeded to generate a flurry of cards and coins and buttons, seemingly from nowhere. Then he picked each up one by one, and in various throwing motions made them all disappear.

“Wow,” said the kid who'd called it magic, “It sure seems like magic.”

“Well, a lot of folks want you to believe that, but it's just a lot of practice. Years and years of practice.”

He folded the table and sat back and opened a paper bag from which he extracted a sandwich and began eating. The kids, realizing the show was over, gradually filtered away. When he'd finished his sandwich, I said,

“I’ve seen a lot of sleight of hand, and even tried a bit myself, but I think you’re as good as any.”

“Yep. I know I’m good, but I just do it for my own satisfaction.”

“Never took it on the road?”

“Nah. Had a wife and family, and liked home life. Kept the kids entertained some evenings, that’s all. Now the grandkids, but they’re getting to be grown-up too.”

“Well, you provided me with lunchtime entertainment. Thank you.”

“Glad to do so. See you again sometime.”

He waved his hand, and I felt a puff of wind.

And I realized I was alone on the bench.

John C. Nash ©2019-08-08

Fidelity

I've a tough time realizing that Jackie and I are coming up on our 40th anniversary. She'd probably like some rubies, but I'm guessing she wouldn't appreciate getting them rather than a kitchen upgrade or a holiday in Europe. Maybe a pot of nasturtiums with a card including a home-made coupon for the holiday. We're not big on luxury gifts. The biggest gift is still being together.

Four decades. Reminds me of the long weekend we took in Quebec City. That was before we got married – sort of a pre-honeymoon. We stayed at a small hotel in the older part of the city. It had an attractive dining room with what turned out to be an excellent menu, and on our first night we decided it would be nice to be able to wine and dine and not have to find our way back. Just stagger up the stairs and fall into bed, if you will.

We were reading the menu when an elderly couple came in. He had a cane, and the tables were arranged far too tightly.

Jackie said, "Why don't you sit here and we'll move to the corner table?", then tried to say the same thing in French, but she more or less garbled that.

The lady said, "Thank you. That will be a great help."

They got themselves settled and the waitress came and realized the change and smiled. To the elderly couple, she gave an effusive welcome with a clear indication that they were, in some way, regulars.

In French, I introduced Jackie and myself, and the lady responded in English, saying she was Catherine and the gentleman was René. She noticed Jackie's ring.

"That's a very classic ring. Will you marry soon?"

Jackie gave a fairly concise outline of our plans. Probably more than I would have said, but it led to a modest exchange, and when both couples had wine, a small toast to our future marriage. As glasses were raised, I could see their wedding rings.

I said, "You seem to be received as regulars here."

Catherine replied, "We were both here in 1943 for the Quebec Conference. I was the principal private secretary to one of Mackenzie-King's ministers. I'd been brought back from child-rearing by the disappearance of men into the Forces. René was working with MIL in Sorel. The hotel and restaurant have a sentimental attachment that we try to honour."

I noticed that they had their hands on the opposite side of the table from

us joined. A quiet gesture of affection. Jackie and I do the same.

In my head, I did the arithmetic. They appeared to be probably in their eighties, so would both have been in their forties during the War. Before I could think more, however, Jackie said, “It’s reassuring to see people who have managed to keep marriage alive over the years.”

Catherine replied, “Oh yes, we’ve been married – I think happily – for a great many years.” Then with a wry smile, she added, “Just not to each other.”

John C. Nash ©2019-08-20

Australian Rules

We're used to thinking of Australia in terms of kangaroos, wombats, koalas and other exotic animals. I can't say that view is overrated, but to my taste, there's a lot more that is special in how the people have evolved their own social culture.

A lot of that is sports. Of course, they share some sports with the rest of the world, and some with former British territories, cricket being an obvious one. But they've definitely evolved their own variants of cricket to make them more suitable for the hoi poloi, either as participants or spectators. One day, 20-over and 40-over games, and possibly some special rules. But not, of course, explained in terms foreigners comprehend, given the extensive and peculiar vocabulary. In what other sport does someone occupy the position "silly mid on". Or "bowl a maiden over". Or "enforce the follow on". In Canada, you could get into big trouble for sexual harassment using those terms to a stranger.

And, naturally, the pitch is oval. An ellipse. Not a nice rectangle like the playing area for most ball sports, though baseball is a bit of an exception. And Australian Rules Football, a mad and often violent clash of 18 players a side on, once again, an oval surface, possibly a modified cricket pitch. But if you think this is a modern aberration of rugby, you'd be wrong. The Melbourne Football Club wrote down the rules in 1859. Soccer didn't get its first rules until four years later.

The energies of Aussie Rules carry over into other recreational pursuits – drinking, gambling and sex. Beer was the main drink, but wine has been making inroads. Men seem to drink with men, women with women, often in workers clubs where prices are much lower than in pubs. As a tourist, you probably won't experience that particular aspect of Australian social life, but as sabbatical visitors, we got honorary membership to a Faculty Club, and later were taken to other workers clubs. Wine in a box, three litres for five dollars – well, that was in 1987.

We also got to experience Melbourne Cup Day – what other place has a statutory holiday because of a horse race? But as Peter Charlton described in **Two Flies Up A Wall**, the denizens of Oz will bet on which of two flies will cross a line on a wall first if there is nothing else on which to wager.

And the attitudes to prostitution are decidedly different from North America. Early in 2002, we were staying in the King's Cross area of Sydney.

One particular morning, we were shopping for small gifts or souvenirs and I was looking in a store window. It was a warm, sunny morning, and by a nearby stairway, a woman was sitting on a chair knitting. She was probably in her mid to late thirties, dressed in a top and skirt like most of the other women on the street. I was more or less finished browsing a shop window when a man in his middle years dressed in slacks and a short-sleeved shirt passed behind me.

“Hi yer Joe,” the woman said.

“Hi, Annie. How’s it going?”

“Not bad. Not bad. Are you coming to see me later?”

“Not sure. Like to. Got to help my Ma with a new washing machine. It’s been delivered, but they didn’t connect it properly, or perhaps at all. But I’ll come by if I get finished before 2.”

“I’d like that.”

“So would I. See ya.”

It took me a moment to realize that this conversation was both a social and a business transaction.

Australian Rules.

J C Nash ©2019-09-12

Mowing the Lawn

“You’d better mow the lawn before it rains,” my wife admonished as I was about to settle down with my coffee and newspaper.

I thought about saying I’d do it after I finished my coffee. I even thought about insisting on the occasional spousal right to take a day off mowing. Or saying that the lawn was getting too dry and cutting it could damage the roots, though that was a bit of an exaggeration. Then, as usual, I put my mug down and ambled off to the back door and put on my gardening shoes.

It doesn’t aggravate me too much to do mowing. More that I figure the whole enterprise of lawns is a waste of time. Blame Capability Brown and his confounded English stately homes with their acres of green that are probably trimmed by an army of flunkies with nail scissors. For my money, I’d prefer a yard full of wildflowers, or a small meadow with a few sheep to keep the grass to a nice length. But my wife liked to fit into the neighbourhood. Didn’t want her somewhat seditious husband to start the next great revolution. The Yard Wildernessers. But we’d all be men, all in those really comfortable and rather ill-fitting sweaters and pants our wives were trying to arrange to lose in the laundry. And because we aren’t really interested in making a fuss – just in letting things be – we’d not likely be noticed by even the most desperate media editor who had to find some item to go next to the septic tank emptying ad.

So I got out the mower, put in gas, started her up and trundled around the yard. My wife worries about my hearing, so I’d bought some ear protectors. Good solid ones. If my wife yells something, I either don’t hear it or can safely pretend I don’t. So I have a good twenty minutes of thinking time.

Every marriage needs to allow each party to have some thinking time. People assume such time has to be quiet, but, actually, a noisy mower provides something better, which is a kind of no-go zone that stops other folk from intruding upon your mental space.

Yes, Lord, I’m thankful for the small mercy of mowing, even unnecessary mowing. And even thankful to a deity I can’t really say I believe in.

If you think all this means love has gone out of our marriage, you couldn’t be more wrong. There’s lots of love. And affection. But it isn’t on public display, and neither is any disagreement. Nor the inconsistencies. Like the couple I once saw in Geneva when I had a spare afternoon after an ISO

meeting because of airplane timetables. I was sitting on a bench in a park overlooking the Jet d'Eau in the lake and there was a couple with a large dog on the next bench. They were, in the slang of the time, playing tonsil hockey. Even the dog was embarrassed. Then the fellow went and got them ice creams. The cones were dripping as he returned, and he licked the dribbles. In French, the girl said the equivalent of "Eeeugh! You licked mine." The dog didn't quite get the irony.

Anyway, my wife and I won't be the subject of any such anecdote. But when I'd put away the mower, brushed off my clothes and changed into my slippers, my wife said, "There's a fresh coffee by your chair, along with a piece of the coffee cake I made for the girls' bridge group."

Yes, in the right circumstances coffee and cake are really good synonyms for love and affection.

J C Nash ©2019-10-24

Two dates

Almost everyone uses the shorthand 9-11 for the 11th of September. And they mean 2001.

But for me, it's also 1970. September 11, 1970, at the Farnborough Air Show. And I was there on my own. Rode down from Oxford on my 80 cc Yamaha. Not quite a real motorbike, but very cheap to run and quite effective in getting through traffic.

So there were lots of planes. That's what I was there for. And the noise. Particularly the English Electric Lightning, the British interceptor that could only manage 45 minutes flying time. That was easily enough at Mach 2 to get anywhere in the UK, but really didn't allow the plane to do anything but get there and back to base.

The plane was essentially a cockpit on a tube that has two jet engines one on top of the other, but staggered. Strangely this day it was being flown by an American. Rather than the usual fly-by, do some ups and downs and loops and rolls, he'd opted for a seemingly very simple routine. One that the PA announcer told us to plug our ears for.

The Lightning came in from our right along the line of the runway at about 25 feet, wheels up. In front of the center of the crowd, he pulled up the nose and rode the tail blast for about a couple of hundred yards. Then he lit up the afterburners with a boom and disappeared straight up in to the clouds that were at about 3500 feet. Except when he got about 1000 feet up, I noticed that the runway was on fire. He was that low, and he'd dropped some gas as well as heated the asphalt. Some workers had to do a bit of fixing of the runway surface before the next take-off.

Later, though, there's the real reason I remember the day. Because it's the link to 2001. A long-time Vickers Armstrong test pilot took up the Wallis 117 Autogyro, which was being flown as part of its Airworthiness Certificate. It had been granted a 1-week Permit to Fly. The pilot had the odd name – for a Brit – of Pee Wee Judge.

The little craft wound up its rotor, which was only powered to start it spinning. Forward motion would keep it going. Then he took off, circled around and was coming in along the runway – right to left again. He zoomed up pretty fast, then suddenly corrected – overcorrected – and pieces flew off the propeller and rotor and he fell vertically. No fire, just what looked like a ball of discarded newspaper. Not good at an air show, and fatal for the

pilot.

It was a long time later that I read the report of the investigators. You should never push the stick forward suddenly in an autogyro, which is counter to habit for fixed-wing flyers. It causes loss of control. And failure to ever get an Airworthiness Certificate.

So nearly 50 years later, I'm sitting having a coffee in a Tim's and I see a fellow reading a magazine, and he has it open to a picture of what looks like an autogyro. So I ask, "Is that an autogyro?"

He says, "Yes. But this one crashed."

John C. Nash ©2019-11-28

Belonging

There's lots of talk these days about "community".

- Community policing
- Community values
- Sense of community

You get what I mean.

Of course, how you get to be a part of a community is the big conundrum. Each place and group has its own rules. Very strict rules. Very unwritten rules – if unwritten has gradations.

They made a big musical of the Newfoundland sense of community – *Come from Away*. That means anyone not born in the area – actually, anyone whose great grandparents weren't born in the area. Not that the Beothuk were asked their opinion.

So my wife and I have been living here in this neighbourhood for five years, and the houses mostly are not that much older. But there's a bunch of folk on our street who bought new, whereas we waited until the blocked plumbing and carbon-monoxide emitting furnaces were fixed before we bought one that hadn't been condemned. Not condemned by officialdom, just by small annotations on the real estate broker's private notes.

So we're still considered foreigners. When we ask about whether there'll be a block party this summer, we're looked at as if we're speaking a very obscure dialect only known in the central-north-north-east region of the Punjab.

Rather than get our noses out of joint, we simply posted some signs on the community mailboxes. Look – there's that word again. Anyway, the signs said:

Block Party. We'll supply a case of wine and a barbecue and potato chips and dessert. Bring your own meat and veg.

And our address and the party date.

We got at least four times the population of the block in our yard. And this guy asks me something – I'll swear he was speaking Hausa.

John C. Nash ©2019-12-18

Distraction

In Canada, we should know a lot about distractions. After all, we have winter. And winter means that there's ice on the roads. You know, articulated buses getting stuck because of no traction, then the rescue bus getting stuck for the same reason and the rescue-rescue bus too. No traction equals dis - traction.

Well, that's my contribution to fake definitions. And it's a meta-distraction. You know. The fakey definition and example direct you away from the real subject. Just like a magician – correction, illusionist – gets you looking away from where the rabbit is being slipped into the hat.

Here's another. How does the magician deal with rabbit poop? You'll never again be able to watch another rabbit and hat trick, or any animal and container trick, without thinking of the inevitable necessity of animal bodily functions.

For us humans, that's how distractions work. We get something that just pulls our attention away from what we should be looking at, listening to, or caring about. And in these days of Facebook, Twitter, and all and sundry "apps", we get popups and beeps and videos and voices and just about everything to stop us doing what we should be doing. I've even got some venture capitalists wanting me to accept millions to bring to market an idea I posted as a joke on an investment site. KVOM – the most demanding attention getter and distractor yet for young families.

Yes KVOM, my 50 million dollar fake idea. Oh. What is it? Supposedly a special inaudible and low-energy pulse that gets kids aged 4 to 6 to vomit. Post a small speaker outside your pediatric clinic, your floor cleaning service or your instant laundry or whatever, and nobody with a young family can pass by undistracted.

Maybe it would even work. But now I'm getting distracted.

John C. Nash ©2020-02-27

Masked Man

I got on Skype yesterday to talk to Bonnie in Sarasota Florida.

She owns a duplex in an old part of the town that's just west of Highway 41, better known as the Tamiami Trail, or just Tamiami. And she's between Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd and University. If you go about 2 blocks to the west of her place, you hit the Gulf of Mexico, and the dwellings are piles going for at least a couple of mil. Cross Tamiami and you're in a night-time no-go area. In fact, more than 50% of the murders in the county occur within a zone around there that can't be more than a mile square.

But where she lives is pretty nice, though the shopping's not too great. She usually drives Downtown. She likes Whole Foods and her bank there still allows you to walk up to the counter.

Not that I think it's all that friendly. I was with her a year ago when she went shopping. I accompanied her to the bank and waited just outside while she went to get some cash.

The bank has a security guard who's been there for years. Big guy, probably in his late 30s, in a uniform and wearing a medium calibre piece of field artillery on his hip. This is the US of A, so no pop guns please.

Anyway, I was sitting on the side of a planter box about 10 metres from the bank door when a frail-looking guy shuffles by me. He had a hunch back and a cane. Probably do better with a wheelchair. And he had a medical mask. The automatic door opened and he managed to just make it through the door before it closed again.

Then I heard a voice booming through the door, "Man in the mask. Down on the floor! Hands above your head!"

I could see the security guard had his gun out and the old guy was on the line between me and the guard, so I shifted quickly to one side. And the old guy said something, but it's too muffled for me to hear. Later Bonnie told me he said "I think I've got the flu."

Anyway, there was a lot of kerfuffle. The old guy got down on the floor, though it took him a good while. Then once the manager had come out and confirmed that the old guy was one of their oldest and richest customers, the security guard had to help him up. Bonnie says he later had a severe case of the flu. Serves him right.

But yesterday we're talking, and Bonnie says she went to the bank. Said everyone's wearing medical masks these days. But while she's there, the

same old guy comes in. Same security guard – still as thick-headed – and he yells “Old guy without a mask. Hands above your head. And step outside!”
Times change. Thoughtlessness is constant.

John C. Nash ©2020-04-02

Manufactured Envy

Governments of the so-called western democracies are always complaining about the demise of the manufacturing sector of their economies. And it's true that China and other oriental countries have taken over a large chunk of the production of everything from nose rings to valve tappets.

Not that there haven't been warnings, but consumers have rushed to that one-penny-less price and factories have closed. Pity we didn't put the culprits in the penalty box when we found we didn't have enough personal protective equipment for the recent pandemic. Maybe we'll draw a lesson from this, at least for a while.

My view is that the real issue is that we've gone into manufacturing envy on a huge scale, even as we've stopped making real stuff.

Case in point. Yesterday I went to my favourite coffee shop and Jenny, the nice young woman who serves there in the mornings, got me my coffee and croissant. She told me which seat on the patio I should take – they number them and assign you a place once the new kid hired to wipe them down has done his job. The pandemic precautions, of which I'm glad given my age. But it is a big nuisance for us all.

As you know, I sort of belong to – well, I got co-opted into – a coffee klatch that meets there. But I rather offended them by getting personal service from Jenny. Perhaps I did rub it in by waving to them as Jenny brought my order to the park bench across the road. I never could resist popping a bubble of pretentiousness, but it does sometimes get in the way of maintaining friendliness.

This morning, though, I really didn't care. I'd had a call from an old friend I'd lost touch with. Well, at one time more than a friend, but that's another story. Anyway, she'd moved back to town a couple of years ago. We'd managed to lose each other's addresses and phone numbers until a mutual acquaintance happened to tell me Margaret was in hospital for some surgery and treatment. The acquaintance was reluctant to give me Margaret's phone number – I guess that's reasonable given some of the nastiness that goes on – but was quite happy to pass on my number. That was several months ago.

Last week, Margaret called. She said she'd wanted to earlier, but felt she wasn't presentable until she'd recovered a bit from surgery and other treatment. Anyway, we agreed to meet for coffee this morning, which I'd forgotten is a coffee-klatch one.

After I'd got my order, telling Jenny I'd be joined by a friend, I took my seat. I was about a quarter-hour early for Margaret. It was only then that I heard Marcy's voice. The klatch must have been at one of the inside tables, though the shop was wide open – it's an old service station and the whole front opens up.

Marcy was talking about the new car she and her husband were buying. Funny, I'd only met her husband once. Marcy says he doesn't like coffee, but I've seen him at a Starbucks downtown ordering a Latte Grande with an extra shot. Oh well. The marital arts take more training than martial arts according to one anagramming friend.

"Michael wants a convertible, but I wanted a nice comfortable town car. So we've ordered a custom town car with a sunroof."

Now everyone in the shop knew. I'm surprised she didn't ream off the VIN.

I heard Jeff say, "I've always wanted an Aston Martin."

Alvin responded, "You've been watching too many James Bond movies. The Maserati is a much nicer car." I knew for a fact that he'd just bought a five-year-old Chevy sedan.

I drive a five-year-old sedan too, but I bought it new. Had to look pretty carefully around the car lots to find a basic model with none of the fancy entertainment "packages" or fancy trim, or gold-plated bum warmer or what you will.

Just then, some young women came into the shop. To their credit, they were wearing masks and standing apart. Perhaps not the full two metres, but a reasonable approximation. Hence they had to talk a bit louder.

"I know for a fact she had a boob job last year," one of them said.

"Yeah. She made a huge noise about just absolutely having to renew her whole wardrobe," said one of the others.

"Then her fiance dumped her for Harriet, that woman who does custom pewter work," said the third. "Harriet never wears a bra and it's obvious she's practically an ironing board. Guys normally want you to have a lot on top."

"And to display it," said one of the others.

Ah. More manufactured hopes and expectations. See what I mean.

Just then Margaret arrived. I waved for her to sit down. We exchanged greetings and I insisted on getting her order, but of course, Jenny said she'd bring it over.

It was clear Margaret had had a rough time, but her eyes sparkled in a way I remembered. In them I saw the woman who had meant a lot to me four decades before. That we did not remain close was not by choice but the vagaries and exigencies of life that I won't go into. For all that there was no animosity, our separation was no less painful.

Somehow I was holding her hand, or she mine. Whatever envy we had was not for cars or anatomical adjustments, and there was no industry that had found a way to manufacture it.

J C Nash ©2020-7-30

Postponement

As usual, governments fail to heed the voice of reason. Kids are being sent back to schools that have no way to keep everyone apart and not sharing the same airspace. And daycares. Well, a good friend of mine says she loves her grandkids to pieces, but that doesn't mean they're not little germ-bags.

At the coffee shop I like, Jenny has had to isolate for 14 days. She attended a training session at the University, then got a call that one of the people in the group had tested positive for Covid, so everyone is to isolate for a few days and get tested. Otherwise they must isolate for 14 days to avoid facing the long lines.

Though I've never formally joined the coffee klatch, I did email Marcy and Jeff and Alvin. The last time I saw them they were sitting together at the coffee shop. Not distancing well, and Alvin leaning in to hear each person because his hearing aids are never set right. They're all OK from their replies, but the enforced separation and lack of variety in life is making us all grumpy. Or grumpier perhaps. At our age, we still appreciate the old adage *Variety is the spice of life*, but we're a bit past the age of the corollary expression *Spice is the plural of spouse*.

You can tell it's affecting a lot of people. Cars are driven aggressively. Lots of speeders. Engines roaring – followed inevitably by screeching brakes.

So Jackie and I have upped our walking game. Try to go a bit further, though we stay on the roads. The walking paths make it hard to avoid people coming close to you when they pass in the other direction. And most people have a very poor idea of 2 metres.

Yesterday, our route took us by the coffee shop. I thought of suggesting we get a couple of lattes to take away, then I saw that there was just the new young fellow working. He makes a terrible latte for some reason. But he's the owner's nephew, so what can you expect. And by the level of business, there may soon be no more coffee shop.

I can feel the grumpiness rising.

Oh. What's Jackie saying? Asking if I'd like a scotch and soda when we get in and try it with some cheese straws she's baked.

Better postpone the grumpiness and show some appreciation.

Super and Natural

With this so-called "second wave" of the Covid pandemic around, Jackie and I don't get out as much. I'm sort of missing my weekly opportunity to play the foil to the eccentricities of the coffee klatch, and indeed to enjoy the excellent lattes made by Jenny, the barista at the local coffee shop.

It's not that I mind spending time browsing online for interesting material to read or informative and entertaining videos to watch. It's being more or less forced to do so.

The extra time at the screen and the mental laziness that goes with it can set you up for some embarrassing moments. Just yesterday, I wanted to read up on ghosts – Halloween isn't too far away now. But in the search bar of my web browser, I accidentally got a space between super and natural. Well, the search came back for the words "super" and "natural" separately.

If I believed the output of the search, I was being directed mostly to two types of sites.

One lot was for organic vegetables. You know – "natural". And if the vendors were to be believed, they would bring all sorts of health benefits and reveal a whole new dimension of flavour and nutrition. The term "superfood" was bandied about.

The other sites were – well – pornography. And the more appropriate search tags would be "oversized" and "surgically enhanced". I'm not even sure that the laws of physics would allow biped locomotion for the bodies depicted in the photographs.

Oops. I heard Jackie coming. Quick, close the browser. Phew. Time to go make some coffee. Perhaps there's still some of those nice chocolate biscuits.

John C. Nash ©2020-10-08

Quicksand

Jackie and I try to stay busy during this time when we can't socialize or travel. Like a lot of other folk, we're getting round to those jobs that we were going to do years ago. You know – clearing those boxes and bins in the basement or up on the top shelf of the closet.

Of course, you find that what you thought was there isn't. So you end up chasing those mental images of what you just knew for absolutely certain was there. On top of that, you start to wonder if you should contact the memory clinic. Not that younger folk necessarily remember any better. Maybe the memory bank inside their skull just doesn't have so much to try to keep organized.

Still, there's always that annoying thought that in the last big clearout you may just have tossed that wonderful photo or tiny-perfect memento. And you let out a long sigh and go make the afternoon tea and snack.

The memory quicksand can be really annoying. I found a box of negatives. Remember those? The fiddly strips of celluloid with rather difficult to make out images.

I used to have a slide sorter when we had slides. And I thought I'd scanned all my slides, but now can't find some that I knew were just there in that blue bin marked "Slides Etc.". Lots of Etc. No slides. But this box marked "Negatives" really did have some. In fact, lots of negatives. 35 mm and 110. The latter from a little camera I got Jackie in the early 70s when she was going away to a course in Europe. She'd had a cheap 35 mm, but the shutter finally failed after we took it to North Africa and the harmattan blew the red, iron-oxide dust into the shutter mechanism. Those 110 negatives, particularly the colour ones, are really hard to see, even with a light table.

I don't have a light table any more, but if you launch a word processor and make sure you have the monitor on full brightness, the white page is not bad. Then I saw this device being sold on Amazon that could scan negatives and slides. Figured it was worth the 120 bucks to clear the negative box.

The gadget arrived. It looked small and cheap. But – big surprise – it actually works not too badly.

The other "but" is the downside that there are pictures I can't place. People who I should recognize and places that look so damned familiar. Thought it was just me, but when I showed Jackie some of the images that were giving me trouble, she had the same trouble. And some pictures are

taken in our own house or garden, but the people are a mystery.

Then we hit the pictures we'd taken on holidays. What year was that? Ah, that's a big question. So there were two holidays that we think were sometime in the late 70s or early 80s. Now, Jackie has a box with all her old appointment diaries. You wouldn't believe how useful these are for sorting out the when and where. Though not always.

In the case of these trips, we only found an empty week of no entries in 1984. Mind you, it was prefaced by "Get money" on the day before the gap. Then I remembered that I still had my cancelled passports. Turns out those are accepted as evidence you returned to Canada. Assuming the immigration officer stamped it, which of course doesn't happen anymore.

So I find a stamp from the Bahamas in February 1977. That answered one question. Then I found a scan of a scrapbook with "Cancun 1984". No Mexico stamp in 1984, but there is a Montreal Immigration stamp from Dec 22, 1984. Ah, that was when we flew from Mirabel on the Mexican holiday charter and got back at midnight. Driving home along the minor roads in snow squalls and at 2 a.m. an idiot going too fast almost got us as he lost control at speed on a bend. We were just beyond him as he slithered and fishtailed and in the mirror I saw him slowly slide into the ditch on our side of the road. We didn't stop – it was slippery and they hadn't flipped or hit anything but snow. We watched for a public telephone, but on the rural west Quebec roads saw none until Hawkesbury, which was 20 miles away.

Now there are still those pictures that I'm sure are Baltimore.

Maybe we'll get some inspiration from lunch. And it should be worth a few brownie points with Jackie if I make it.

John C. Nash ©2020-10-15

Error and Re-trial

I once picked up a book on sailing. I think it was called “Teach Yourself to Sail”. I don’t think I learned anything much about sailing, but I liked how the author introduced his book. He said he learned to sail by trial and error, or more precisely from error and re-trial.

Good one! It’s nice when someone picks up on an aspect of language that isn’t quite right and bends it to align better with the true meaning.

Of course, there’s sometimes a fundamental flaw in trial and error or, if you prefer, error and re-trial. Experimental surgery for serious illness often doesn’t make it to the next try. And there’s probably a bunch of folk who don’t believe in masks and distancing who might not get a chance to have another opportunity to take steps to avoid infection during a pandemic.

The coffee klatch yesterday brought up another example. Well, they’re still including me. We use Zoom. I don’t like it much – needs a so-called “app”. I think the Welsh should make their country rich by suing everyone using “app” for violating their copyrighted names. “Ap” means “son of”, though, in the last few centuries, they’ve tended to drop its use. Even more so “ferch”, meaning “daughter of”.

Where was I? Talking about the Coffee Klatch Zoom get-together. Oh, yes, I don’t like Zoom because you have to download and install an “app” for it. That means a program or programs, and each one you add to your system means one more for some hacker in Minsk or Riyadh or Guangdong. If I want to meet online, I prefer to use something that just needs my browser, which is a bad enough source of risk. On the other hand, Zoom cuts everyone off after 40 minutes, so it can’t be all bad.

We actually only had 27 minutes. It took the rest of the time to get Marcy online. Turned out, she hadn’t plugged in the microphone, so a good 12 minutes of angry messages in the chat window about turning on the microphone did absolutely no good. Finally, I noticed that there was a wire hanging loose from her headset and asked what it was and Alvin typed: “Marcy, is that wire hanging from your headset plugged in?” and we had all of us online. Well, four of us. Alvin and Jeff were the others.

“Pretty easy to forget to plug in everything when it’s on a headset,” Jeff commiserated with Marcy.

“Well, I guess I can learn from that mistake,” Marcy conceded in a rare admission of being even slightly in the wrong.

“Sometimes you can be misled by a mistake,” Alvin said, introducing a new direction.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, when I was a university student back in the 60s, I took a natural products chemistry course. You know, how to get digitalis out of foxglove and things like that.”

“How’s that got to do with mistakes?” Marcy jumped in.

“Give me a chance! I’ll get there.” Alvin echoed my own annoyance with Marcy’s impatience. After all, we were all in this virtual meeting to burn a little time and avoid some of the cabin fever of "Stage 2" or whatever that means.

Alvin continued, “Natural products are often extracted from plants, and they’re often just a tiny percentage of the mass of material, so you need to cook them up with a lot of solvent, then concentrate the result somehow. The lab course made us sign out equipment, one piece of which was a 10 litre round bottom flask. This is bigger than a basketball, and pretty expensive, as were some other bits of our kit.”

“What’s a round-bottom flask?” Marcy asked.

“Think of a sphere of glass with a glass pipe out of it. As I said, a bit bigger than a basketball.”

“And I just looked one up,” I said. “130 bucks US plus shipping.”

“So you get the idea,” Alvin continued. “Well, the guy ahead of me gets his flask and he’s holding it by the neck, but it was a warm day and I guess his hand was sweaty because he drops it.”

“Oh no! Glass everywhere,” Marcy said.

“Not exactly. It bounced! And he caught it with both hands like a ball.”

“So he got away with the mistake of handling it with slippery hands on the neck?” Jeff proposed in the form of a question.

“Nope. He learned the wrong lesson from the mistake, and made another. He thought it was so neat that he decided to bounce it again, except Well, you can guess.”

We didn’t get to find out more. Zoom displayed a countdown and we had to say goodbye.

J C Nash ©2020-10-22

Tapioca

Jackie was away for a few days visiting her sister. I suppose I could have gone along, but I'm just a big nuisance to their catching up on family gossip. Usually in 4 to 5 hour long gab-fests with much giggling and mirth about topics and people I have difficulty even vaguely placing in my memory. Also, when Jackie's away, I get to eat a few of the things that have been declared "rubbish" or "awful" or "so bad for you". In other words, some of my favourite edibles.

Today, for instance, I had beans on toast for breakfast. Very English. Or maybe it's British, since the Scots and Irish like them too. If you believe the website fact.cat, the UK consumes more cans of baked beans than the rest of the world combined. Go figure. Though mapsofworld.com shows per-capita, the Irish Republic is ahead at 5.6 Kg/person in 2004, with the UK at 4.8 Kg/person a close second, and New Zealand a faraway third at 2.3, just ahead of the USA at 2.0. Canadians eat just 1.2 Kg/person per year, putting us in 10th place. Well, I guess it keeps the air fresher.

But I digress.

What I was going to say is that while I put on a long face and pretend that having to look after myself is a great sacrifice, I actually enjoy a few days to myself once in a while. On the other hand, I've learned to make sure there is a label or two for some eminently healthy food item left where Jackie will find it, even if I earn a: "Why didn't you throw the package away when you're finished?"

If I don't do this, I might get a long lecture on how a dinner of fish and chips from a local place I like will leave me with scarred arteries and lead to early widowhood for Jackie. I'm old enough that I figure it's important to die satisfied, even if it comes a few seconds earlier than if I deprive myself. Now that would be the sacrifice.

I don't think the Coffee Klatch quite realizes that I'm actually a perfectly good cook. If I'm honest, I do a better job than Jackie, whose mother wouldn't let her daughters into the kitchen. When we first met, Jackie invited me for dinner once. It was after our twenty-fifth anniversary before she admitted her mother cooked the meal before going out for the evening and letting Jackie take the accolades. I probably should have figured that out in the first couple of years we were married, but we were young and ... well ... there were other appetites to satisfy. Jackie learned how to make a selection

of satisfactory meals, and we've always shared the cooking. Of course, I can't always cook some of the things I like.

Today, for example, Marcy asked what I was going to do for dinner for myself. I should have lied, but before I engaged my brain, I said, "I've a nice small steak to go with a baked potato and some Brussels sprouts, followed by tapioca pudding."

Now, Jackie thinks Brussels sprouts should be placed at the curb immediately after purchase so they don't sully the house and are ready directly for the garbage pickup. Tapioca, she reminds me at any mention, used to be called frog spawn by British children served it as school lunches. She misses the context – the children were trying to gross out their lunch companions in the hope of getting an extra helping.

However, Jeff and Alvin both said "Euch!" at the mention of tapioca. Or maybe it was the Brussels sprouts. Clearly I have minority interest taste buds. Too bad. For them, that is. More for me, though there is that danger the shops won't stock some of the things I like.

I'm not too worried, as it seems celebrity chefs have got interested in sprouts. Instead of boiling them, they're now playing all sorts of silly games. Me? I just nuke them enough to tenderize them and add a little butter. It helps to use young sprouts, and if they've had a touch of frost they'll be sweeter.

The bubble tea craze has increased the popularity of tapioca too. In Japan, tapioca was dish of the year in 2019. I'd have been committed to an institution if I'd suggested that as a possibility when I married Jackie. And I still have to smuggle it into the house. Last time I bought it at the bulk store, I hurriedly relabelled it "Bathroom grout" before I brought it into the apartment. I store it in the utility room, but I've added "(Tap)" in brackets so I don't make a mistake and try to repair the cracks between the bathroom tiles with it. Might actually work of course.

Anyway, it's too bad none of the klatch likes sprouts or tapioca. I prefer to share pleasures, but these are two I may have to enjoy alone.

John C. Nash ©20201029

Riches to Rags

This pandemic business has been driving all kinds of strange thoughts through my head. Part of that is that Jackie and I have been using the time we're spending more or less forced to be together to try to do some useful things. People in our neighbourhood have too. Gardening seems popular, as does home improvement. But we've not got a garden – we're several stories up in a condo apartment building. And fortunately, we've a big apartment, and we've already done improvements to the decor and kitchen and bathroom.

I'm glad it's a large apartment. I shudder when I think about the 400 square foot units some formerly smug folk bought. Declarations that 40 square metres – the conversion is happily 10 to 1 approximately – is enough given what most of the world's population have to live in won't help during a lock-down. You'll be feeling like a mouse who's fallen in the washbasin with a few rodent friends while trying for a morsel of peanut butter.

Where was I? Ah yes. Useful things. Well, some of that is going through the storage locker and the Rubbermaid tote bins. Loads of souvenirs and mementos that somehow seemed so indispensable or irresistible when we bought them.

"Where did we get this?" I asked Jackie, holding up what I thought was a very colourful fringed hat. Or was it a 1970s micro skirt from a particular cultural tradition? Jackie used to wear short skirts then and looked good in them, which far too many women wore who definitely should not have. I wonder what Marcy looked like in them. Hmm. Should be more charitable. I didn't know her then, of course.

"That's the fringe from the bottom of that skirt we bought from the gypsy – I mean Roma – woman in Budapest that time in 1979," Jackie said. "The skirt was OK, but I changed to a plainer fringe. You can toss it away. I thought I might find a use for it, but of course, never did."

We have a lot of that sort of stuff. Salt and pepper shakers that somehow don't have proper holes or – worse – stoppers. Straw hats that got crunched in the luggage bin of the airplane coming home but you couldn't bear to throw away until now. And why do we have a pottery plaque with a crude beach scene that says "Wish you were hear" spelled H E A R.

But most of all clothing. Like the fringed skirt. And tops for Jackie that stretched unevenly in the first wash or else the die ran. T-shirts with printed messages that are now out of date. "Czechoslovakia", for example.

Not so much the Scottish woollens, though my tartan tie hasn't had an outing for two decades. Will the pandemic be the end of ties? I rather hope so. Useless things, and needing pins or bars to stop them flying around untidily. But the Aran sweaters we bought in '82 we still have and wear, even though the sleeve ends are a bit frayed.

So we've managed quite a collection – two large black bags full and ready to go to the thrift shop. Or the third-world rag pickers.

Wonder what we spent on all that stuff? Could be a very interesting statistic if we worked out the hours of wear per dollar spent on each item. Wouldn't surprise me that it is less than 1 hour per dollar for some of the sillier items. Should think of working it out for some of the garments in our closets and drawers.

Jackie's saying something ... what's that ... oh, showing me a picture of her in a bathing suit she bought in the Caribbean, one that she thought too skimpy to even put in the bag for the thrift store. Well she was, and still is, a fine-looking lady. Better tell her and give her a kiss. It's tough enough having to be at home so much, and I'd better make sure she knows she's appreciated.

J C Nash ©2020-11-12

A minor obsession

For some reason, novelists and movie scriptwriters love obsessions. Me, not so much. I can't enthuse about crazy serial killers, fetishists of olive green polka dots on purple velvet, or love-struck maidens who seek the affections of one-legged giants. Truthfully, I'm generally bored by walkers who need cardiac resuscitation after stepping on a sidewalk crack, though it might be interesting to observe the function of the gurney as its wheels fold up when the patient is inserted into the ambulance. But overall, I'd rather not have the day disturbed by sirens, lights and all that fuss.

Now, in this time of staying home because of the Covid pandemic, Jackie and I do seem to have one teeny, tiny obsession.

The fly.

It's December, yet we have this fly in the house. Or maybe more than one.

Jackie gets all upset whenever it's in the kitchen when she's cooking. Even more upset when I'm there cooking and won't drop everything to swat the pesky insect. Or try to.

We both get super annoyed and miss the most important moments of whatever is our current imperative TV program when a fly cruises across the screen at one inch per second and the screen is a 55 inch. This slow cruise is just a tease. The fly can accelerate away like an anti-ballistic missile the very moment you try to get out of your easy chair. And you've just got comfortable, the gas fire is giving its warmth, so you really don't want to get up.

Sometimes, one of us gets up and finds a swatter, but only once have we managed to get one with that. I think last August.

Except for yesterday. I was in the kitchen making an afternoon snack. Jackie tends to favour those cheese crunchies that leave your fingers yellow. I must admit they're quite addictive. Or she suggests chocolate, but the bathroom scale has lately seemed to display "FATSO" instead of a quantity in pounds, kilograms or, my personal choice, stone.

Yesterday, however, I had the makings for toasted crumpets, which personally I like with butter and Marmite. I know, that sticky black stuff that a friend has characterized with the statement "Only the Brits could figure out a market for the sludge left at the bottom of the beer vat." It's an acquired taste, and Jackie and I found we liked it when on a narrowboat holiday in

Britain many moons ago. The trick is to treat it as a condiment, not a spread. Think cayenne pepper rather than cream cheese. Hence the butter. And toasted crumpets.

Otherwise, you get something that will never get past your tonsils. We once had a jar of the somewhat equivalent Vegemite brought back from the land of Oz. We landed in Vancouver and took a day or two to visit friends. One of them offered to make a picnic lunch and saw the Vegemite. She used over half a jar. It's the only sandwiches I've seen ants running away from. Hmm. Maybe a market there if one can figure out how to exploit it.

Anyway, in mid-toasting of the crumpets, the fly buzzes by. Expletives were voiced, but they can't be repeated here. However, I noticed a plastic yogurt bin on the counter with a number of those fat rubber bands the postman uses to hold bunches of mail together. And there was a ruler by the telephone – a fairly thick one.

The fly had settled on the ceiling over the kitchen sink. I took the ruler and pulled a rubber band over the end and took aim. Thwack! Got it. The band fell into the sink, from where I retrieved it. There was a fly corpse stuck to it, so I threw it in the garbage. Well, actually there was about two-thirds of a fly corpse. Better hope Jackie doesn't look up when she's in the kitchen.

J C Nash ©2020-12-09

Shadow of Sadness

I was out for a walk earlier. Today it had warmed up. Above freezing anyway, and we're into December. The snow that had fallen up to now had melted away, so walking was a lot easier and safer. The coffee shop opposite the park was closed. Even if it were open, it would only be for take-out. I'm thinking it's gone out of business. When we get back to normal, whatever that means, I'll miss the nice lattes made and served by Jenny, the young woman who works – correction, worked – there part-time while going to university. And the breakfast bagel. Just have to hope that somehow there'll be someone to open up again in a few months when these fancy vaccines get a grip on the pandemic. And the idiots stop pretending the message "keep away from other people" doesn't apply to them.

Better stop thinking about that. There's no future in getting angry about the stupidity of others since you can't do much about it. Using a flame thrower on them would only contribute to global warming. Mind you, given the cold snap we had a few days ago, we could warm ourselves on the fire. Get some t-shirts made up with "Righteous Fire" on them and start a different kind of revolution.

Better stop Walter Mittying. Daydreaming. Thinking. Pondering. No. Ponder has overtones of heavy. Well, it does mean to weigh ideas, not just catenate random notions. Remember **Double Exposure** with Linda Cullen and Bob Robertson and "Notions – subjects too small to be called Ideas" in mockery of the CBC **Ideas** program? Did they introduce that catch-phrase "I'm Adrienne Clarkson and you're not!"?

There was a mother with a small boy in the park. He was still getting the hang of walking but insisting Mom not pick him up. Will he remember these outings in the park? Or be able to interpret them? Probably not. Sometimes I still get fractured dreams of being on the top of a double-decker tram in south London. I got motion sick. That was sometime before I was three, and not so long before the last trams stopped running in 1952.

No, he probably won't remember the park outing. And particularly won't have memory of his stubbornness. Perhaps, a mental snapshot of his mother's arms around him when he started to fall, her cheek close to his.

It'll be a while before he notices sadness or hurt on the face of others. It must have been when I was about four that I started to register those emotions. Somehow, I was at a party. It must have been for the birthday of

a cousin and it was in what seemed like a large upstairs living room. There were quite a few kids, and I only knew a couple of them, and most were "big kids", meaning they were six or seven. But there was another little boy my own age or a few months younger, and I think he was a cousin that I hadn't met before. He was quite wilful and aggressive. Grabbed a cookie right off my paper plate. I was nonplussed by this behaviour, to use a word I certainly did not know at the time. I didn't know whether to shout or cry or go after him, and in the end did nothing.

Then, he went over to the sideboard and opened a drawer. There were some little dishes in the drawer and he took one out. At this point, I think his mother noticed and came over, and my grandmother turned to look too. There was some alarm on their faces, an expression I had only recently come to recognize, and then only in a more or less instinctive way.

The boy threw the small dish at his mother so quickly she didn't have time to dodge and it hit her shoulder, deflected up then fell to the floor and smashed. My grandmother looked very sad, as did the boy's mother, who I later would call aunt. I was surprised they weren't showing anger. That was something I'd seen with my parents when some hooligans were kicking a ball in the street and knocked over the neighbour's rose bush. My father and mother went out and yelled at them to come back and arrange to pay for the damage, but they ran off. My dad knew the parents and he stormed off to bring the miscreants to justice.

But with the little boy, my aunt simply took both his hands and marched him out the room. He started yelling and crying as she did this, even though she hadn't slapped him – much more common then. Nor had she said anything. But the look on her face wasn't anger. The same with my grandmother, who just went out and got a dustpan and brush.

The expression on the faces of both grandma and my aunt was one of sadness and hurt, which was at the time new to me. And though I'd had nothing to do with the smashing of the small dish, I felt somehow that I'd been naughty. My first memory of shame, even though I had really nothing to be ashamed of. But that, of course, is one of the strange things about shame – it's a guilty feeling that doesn't need guilt.

Later on, I heard family gossip about the little boy being "not quite right". Today, we'd probably learn he was on the autism spectrum. But then, "not quite right" was the politically correct alternative to "wicked" or "naughty", which might presage a steady regimen of spankings. I'm guessing my family was slightly more enlightened, but that didn't mean my grandma could replace an heirloom. Or heal the hurt that an innocent, but damaged, child could inflict.

In the park, the toddler finally decided he had had enough running around and put up his arms to be picked up. His mother put him in a stroller

and they left. The wonderful glow of the winter sun started to weaken and my thoughts turned to the pleasures of a hot toddy. Hmm. Wonder if I can remember the first time I had one of those.

John C. Nash ©2020-12-16

Filtering

Jackie and I have been keeping to ourselves lately. And "lately" now means the better part of three months since we've even sat outside with friends at 2 long paces. But our neighbours can sometimes be heard talking outside if we crack open a window to get a bit of air on a day when it's not too cold. The other day, I overheard one woman say, "We're following all the rules. It must be other people causing the rise in the Covid infection rate."

Strange. I think that was the same woman I saw in the park talking to Marcy about her grandkids opening their Christmas presents from under her tree. They certainly don't live in her apartment, so, you know, it makes you wonder.

Marcy didn't have her hearing aids in, so she was leaning in to hear, though I could get every word from across the park. Marcy must have asked if the grandkids were in the woman's "bubble".

"Yes, of course. We have to be careful."

Marcy must have asked something about daycare and school.

"Ricky's in daycare – well, he's in two because one doesn't work on Wednesdays. And little Diana is normally in school, but they're doing virtual just now, but she has to go next door to a friend who has proper internet. Why my son won't get good internet I'll never know."

Something was being said about travel. I know I'd love to be able to get away. What was the woman saying?

"My son's in-laws just came back from the UK. They had to go and help their other daughter to move house because she and her common-law partner broke up. There's three kids there to sort out too."

There was some mumbling, then "No, the kids saw them at New Year. Just for a little while. Got to be careful. You take care of yourself, Marcy. As long as we all keep to the rules, we'll be OK."

John C. Nash ©2021-01-12

Sleeping Companions

Jackie and I used to stay in bed all night. I guess not always asleep the whole time, but we didn't get up. As we get on a bit, we're both up at least once and occasionally twice for calls of nature. Yes, I know that the cliché is that it's guys, but as we age, I think both sexes get less tolerant of a bit of hydrodynamic pressure. And both Jackie and I like a warm milky drink before retiring.

Now, I'm not going to labour you with a treatise on this topic. I just wanted to mention that I'd got up for a pee the other night, then found myself pondering some of the knotty topics of domestic and personal life that kept me from my usual quick return to the land of nod.

Some time ago – maybe before we all got into distancing and masks – I met Alvin in the park.

"How's it going?" I asked, mostly as a form of greeting rather than a question.

"OK, I suppose, but I've not been sleeping so well the last week."

"Something bothering you?" This time I was asking a question.

"Can't say if 'bothering' is the word. But I've been thinking a lot about odds and ends."

"Anything in particular bring that on?" Again, a question.

"Oh. Nothing that corresponds to the typical things the head-shrinkers like to rabbit on about. But I did learn that an old friend died, and her passing made me think about a bunch of things."

"Sorry to hear that. Must have been someone important to you," I commented.

"Yes. I guess Alice was important to me, though we only saw each other every couple of years, and we didn't write or call that much."

There was a silence for a couple of minutes. I've learned that silence doesn't mean nothing is happening or that a conversation has been suspended. It's like the silence before the beginning of the long dash in the official time signal from the National Research Council. Apparently, the most listened to milliseconds of all radio broadcasting in Canada. Go figure.

Alvin said, "I don't know why, but thinking of Alice has got me off on a strange bout of thinking about sleeping companions."

I couldn't think of much of a reply, so just said "Really?"

"Well, you know, I've been married a couple of times, and now live with

Zelda. And, in my time, I wasn't exactly the pillar of the moral society."

I'd not met Alvin until a couple of years ago, but Marcy had given the rest of us in the informal Coffee Klatch a catalogue of Alvin's affairs, as she called them. Truthfully, I suspect it was just that he had been less discreet about his involvements with women than many others, though there had been the two wives – I recall their names were Margaret and Penelope. Zelda came from Jamaica originally and was working as a practical nurse when Alvin had to have a hernia operation a few years ago. They aren't married, but from what I've seen, they've a tighter partnership than most couples.

Alvin continued, "Anyway, I can't help thinking about the way in which you sleep with different people. You know. Which side of the bed you sleep on? How many covers? Do you have to fight to keep the other person from pulling the covers? Do they toss and turn? Do you cuddle up or keep your distance?"

Now this wasn't quite what I'd expected when Alvin mentioned sleeping companions.

I said, "I guess I hadn't given those ideas much thought, but – you know – Jackie and I have been together a long time. Probably got all that sort of thing worked out early on. I'll agree that we always sleep the same way – I get the left hand side of the bed if you're lying on your back in it. And I've learned to hold on tight to the covers, even while asleep. Jackie works like a ratchet wrench in the night and always rolls in the direction away from me."

"Yeah, that's the sort of thing I've been thinking about. Zelda and I sleep in different rooms. She says I snore too much."

"Jackie and I only snore if one of us is awake," I said, bringing out our long-standing and totally silly mantra about snoring. It is, of course, true that snoring is only a problem if you have to listen to it.

Alvin chuckled, and I asked, "So how did Alice bring up all these thoughts?" My curiosity was at a high level, and I couldn't hold back.

"Well, we knew each other from the time we were kids. She lived down the block. We bumped into each other in school and university, then she got work out on the West coast. A couple of years after graduation, I was working for the feds, but there was a job in Vancouver that might have been interesting, so I applied. They offered air fare, but I'd have to find accommodation, and Alice said I could camp on her sofa.

My flight went out of Ottawa at around 8 in the morning, but we got some sort of technical trouble when we stopped in Winnipeg and didn't get in until 9:30 at night in Vancouver, even with the time change. And there was the FLQ flap on at the time with the Army on the streets etc. We wanted to catch the news.

So I got to Alice's place – a tiny apartment she jokingly called her garconnière, which was one of her slaps against male slanted language – and we

got ready for bed, but her TV was in her bedroom, so she said to come in to watch the news. Her TV was one of those 14" black and white jobbies. Can't understand how we ever managed to see anything on them, but they were what we had in the time.

Anyway, I guess I fell asleep, because the next thing I knew it was morning. Alice was beside me, and we were really comfortable together."

"Was that a problem?" I probed.

"Not as such. We'd always been able to talk to each other easily, and shared a number of interests. Also liked the same type of restaurants. Agreed generally on political matters. And she was a Phys. Ed. teacher and very fit. Not a pretty woman, but definitely good looking. Except she'd told me – I guess I was one of the few people she did tell – that she preferred women. The way she said it rather gave "prefer" a different meaning. There was no way we were doing much more than sleeping together."

I'm not sure where the thought came from, but I said, "There can be a lot more to relationships than sex."

"Yeah, precisely. Anyway, whenever I saw her and there weren't obstacles to doing so, we'd sleep together. Sometimes lie in each other's arms and chat for quite a time. And – dammit – I never had another woman who I could be so comfortable with in bed, either awake or asleep. Makes you wonder, doesn't it."

"Yeah. Guess so," I replied, not realizing the same sorts of ideas would be bumping around in my head in the middle of the night.

J C Nash ©2021-01-18

Perfect Secrecy

Every so often, there's a resurgence of some craze or other that captures popular attention or at least gets some page space or air time from lazy media types who can't be bothered to investigate what is really going on. When I was growing up, there must have been two and possibly three times that yoyos were in fashion. And in an age when the seasons seemed more well-defined, mid-Spring was kite time. If I'd had a good Latin education, I'd have been able to paraphrase Horace:

. . . the raging wind
To thee, O Sacred Kite, be kind;
And gentle breezes fill thy fabric,
Supplying soft etesian gales.

Once kite-time was done, the ground in the schoolyard was dry enough for marbles. Competition was fierce, but if they made a noise while class was going on, then the teacher was the big winner. I'm sure Mrs. Kenton had the biggest sack of marbles in the school, and she didn't play a single round.

We don't hear so much nowadays about those sorts of things, especially with the pandemic on. Still get the usual cycles of scams, of course. I'm thinking of resurrecting one myself. The old "secrecy" boondoggle. You know – how to have perfect passwords so your bank account can't be stolen by Russian hackers. That's if your Canadian bank hasn't found a way to put a line of fine print on page 246 of their "Customer Agreement" that says:

“No condition of this document requires us to ever give you your money if you ask for it.”

That's why I need to restart the privacy scam. Assuming you're not like that guy in San Francisco who has over \$200 million in Bitcoin if, and only if, he can correctly remember the password he used.

That is, of course, pretty common. When we bought our condo, it came with a fancy security system. But – you knew there'd be a "but", didn't you? – the lady who sold us the place was moving into care for dementia. No master code. We had to pay for a full new system. And now we use my birthday so we won't forget. Or is it Jackie's birthday? Oops.

I suppose we should use a password keeper. But you do need to remember a master password, so you've really just transferred the problem to a single point of failure.

The mirror image of secrecy is information security. Not wanting to lose anything, especially highly secret government information. Back in the days just before personal computers, a guy I knew at the National Research Council got the NRC to pay big bucks for his unit to buy a tape backup. Every Friday afternoon for two years, one of the staff would fire up this box and create a tape, then put it in a fireproof safe. After 26 weeks, the oldest tape would be reused. Then, one day, there was a big mess. No worries, right? Well, they'd never checked the Restore program. Didn't work. Nothing. Nada. Rien. Niets.

But the data was really, really secret.

Which reminds me of the scam I want to use to make money. A totally legal scam. It's called "write-only storage". Makes your data fully secure. Totally, unambiguously secret. Just push the button on our new WOSBox after you connect it to your computer via the USB slot and run our software. Watch the LED lights flash, and when they stop flashing, your data is fully secured.

I can't say I thought this one up. A company called Signetics put out a data sheet on April 1, 1972, for the Signetics 25120 Fully Encoded, 9046xN, Random Access Write-Only-Memory chip. The data sheet was replete with voltage levels, power requirements, pinouts and all sorts of other snazzy phrases. Total bunk, of course.

The big surprise came after some of the computer magazines – I think Byte was one – followed up on this in their April issues to amplify the joke.

It back-fired.

They got hundreds of letters asking where the chips could be bought and how much they cost.

So I'm thinking maybe give the customers what they're asking for. A little box with a USB cable and a program that makes the lights flash a bit and runs a file move to /dev/null. Look up "Null Device" on Wikipedia if you wish.

Would \$69.99 plus shipping be out of line?

J C Nash ©2021-01-26

Chances and Choices

It's winter, so walking requires more effort to get properly dressed beforehand, pay more attention to possible slippery patches, and then avoid tracking salt and grit into our condo when we get back. Altogether more work and it definitely diminishes the satisfaction. Still, it could be worse, and the weather hasn't been so bad that we've been stuck indoors for more than a few days by extreme cold or icy conditions.

Where we live also has enough spaces where we don't need to keep a mask on all the time. In the cold your breath condenses on the mask and it gets clammy and apparently doesn't work so well anyway. That green space, however, could do with better management. Trouble is, we're in the city, so there's a bunch of urban planning issues. Then also there's a couple of wetland areas, a river and some tributaries, and some public land under the control of three levels of government. Messy. We do have a River Keeper – somewhere.

Unlike some parts of the UK, we don't have verderers. These are the keepers of the Royal Forests. The New Forest in Hampshire has a website that points out they've been in place since the 13th century. The website is a bit newer, of course. They have a court listing ten verderers with regular court sessions to hear any matter relating to the management of the New Forest. And they have five permanent agisters, who enforce the regulations on the grazing of livestock that are allowed to run loose in the lands of the forest and, as will happen, get into collisions with vehicles. The wild New Forest ponies get into similar collisions. Then the agisters have to show up and sort things out as best they can. It's one of their specific duties.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the verderers had quite a responsibility for managing the trees, particularly the oaks, given the needs of the Royal Navy for ships. Most of Britain's forests today are a mix of scrub, meadow and a few woody parts, not a swath of mature trees. Blame the Navy, I guess.

Oak was a big deal back in the day. Lots of people owed their jobs to it. My own college needed new floor beams due to dry rot. The consulting engineer declined to come for lunch when he learned the meeting room was over the beams to be replaced.

Then, the plan for restoration got into the usual uproar over heritage materials versus modern substitutes. Twelve-inch square oak beams were

not listed in timber merchant inventories, and some Scandinavian offerings would bankrupt even a Saudi crown prince. Then, one of the older fellows remembered seeing a staff list with a name beside "College Forester". The college owned a number of tracts of land thanks to generous bequests by alumni. Perhaps nobody had done a careful audit for a while, but indeed there was a Forester, and when somebody telephoned to ask if there were any oaks suitable, they were told that indeed there were. They'd been planted in the mid-19th century and were just coming to harvestable size a century and a quarter later.

Well, that's the story I was told, though there's some confusion that it was my college. Seems a number of colleges have quite similar stories. Verifiable evidence – like mature oak trees suitable for large scale renovations – seems to be a bit thin on the ground.

The New Forest has its share of myths too. The Rufus Stone, a memorial to the supposed location where William II, son of the Conqueror and unpopular King of England and regent and would-be king of a goodly portion of modern France, died as a result of a hunting accident. Or possibly an assassination. One variant blames an oak tree for deflecting an arrow into him. Moreover, the site of the offending tree – since burned and removed, is commemorated by a monument. Rufus died on August 2, 1100. But the monument, reporting rather precise details that don't seem to be available in earlier records, didn't get set up until 1745. Then the monument was vandalized or maybe treated like the Berlin Wall and pieces appropriated for souvenirs, so it was replaced in 1841. Hmm. Three-quarters of a millennium to do a bit of spin-doctoring on the story. I visited the stone as a kid. I seem to recall that it was covered in metal to discourage souvenir takers.

People live in the New Forest and properties there are now crazily expensive. Those people have to fence their garden well or the ponies and deer will have a good munch on their flowers and vegetables. My guess is there are rules on what kinds of fencing are permitted. Maybe also whether you're allowed to go out with wheelbarrow and shovel and get some free fertilizer for the prize begonias.

Of course, the UK has other agencies responsible for things like recreation, car parking, and all sorts of other things, but it turns out their actions have to have the agreement of the verderers if they want to do anything in the New Forest. Similarly with other royal forests like the Forest of Dean, or Epping Forest. Interesting. I can imagine all sorts of political fizz when different interests bump up against each other.

Still, getting on for a millennium of continuous oversight does lend a certain authority to the regime. When I see fast food wrappings that blew into bushes and fences a long time ago still waiting for clear-up in a neighbourhood event that can't happen while Covid is around, I can see a great opportunity

for employing some laid-off wait-staff as agisters. Probably get stopped by the terminology police because neither Google Translate nor Collins English-French dictionary can find a French version of that word, though it almost certainly comes from Norman French and the verb "agir".

Well, we have the opportunity to do something, but we probably won't. At least I seem to have got round my usual walking route without slipping over while I've been musing about the matter.



New Forest ponies, August 1998

J C Nash ©2021-02-10

Coincidentally

Jackie and I were reading, but had the TV on more or less as background and to give us some reminder of time. With the pandemic lockdowns, we can easily lose track of the clock. While it isn't critical to follow a schedule, we prefer – supported by some of the mental health gurus – to keep to some semblance of a routine. Hopefully a healthy routine.

There was some sort of BBC drama playing on TVO. Possibly one of the Father Brown mysteries. Anyway, I happened to look up and one of the characters was an almost stereotypical English girl. Dark blonde curls, a little on the chubby side of average. Handsome, rather than pretty. The image threw a switch in my memory. Sally! Sally what? I couldn't remember her last name. It was something common in Britain. Crawley or Higgins or such. Now I was trying to remember.

Was it important to remember? Not really sure. Let me think.

Yes. It was probably '69. A week to 10 days after the first moon landing. That was – let me see – July 20. It was after the first year of my graduate program at Oxford. I'd shopped late, just before the 6 o'clock closing and bought a quiche and some tomatoes and a cucumber, along with a pint of milk and a bottle of cider. Walking north on St Giles, I realized that the girl about twenty feet in front of me was Sally. She'd been going with the student who'd had the room on the other side of the landing on my staircase in college. Grad students were offered the chance at a room for their first year, then had to find digs. Like many others, I found a third floor (second to the Brits, who count from zero) room with a cold-water sink, gas fire with a heating ring on the side, toilet and bath – shared with the other occupants and behind separate doors – a floor below. The gas was on a meter. It swallowed 2 shilling pieces – florins – at a ferocious pace. I once worked out that a whole house in Ottawa could be heated for expenditure at the same rate as the gas fire and ring. Generally I chose to use two eiderdowns, long underwear, and thick sweaters. In winter there was the dubious advantage that the lack of a refrigerator was not a problem.

But that I discovered later. I'd only had the room a few weeks. So I shopped frequently and ate out. I had powdered milk for my instant coffee or tea if I could stomach it, or else tried to use up a pint within a few hours of purchase if the weather were warm.

Anyway, Sally was walking along in front of me. We had just passed the

Lamb and Flag. She was wearing the uniform of a worker in one of the shops on Cornmarket. I picked up my pace until I was within a few feet and said

“Sally. Is that you?”

She turned and recognized me, and mumbled a hello. I’d been introduced to her at some sort of gathering of the Middle Common Room by Harrison Templeton III, the man who had the room on the opposite side of the landing in college. He was American, and from an old commercial family from Philadelphia. His name didn’t quite match up to the family fortunes. Like me, he was on a scholarship, and his family was prosperous but not rich. I think he said his parents were both educators, and one of them was the principal of a fairly good high school.

Harrison had not been discreet about Sally. In a rather boozy all-male session in one of the local pubs – I think The Kings Arms near Wadham, he implied that he’d managed to enjoy Sally’s favours rather easily. Now, he was in Rome as guest of a rather richer fellow student with whom his family had a distant connection. From the inebriated conversation, he wasn’t concerned that Sally was left behind.

“On your way home?” I asked.

“To my rooming house on Norham Road. Yes.”

“I’ve just got digs off Norham Gardens. Shall we walk together?”

“OK.”

As we walked, we had a desultory conversation. I mentioned how quiet it was in the summer, and that I’d not really had a conversation with anyone for the better part of two weeks. She agreed. I asked if she’d finished her teacher training – I’d remembered that much from when we met before.

“Yes. But there’s not much available for the summer, so I’m working stocking shelves at Sainsbury’s.”

“Hence the uniform,” I responded, then added, “Does your landlady feed you?”

“No. I’ll probably have beans on toast.” Like me, she had a shopping bag with something in it.

“I’ve a quiche and some salad stuff that I won’t easily be able to finish before it goes off. No fridge. Do you want to share?”

Sally looked nonplussed. “I really shouldn’t, but it sounds a lot nicer than what I’d in mind. OK.”

So we turned in at my digs and clambered up the two long flights of stairs in the Victorian pile that was now my home. The ceilings on the first two levels were high – probably 9 or 10 feet. My room was under the roof and clearly was formerly where the servants slept.

Sally and I did the little preparation that there was. My "table" was an oilcloth sheet on top of a modest steamer trunk I’d bought so I had a place

to keep stuff I didn't need out every day. The storage options in the room were limited. We chatted as we ate. I poured some cider.

I wondered if Sally were interested in activities other than eating. A woman I'd gone out with a few times in the Spring Term had told me not to bother to write. Or to contact her again in any other way. How I'd offended I wasn't quite sure. Possibly not at all. Sally seemed nice enough. A little heavier than I recall, but still sort of interesting.

She told me about her parents. Her father was a local vicar in East Anglia. Mother the usual vicar's wife. She didn't have any siblings. Somehow talking about her family seemed to distress her.

"Got any prospects for the new school year?" I asked.

"I put my name in last winter, and there's been a couple of replies, but I think I'll be going to stay with my aunt near Hereford and help on her farm."

"Oh. Not teaching then?"

I noticed tears forming at the corners of her eyes. I suddenly realized I'd been very dense. Harrison had been callow. Worse, it looked like he was, in the old parlance, a cad.

"Harrison?" I asked.

"Yes. He told me there's no future for us. Chucked me."

"Sorry. He's not taking responsibility?"

"No ... he said he thought I was on the Pill. He said he'd pay to get rid of it, but I can't do that. It wouldn't be right."

Thinking back, I realized that the so-called sexual revolution was far from revolutionary. There was some promiscuity, but not a lot more than in other times. Most of us were trying to figure out how to get some sexual experience but generally awkwardly and without the serious conversations that might have made it both more possible and more enjoyable. Instead, we suffered a lot of fumbling and bad behaviour.

For a fleeting moment, I considered that Sally might be a temporary pleasure. Then realized I didn't want to be another Harrison. Not my style. Instead, I said, "You know where I live and you can leave a message for me at the college if you want to talk. You know, have another viewpoint."

"All right. Thanks." Sally didn't sound convinced this would be at all helpful. I couldn't really say myself whether I thought it would be useful either. I was trying to find some way to show some decency. Apart from giving her some money which I really couldn't spare on my "just adequate but not more" scholarship, my offer of moral support was about the best I could do.

Nevertheless, I filled one of the saucepans I had bought as my cooking equipment with water. Good ones, actually. We still have them.

"Cup of tea?" I offered, having adopted the British habit of using that as a panacea for all woes.

Sally nodded, and I turned on the gas ring and grabbed the lighter. It was the type that used a largish dry-cell that caused a wire at the tip of an eight-inch metal tube to glow. The metal tube came out of a disk that resembled a jam-jar lid and screwed onto the special dry cells, and the "lid" had a button to turn on the current. These dry cells were rather expensive. Sally noticed that I didn't push the button on the lighter, but simply put the tip of the pipe near the holes in the gas ring where the gas was exiting, then gradually moved it away very slowly until the wire glowed and then the gas ignited.

"You didn't press the button?" Sally seemed surprised.

"Not necessary. I think the wire is acting as a catalyst to cause some carbon monoxide or hydrogen or methane in the gas to combust. I read in an old chemistry book how platinum wire does this, but I can't think they'd put platinum in these lighters. Possibly nichrome wire works too. Anyway, you saw it works, and I'll avoid having to buy a battery."

It was good to see Sally show interest in something, and we chatted about everything and nothing while we drank our tea – with milk that was fresh, too.

Around a quarter to eight, Sally said she'd like the loo, then should go home. I took her downstairs one level and pointed out the door, though it was marked WC. She came back, washed her hands, and got ready to go.

"Shall I walk you home?"

"I'd rather you didn't. My landlady is already a bit suspicious, and I'd prefer she had nothing extra to moan about."

"OK, but I'll see you out."

I escorted her outside and to the edge of the road and we said goodbye. It was a nice evening, and I stood in the entrance to the yard – the house had a gravelled yard so cars and delivery vans could pull in. Parking was precious in North Oxford. There was a sign "Private Property. No Parking" on one of the posts of the entrance. Necessary, I suppose. I watched as Sally walked up the street and turned the corner.

As I stepped back towards the house, I noticed on the other side of the entrance a young woman struggling with a large suitcase, which she was carrying in her arms. The handle was clearly broken.

"Bugger this suitcase!" she burst out as it slipped from her arms.

"Can I help?" I asked.

The young woman was looking down at the suitcase that was on the ground. She now had her hands on her hips, glowering at it. She was wearing the mandatory miniskirt of the day, with shoes having heels a couple of inches high. Not very well-suited to carrying a large suitcase with a broken handle.

"Damned handle broke," she said. "And I've got to get down to the end of Crick Road. I managed to beg a ride to the beginning of Norham Gardens,

fortunately.” She still had a quarter of a mile to go, however.

In that era, suitcases didn’t have wheels. Why, you may ask? I don’t have a suitable reason, but it was over a year later before the first wheeled luggage appeared in Macy’s in New York.

I said, “I’ve got some rope we could use to tie into a handle. I’ll go and get it.”

I moved the suitcase – it was a bit of a monster – into the yard and went in and found my length of rope. It was about 25 feet, and still tied in its original hank.

When I got back, I said, “Unless I’m mistaken, you’re Canadian.”

“Yes. I’m from McMaster in Hamilton, here for a year with my doctoral supervisor who’s on sabbatical. We had a conference in Bristol, but my suitcase decided to break when I was getting into the train.” The young woman was calming down now that we had a solution in progress.

“I came here from Edmonton, but I was born in Kent. Grew up there.”

“How are you going to make a handle?” the young woman asked.

“I’m not. At least, not directly. I’m going to run the rope around the case on the long axis, then twice around the short axis separated by roughly the size of a handle. I’ll use the loop around the case the other way to keep the verticals from slipping when we pull on a handle I’ll make out of the rest of the rope. And probably we shouldn’t have too much rope left and I won’t need to cut it. In any case, this plastic rope needs to be heat-sealed if you cut it, and I’d also like to keep the full length intact.”

“Clever! By the way, I’m Jackie.”

Yes. That was how we met. And I wondered about the chances that I’d have run into Sally Whatever-her-name-was that afternoon, that we’d share a meal, that the circumstances were such that we’d call it a night early, that I would come out to see her off just as Jackie came along, and that Jackie’s suitcase would have got a broken handle that day.

What was that Jackie was asking? Oh, she wants to know what I’m dreaming about.

“Just remembering the broken suitcase handle,” I said, leaving out the rest.

John C. Nash ©2021-02-21

Out of War

Walking is a pleasure that lately, with the pandemic, has become a bit of an obligation. Jackie and I try to ensure we manage a walk each day as a partial response to the temptations of food and drink. Sometimes we chat, but other walks are a time of thought. A pedestrian pondering. Before all the lockdown conditions, I'd normally take a walk on my own, and sometimes stop in the park and take advantage of a bench in the shade to read while keeping an eye out for the ebb and flow of people.

Last week, we walked past a house that I knew was being rented by a family rescued from the hell that was Aleppo. As we passed, I could see three children of different ages making a snowman. Given that they probably had been in Canada for a couple of years at least, this wouldn't be their first experience of making snowmen. Still, the images in my mind of what I understood to be the battleground of Aleppo were in sharp contrast to the view I had of a Canadian back yard.

These kids were, of course, the lucky ones, following a stream of refugees to Canada since the Second World War. Before then, well, we weren't quite so welcoming. Our forebears, copying the Cubans and Americans, turned away the St. Louis which took a boatload of Jewish families on a journey that mostly ended in the gas chambers.

How many we can and should help is always going to be a matter of debate. On top of which, there'll be waves of opportunists and cheaters. There is always a rush to distrust the many when the bad behaviour of a few is revealed.

Sometimes, you get a glimpse inside the reality of those who've escaped wars. Some decades ago, I got to know a Vietnamese academic and his family. A rather extended family, as it turned out. Like many Vietnamese, one of his names was Nguyen, and we'll use that here. Nguyen had a doctorate in education from a respected American university and was working in the early 1970s in Vietnam for the United Nations.

When the collapse came, he was away from his home. His wife and kids were in Saigon. I don't know where he was, but he had some way to get out. Somehow, his wife got a very short message to him. All it said was "Go to Canada."

Given that the Americans had the resources to get people out of the chaos that was the self-induced rout of the US forces, and that he'd been in

the US for his post-graduate work, Nguyen planned to go there if he could, and for a few days was conflicted, since it would mean some extra effort to get into Canada.

Then he realized why Phuong, his wife, would suggest Canada. It came down to a modest, late-19th century house near the eastern end of Wilbrod Street in Ottawa. Canada had diplomatic relations with North Vietnam, while the US didn't. This became important when Nguyen was able to actually make some arrangements to get Phuong and the kids out of Vietnam. They didn't come all at once, and, eventually, a nephew and niece joined them. I think those two got out on boats. Nguyen's brother had been a village cop, and that was enough that he got to spend a few years in a so-called re-education camp. He eventually got to Canada too, settling in Montreal. But that was after 1990. A long time.

In the meantime, the kids became young adults. Seven people in a small townhouse near Rochester and Albert.

Sometime around 1990, Nguyen invited me to dinner. I think it was his 60th birthday. After a very nice meal, he and I took our coffee into the small living room. The rest of the family disappeared to homework, outside tasks, or other things.

Given Nguyen was born around 1930, from what he'd told me in Hanoi, I wondered how he had been educated, so I asked, "What was education like for you in Vietnam?"

He chuckled and said "When I came home from the first reading class, I asked my mother how we were all descended from the Gauls."

I laughed too – Vietnam was then a province – Département – of metropolitan France, and the schools had a uniform curriculum and texts.

"Were the teachers good?" I asked. Sometimes colonial schools were pale imitations of their European models.

"Actually, very good. Some were even educated at the Sorbonne."

"French?" I probed.

"No. Vietnamese." Nguyen paused, then added, "My high-school history teacher's name was Giap."

Now that was one for the books, though Nguyen was clearly testing my knowledge. Vo Nguyen Giap went to school with Ho Chi Minh and became his general, defeating the French at Diem Bien Phu and later doing enough to convince the Americans to leave. In a documentary where I saw him interviewed when he was almost 100 years old, he did not claim victory over the Americans. In fact, in very precise and upper-class Parisian-accented French, he said that the North Vietnamese lost the Tet offensive to the Americans, but that the TV coverage was such that the American people clamoured for an end to the carnage.

To be sure, I asked, "The Giap?" and Nguyen nodded.

We talked of other things. Phuong's watercolours – beautifully executed, and in a style neither oriental nor western. How the children were doing. Nguyen commented that one of them was finishing the Royal Conservatory of Music piano teaching qualification. Indeed, the piano made the small living room even smaller.

Nguyen said, “You know we have family meetings to decide on big purchases?”

Actually, I didn't. In fact, it hadn't occurred to me. Then Nguyen said, “A few years ago, Phuong and I said we thought there was enough money for a second-hand car, but the kids voted for a piano.”

John C. Nash ©2021-03-08

Run, Run Away

After a year of social isolation due to the insolent collection of molecules called the Covid-19 virus, many of us would welcome an escape from it all. A running away.

Few of us will, of course, act on this feeling, no matter how much we'd like to. For one thing, it's hard to think of where one could go, at least with a serious chance of finding a better situation than we have. And of course, to have the resources to continue to enjoy that new situation.

The ability to sustain an escape is the elusive holy grail of any running away. Pique at exaggerated wrongs has a large proportion of children attempting to run away. For those fleeing abuse, the departure may be effective, but the escape may lead to the tragedy of exploitation and human trafficking. Runaways from more humane households likely return within a few hours.

Nevertheless, running away is a concept that resonates loudly in everyday culture. From popular music alone, a recent retiree will have been exposed to half a dozen tunes with "Runaway" in the title over their lifetime, though it's the baby boomers who will be carried back to Del Shannon's electric guitar and piano intro to the single that for a time sold 80,000 singles a day in 1961. The Gen-X cohort will more likely remember Slade's metal head-banger "Run Run Away", though about two decades later Newfoundland's Great Big Sea managed, I think, to make the tune more accessible to a wider audience.

I only met one person who I believe managed to actually run away with a modicum of success. I'm not counting refugees. The state of a refugee always incorporates a large measure of failure. And the running away is more an instinctive flight. The same with a fugue where, at least in some definitions, the escape is not remembered later. For me, the other definition is a better escape. Nothing beats the Bach D Minor in a church with a good organ that has a few 32-foot pipes to carry the low notes that you feel rather than hear.

My one true runaway was not a bedraggled mendicant but a tidy and very proper-looking late-20s woman who worked in the library of the government department that had hired me to solve some problems for them. In fact, the department thought they were getting someone else when I was hired. There was a misunderstanding in asking a reference about me. A mixed-up professor said I was a very strong Ph.D. candidate in physics. Actually I was a post-doc who possessed an Oxford D.Phil. in mathematics. No matter, I

answered the call, and the library was helpful in the process.

Susan was the library clerk who would often be the person to handle the finding, acquisition, interlibrary loan, and copying of material I requested. For several months, I didn't even know her name. Then one evening, Jackie and I saw her when we were at a meeting of an activist group we belonged to in the late 70s. The meeting was being held in the Quakers' or Friends Meeting House. It turned out Susan was the caretaker there in exchange for a small apartment in the building.

A couple of weeks later, I was having my lunch on a bench outside the office when Susan came along with her bag lunch. I motioned to the empty half of the bench and she joined me. For a few minutes, we talked of trivial subjects like the weather. Then, given the population of Ottawa at the time, I asked, "Are you a local? So many people here come from other parts of Canada or the world. We moved here from the West."

Susan answered "No. Nova Scotia. I only came about six months ago."

"For the job in the library?" I asked.

There was a long pause, then "No. I came here without a job. In fact, just one suitcase."

"Sorry. We can change subject if you like," I suggested.

"No, I'm going to have to live with my decision. I was a stay-at-home mom. Two kids, 2 and 3. Grandparents around who thought the kids were the sun and moon and stars. And me? I was going nuts. People told me my life was so perfectly nice. Perhaps for someone else. Then one day, I couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't what I could live with. I packed a small case and went to the bus station. When I got to Ottawa, I found a room and managed to get a term job here in the library. Pays very little. The apartment at the Friends' House was a godsend. So were the people there. They just accepted me. Didn't judge my decision when I told them."

I decided not to make any judgement either, though I was curious as to many aspects of Susan's story. Was there some sort of abuse, either by the anonymous husband or some other family member or acquaintance? Were there overtones of mental illness? Witness protection? An extramarital affair, possibly – in that day before "gay" took on its same-sex meaning – with another woman? However, sometimes what has been stated is, in fact, as close to truth as one can get.

Not long after, Susan's term at the library ended. I heard she found a permanent job elsewhere. And the activist group moved our meeting location to a bigger space. I made no effort to keep in touch and I haven't seen Susan since. Her kids will be middle aged now.

In that I believe there is an unwritten 11th commandment to be there for others, maybe I was the runaway.

John C. Nash ©2021-03-16

Seepage

“Do you have trouble remembering what it was like to just decide to go out for dinner rather than cook?” Jackie asked the other day.

“Yes. It does seem to have been a while, and looks like it will be a while more.”

“And I miss our trips. Especially where we would stay a few days in a place and have some unplanned time and just decide where to eat on the spur of the moment.”

I’m not sure why, but the Abbotsford Bar and Restaurant in Edinburgh came to mind.

“Remember 2006 in Edinburgh?” I asked.

“You mean that pub and restaurant where you had the Angus steak and I had the salmon?” Jackie responded.

Now one of the things that really delights me about Jackie is that she and I often remember the same things at the same time from seemingly trivial stimuli. Somehow and sometimes the experiences are shared at the level of equivalent memories. A sort of alignment of the stars without noise or fuss, just a quiet hint of a smile or a gentle touch on the elbow or shoulder. Once we realize we’ve both got similar thoughts, we don’t need more.

We’d had a few days in Edinburgh and Glasgow that summer. And this particular day we’d gone to the Dean Gallery of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, walked along the Leith river walk, then back to the Cannongate where we found a marker for Adam Smith’s grave in the Auld Kirk yard. He was – if you give him the credit for unrestrained enterprise and application of capital – appropriately located under the rear bumper of a car in a paid parking lot. We ended up in the New Town where the Abbotsford beckoned our weary feet around 5 p.m. We could not eat until 6. The Angus steak that Jackie recalled was excellent. Moreover, when the waitress took my order, I asked if the chef would be offended if I had it done a bit on the rare side and could then send it back for a minute or so more if it were too red. This they did, the waitress waiting while I did a small cut to check the doneness, then taking it back for a little more heat. I got a perfect medium. The chef poked his head out of the kitchen and I gave him a thumbs up. A service above and beyond the usual.

But before that, we had some time to sit and enjoy a pre-dinner drink. Neither of us are big whisky drinkers, but we do enjoy one occasionally. And

where better to enjoy a single malt than in Edinburgh. Not knowing our single malts, we took the surer path and ordered Glenfiddich. The intricacies and folklore of whisky productions haven't been on my list of required reading. I do recall that George Washington made a good deal of money from his Mount Vernon distillery. It produced 11,000 gallons in 1799. Apparently none of it aged. Distill and sell was the order of the day. How and how long Scotch is aged is, apparently, the key to its value.

In any event, we ordered our Glenfiddich. Neat, of course. We sipped in silence, not needing conversation after our longish day.

The bar wasn't busy, but there were several sets of clients spaced about in the bar, which had a number of wooden partitions so client groups had a bit of privacy. I was sitting with my back to one of these, and could hear a conversation between two men behind me. They were clearly Scots, and the regional accents – I'd become able to pick some of them out – were not Glasgow or the Lowlands, but Edinburgh or further north.

Voice 1 said "Nothing like this particular single malt. Takes me back a few decades to when we found a way into the barrels."

Voice 2 joined in. "Think they ever realized what we did?"

"Me Da said that Ian, the head distiller, figured that the levels were dropping more than normal evaporation and seepage. But he was a constant worrier. Every drop counted towards the profits."

Voice 1 said "I wonder if they ever realized that the pipe chase was big enough for a couple of eleven-year-olds to crawl through."

"It was bloody brilliant of you to find the left-over pipe holes from long before, when they used the warehouse for making some sort of explosives during the War. Maybe even the First War."

"Yeah. That let me figure out that the barrels were snug against the chase, and it was just galvanized tin. And once we figured out the position of the barrels, it didn't take much to cut a small hole that looked like the old pipe holes, but behind a couple of the barrels. Da had some tin-snips perfect for the job."

Voice 2 added "The tricky bit was drilling the small hole and getting the neoprene tube into it before too much whisky spilled."

Voice 1 rejoined "And getting it out and plugging the hole with a small wooden plug and smoothing it off with sandpaper and some brown clay. We learned a lot from your older brother and his model aeroplane stuff."

Voice 2 said "Yes. The tubing was what he used to join up the fuel tank to the little engine. Fortunately, he had some clean tubing."

Voice 1 countered "And my little sister's brown plasticine was the clay to seal the plug and camouflage it."

Voice 2 mused "It was our introduction to the amber nectar. Didn't like it for the first couple of sips, but then got the hang of sniffing the spirits first

and nursing a small dram for a while.”

“Down by the Spey there. Wonder if the small bottles are still in that crevice in the wall behind the loose stone,” said Voice 1.

“Possibly. We left a quarter inch in each, as I recall. Sort of a gift to the distillery gods.”

Voice 1 said “A toast to the gods of distillation.”

“To the gods of distillation.”

Some time later, I asked Jackie if she remembered that overheard conversation, but apparently somewhere behind her there were two women discussing the pregnancy – unplanned according to the speaker – of one of their daughters. Focussing on the rather bitchy chat between the women, she didn’t hear, or rather listen to, the men behind the partition on my side.

Still, when we indulge ourselves with some whisky, we still sometimes toast the gods of distillation.





J C Nash ©2021-03-24

Respectability

The slip of paper was scrunched up in the bottom of the old suitcase.

I'd been going through what we call the attic, though it's really just a large closet in the guest room. The old suitcase had a questionable handle, wonky wheels and a zipper that jammed three inches from full closure. Still, it served to keep mementos and papers we couldn't bear to throw away. At least until now.

I was separating things into piles. Keep. Toss. Maybe. Jackie and I could then review my categorization and I would accede to her wishes. That's how things work in our household, mainly because, while I like to get rid of everything after I've taken a photo or a scan, Jackie's enthusiasm for tidiness wanes when she sees the items to throw away. I figure I can afford some space for storage. In any event, I'll be long gone when someone has to clear everything out, and I've made provision for that already.

I uncrumpled the slip of paper and saw the name and address. Let's say the name was Ann Smith, with an address of no particular cachet in a nondescript part of an unremarkable city. Just reading it gave me a shiver of discomfort. Not fear or even embarrassment. More a reminder that I had been party to a meanness and a sadness that I could do nothing to remedy. That I had been ineffectual and small, and even half a century later, just seeing the name and address could bring back that same emotion.

At the time I was studying in the city of the address. Soon after I'd arrived, I got a cheque for my scholarship and sent it by mail to my bank back home – that's how things worked back then before inter-branch banking and electronic transfers. I carefully instructed that the bank was to (1) deposit the cheque and (2) send me a draft for half the amount. Well, they duly deposited the cheque and omitted to send me money. Letters went back and forth with a response that "We cannot locate your letter". My father, armed with a signed and witnessed letter from me, managed to get the bank to send the draft, though their claimed "expedited service" still took two weeks.

In the meantime, I was in some straits financially. A fellow student, we'll call him Jones, lent me enough to tide me over. Ah yes, it does well to remember Polonius saying "neither a borrower nor a lender be", but at the time I had rather limited options.

About six months later, Jones came to me to ask a favour. I was to deliver an envelope to Ann Smith. It was fat, and Jones implied it contained

a considerable sum of money. He said he could not deliver it personally for reasons he was reluctant to divulge.

Now Jones' family was often referred to as "prominent". That is, they had money. A lot of money. And they had their fingers in politics, the arts, and the various social assemblies that got reported on the society pages of the newspapers and magazines of the times.

Since Jones had helped me out at an awkward moment, I really could not refuse. So I took the bus to the area where Ann Smith lived and walked to the address in question.

The doorbell was answered by a middle-aged woman in curlers – remember curlers – with a less than fresh apron and a cigarette in the corner of her mouth.

"Is Ann Smith here? I've an envelope to deliver," I said.

"I'm here," said a voice in the dim hallway behind the woman who'd answered the door.

I went to hand the envelope to Ann, but the woman in curlers grabbed it, and tore it open, with a gasp at the amount of money inside.

"So, trying to buy off your conscience?" she said.

I saw that Ann was pregnant, and realized what my errand was about.

"I'm just the messenger. I've no idea what this is about," I said, even as I had a good idea.

"Well, I'll keep this for my troubles," said the woman in curlers.

Realizing this was not Jones intent, and could well compound the insult and injury to Ann Smith, I said, "Unless the envelope is delivered to Ann Smith, I will have to report a theft. Moreover, if you are receiving the money, I will – because of my obligations under my contract – report a possible case of living off the avails of prostitution."

I was skating on thin ice here, but figured the woman wasn't actually running a bawdy house and would not know that I had no official role. However, I did at the time always carry a notebook in my pocket. I took this out and carefully wrote on a clean page "Envelope received from Reliable Messenger Service Inc." with the date and a printed ANN SMITH.

The woman in curlers handed the envelope to Ann with a snarled "There you are. Much good it'll do you."

Ann played along – possibly she believed my ploy.

I thanked her and, turning, said "Good luck." Then I made my way out of the neighbourhood as quickly as possible.

Jones went on to follow his family's pattern of business and politics. He's in the news quite a bit. Fortunately not like some of the characters in the news lately like Peter Nygard or Jeffrey Epstein. In fact, his private life seems to have been relatively unremakable, so perhaps he learned a lesson.

Still, there was a child, now middle aged, that he fathered. And a young woman who likely took a considerable loss in life's lottery.

I didn't put the slip of paper on any of the piles, but tore it up and tossed the pieces in the waste basket.

John C. Nash ©2021-04-07

Lost Time

We had an online meeting of our Coffee Klatch yesterday. Marcy finally knows how to connect her microphone. In fact, her husband found a headset with the microphone on a stalk, and we're now all using those. They cut down on a lot of audio problems that come from feedback between the speakers and the mic. on tablets and laptops.

Marcy was upset about the schools going to all-virtual again. "My grand-kids are going to lose almost two years of learning. It's terrible."

I thought of commenting on how Jackie and I see a lot of kids fooling around on their way home in groups tightly packed and interacting physically. The public health folk have sung the litany of proper measures in schools. They don't, of course, have jurisdiction over the homeward sidewalk.

In this case, I didn't need to jump in, as Alvin took us off in a different direction. He said, "They'll probably survive OK. And they are mostly getting some instruction. I know some folk who missed out on four years of school, and many of them lost family too."

"What're you talking about?" Marcy bristled. She doesn't like anyone to be even 1% in disagreement with her. I really pity Michael, her husband, but maybe he's learned strategies that keep him out of the line of fire.

Alvin responded, "Well, one of my neighbours is a bit older than us – I'd say mid-eighties. A couple of years ago – maybe more now, since we've all been at home over a year – I was in that chinese buffet place on Merivale. What's it called?"

I suggested, "The Emerald Garden was on Merivale near where Pascal's Hardware used to be, but I saw "For Lease" on it when I drove by last week."

"Yes, that's the one. Anyway, I was in there for lunch with a couple of former colleagues this time, and I saw my neighbour Marie at a table with about a dozen other folk. We said hello, and a few days later I saw her in her garden and we had a conversation.

Apparently, she was born in Indonesia in the mid-30s. Dutch parents who were part of the colonial administration. When the Japs rolled in in 1942, her father disappeared. She said they never did find out quite what happened to him. She and her mother were put in a series of camps. The lunch group is part of something called the Kumpulan, though there's another word too that I didn't quite get. In Indonesian or Malay. I guess they are essentially the same language."

“Didn’t they have schools in the camps?” Marcy asked.

“I think they had pretty much nothing. She did say some of the mothers tried to teach them how to read and write and do some simple arithmetic, but there was nothing to write with or write on except the dirt around the huts. But in any case, the Japanese forbade teaching the children.”

“So they had no schooling from 1942 to 1945?” Jeff asked.

“Actually, 1946,” Alvin answered. “I did some reading. After the Japanese surrendered, the Allies didn’t have much of a plan to liberate all the Japanese-occupied areas that they’d bypassed in the attack on Japan. And there were a lot of Indonesian militias who wanted to kill off the Dutch, or any Europeans for that matter. It was late 1945 that the British finally came in, and in fact they rearmed some of the Japanese to protect the camp survivors from the republican militias. So you had Japanese fighting shoulder to shoulder with British troops. Apparently also the Gurkha’s were sent in. The militias would make themselves scarce when the Gurkhas were around, and my friend says these Gurkhas made them a Christmas celebration, even though that isn’t part of their culture.

However, that was after the Battle of Surabaya. The Brits had negotiated a ceasefire with the Indonesian republicans who wanted independence. Then the British commander, a Brigadier Mallaby, was killed by a republican teenager while going around unarmed with a white flag to inform the British troops. After all the fighting in the War, I guess the Brits and Indian Army troops were pretty impatient. They used five warships, some tanks, and a few airplanes and on November 10, 1945, they retaliated. They still lost 295 men. However, the Indonesian republicans lost anywhere from 6,300 to 15,000, plus most of their weapons. Well, the weapons they’d got from the Japanese. And later they had trouble equipping an army when they did get independence. But in the fighting, quite a few of the unfortunate camp survivors were massacred, just after surviving four years of hell.”

“Gee. I didn’t know about that,” Marcy said.

“Actually, it’s not what I was trying to talk about,” Alvin continued. “What I wanted to say was that Marie – her Dutch friends say Ria, though she introduces herself to Canadians as Marie – managed to get back to the Netherlands and somehow get some training in bookkeeping, met her husband where she found a job, and they came to Canada around the time of the celebration of Confederation in 1967.

She was quite active in the Tulip Festival, as well as a local theatre group and a choral society. So despite her missed education, she had a strong cultural life.”

“You’re saying losing school isn’t that important?” Marcy asked.

“No. It’s not a good thing. But examples like Marie show it isn’t necessarily a complete disaster,” Alvin answered.

Jeff, who'd said little until now, chimed in, "But it didn't save a lot of people who were killed by the Japs or the Indonesians, or starved or succumbed to sickness. Maybe only the strong ones are still here."

That was a thought. Would many, or even most, kids who missed a lot of school fail to make a life for themselves. Was it a case of "They don't build them like they used to" because we only see the buildings still standing? The rubbish fell apart and disappeared. The good stuff is still there.

I thought of asking about the proportion of people who would do OK after missing school, but the timer in the top left corner of the meeting screen was counting down to zero. It was time to say goodbye. Oh, well, another time.

J C Nash ©2021-4-14

Squelching Rumours

The other night the informal coffee klatch met online again. I planned to excuse myself after a few minutes under the pretext of having to help Jackie with something or other.

As it turned out, I ended up staying online longer than I expected. Jeff related a quite interesting story told to him by a fellow he knew who'd been a cameraman for CBC Television.

Jeff didn't say how he met this fellow, who he called Bob. Bob was Dutch, but born in Bandung, Java, and came to Canada in the immigration wave of the 50s and somehow tumbled into working freelance as a cameraman for the CBC and others. That was the age of very large cameras. He must have been fairly good, because he was assigned to one of the cameras for the June 9, 1968, leadership debate between Trudeau – Pierre that is – and Bob Stanfield. Actually Tommy Douglas and Raoul Cauette were there too, but somehow it's Trudeau and Stanfield who were the headliners.

Jeff recounted, "Bob said that the audience never saw how Trudeau was winding Stanfield up – trying to distract him. Trudeau had arranged to have a bowl of grapes on his podium, but it was out of sight behind the front of the lectern.

When Stanfield was on camera, Trudeau would eat a grape. But Bob and his sound technician Margo, who also happened to be Dutch and retired with Bob back to the Hague in the late 80s, were crouched down in front of Trudeau's podium to get the close-ups. Trudeau started tossing grapes for them to catch in their mouths while Stanfield was speaking. That, of course, wasn't shown or reported, but poor old Bob Stanfield seemed to be distracted. No wonder."

Alvin – more as a question than a statement – said, "I guess the cameramen got to see a lot of stuff that wasn't part of the official record."

Jeff continued, "Sure did. In the mid-90s my wife and I had lunch in the Hague with Bob and Margo. It was nice weather and we found out how to get to their apartment on the Sneeuwkllokjestraat. I learned how to pronounce it so I could ask directions if we needed them. It means "Snowdrop" in English. I looked them up after Margo told us the translation. We know the word, but they aren't native to the Americas. Literally in Dutch the name is "little snow clocks".

Anyway, we had a nice lunch. I don't know if Margo cooked them or

just heated them up, but we had kroketten, the traditional Dutch deep fried meat ones. Nice.”

“So what was the story?” Marcy asked, trying to bring Jeff back from his food dream.

“Well, we had a laugh about the grapes, and I suggested that maybe the interesting bits were separated by lots of boredom or busy work. Bob agreed and said they went through a lot of coffee, donuts and cigarettes, sometimes waiting in hallways to get a few-second clip for the nightly news.

Then he said he wondered if some of those times waiting – he called them stake-outs – didn’t have an influence on the outcome of events like the election.

My wife said she didn’t see how that could be. Bob said he’d give an example from a time when they were on the campaign trail somewhere out West. Trudeau had a hotel room down a short corridor from where the reporters and camera folk would hang out waiting for the chance of a sound-bite.

This was when Trudeau was pretty new. He was single and in his 40s. Given the times, someone voiced the question as to whether he preferred women or men. That was before the word ‘gay’ got into our vocabulary. I think Bob said someone had asked if rumours that Trudeau was queer were true.

So for some tens of minutes there was a sort of debate about Trudeau’s inclinations, along with speculation on who had started or amplified the rumour. Or rather, which political party was putting money behind spreading that rumour. I can remember early in the election hearing the idea mentioned several times. Even veiled references in the press. Then it all stopped.”

“So what happened?” Alvin wanted Jeff to get to the punch line soon. So did I.

“Well, there was this young woman reporter. Bob didn’t say who, but there was just one woman in the Parliamentary Press Gallery at the time, and she was also its youngest member, and that was Marjorie Nichols.”

“I remember her,” Marcy said. “She died before she was 50. Terrible loss.”

“Anyway,” Jeff continued, “after about twenty minutes of blather, this gal gets fed up, and notices the Mounties are busy trying to get new batteries into their walkie talkie – you know the big clunkers they had back then – so she knocks softly on Trudeau’s door. The door opens and she goes in. Everyone wonders and waits. And waits. After about an hour she comes out with a big smile and says “He’s not queer”.”

With appreciation of Bob van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1927-2009.

J C Nash ©2018-2-21

Sunshine

May's been a good month for Jackie and I. With the pandemic, we've not had any social interactions in person since last October, but the bright but fresh days this month have been a great chance to get out and walk, and in one case invite some friends to walk with us. "With", of course, means 2 metres apart, but you can still chat as long as you remember to enunciate clearly.

Actually, for a lot of the time we didn't say a lot. There were birds and some wildlife. The rabbits round here are almost tame. When one of us saw a bird or animal that might be interesting, we just pointed. Sometimes you don't need to speak, and keeping a bit quiet seems to encourage the wildlife to stay near.

This uncomplicated promenade was soothing. The sunlight was strong but not a glare, and the breeze was sufficient to be refreshing without having the edge of chill nor the vigour to toss hats. I found myself thinking of other days and different sunshine.

In temperate climes, sunshine is generally benign. We don't get desiccating radiation of a Sahara noon, though a late July heat wave can be pretty uncomfortable. But even cool sunshine can be a danger.

I remembered a late 1960s morning in early January. I'd spent Christmas with an aunt and uncle in south-east England, then had a chance to collaborate with some British Navy researchers on computations for acoustics. They were interested in sonar applications for anti-submarine equipment, but one of the senior people at the Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment saw that they could benefit from sharing basic research with selected outsiders. I didn't even get inside the unit proper. There was a modest building with some meeting space and a club room just outside the main gate. They put me up in a local B and B, of which the Poole and Bournemouth vicinity had a good supply. They were, unfortunately, there to cater to the summer holiday trade. My room was bitterly cold.

It was that very cold that got me up early one morning as the sky lightened in the east. Rather than freeze in bed, I decided to take a brisk walk on Portland Bill, of which the majority of the land is a conservation area. By the time I'd got near the lighthouse on the southern tip, the edge of the sun was rising over the water of the channel. The grass clinging to the chalk of the bill was wet with a rime of melting frost. A few sheep

were unenthusiastically seeking the best of this grass while presenting a well-wooled rear to the stiff breeze.

I caught the flash of a reflection of the sun. Looking, I caught it again. It had come from on the water, about a kilometer out in the channel. For some seconds I couldn't see anything, then another flash. And it had moved slightly. The lighthouse gave me a fixed reference, otherwise I would not have spotted the motion.

So, what was it? Something floating on the surface? It had moved counter to the prevailing breeze this particular morning. As I watched for a minute or so more, I realized that I could be seeing a periscope lens. This was at a time when tensions with the Soviets were high.

I found the roadway to the lighthouse and headed away from that structure back towards Southwell at a fast walk. By the time I got to the guard-house of the main gate, I was no longer chilled.

After I'd explained who I was and who I was working with and told my story, the guard on duty agreed to pass my concern up the chain of command. There was clearly skepticism, but at the second level of responsibility whoever was at the other end of the telephone asked to talk to me. I related what I had seen, and my concern that I had seen movement that was counter to the wind direction, so that some floating bottle was somewhat unlikely. Whoever I talked to seemed rather pleased that I was able to give a quite precise location relative to the lighthouse. I was told that "someone would look into it". Indeed, I heard a Sea King taking off from the Naval yard shortly after.

It turned out that there were some experiments going on that the Russians were rather interested in learning about. I learned later in the day that the helicopter and a research launch that had some pretty good acoustic gear were sent out and picked up something underwater by means of some rather active pinging. The launch also had a transducer and a tape player and broadcast a rousing turn of the Beatles "Yellow Submarine" followed by "Back in the USSR". Later in the day, we calculated that the volume was loud enough that the lyrics would be easily heard inside the submarine. By the time of the musical interlude, a couple of Royal Navy frigates were in the area. The research launch returned to the dock while the frigates followed the target to the south of Ireland before they either lost it or decided the Atlantic in January is uncomfortable.

I was brought back to the present by Jackie suggesting a well distanced cup of tea outside. Our walking route was nearly complete. I was glad of the May sun.

J C Nash ©2021-5-25



Portland Bill, late December 1968

The Whole Truth

The coffee klatch members have all had their first Covid shots and we're all hoping to get the second sooner rather than later. Which means we still either meet online or in a very loose, and probably rule-bending, clump in the park. This week was online.

Marcy sort of lit the fire of the discussion by saying "I guess the Kam-ploops report of unmarked graves is going to be all we hear about for the next few weeks."

Alvin took a bit of offence and responded "But it's a big stain on Canada's history."

Jeff reacted by saying "Didn't that train leave a long time ago. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had quite a bit of testimony that there were burials, and there was an article four years ago in the Toronto Star by a prof. at Mount Royal University that gave a good account of how John A. Macdonald's government set up the residential schools, with quotes from documents and Hansard. Seems they thought the Americans' aggressive integration approach and boarding schools were a great idea. Obviously racist, but in the full spirit of the "sun never sets" flag waving. And pretty soon after Canada set up its own schools, there were more deaths than expected."

"You mean deaths were expected?" Marcy asked.

"It was the 19th century," Jeff answered. "Around that time the germ theory of disease was being debated, Dr. Semmelweis was pilloried for promoting hand washing by doctors, and infectious diseases were major killers of people of all ages, but particularly poor people, those with a feeble diet and crowded, dirty housing. Our indigenous people ticked a lot of the boxes, and the Europeans brought in a few extra nasties that the locals hadn't much resistance to. Apart from the politically well-connected, the immigrants were scrambling themselves to put food on the table."

Alvin piped up "You remember me talking about my friend Ria who was in Jap camps in the War. She once told me she had a couple of aunts who were in boarding school in Holland when the First War broke out. Shipping was disrupted so their family was stuck in Indonesia. Ria says she's seen letters they sent, not quite saying conditions were bad in the school, likely because the letters were read by school staff. But both died of what Ria thinks was tuberculosis, likely enhanced by unheated accommodation and poor food. The Netherlands was neutral in the Great War, so poor food was

a school matter, not a question of availability.”

Jeff added “In the same period, the Brits were shipping thousands of kids to the colonies from workhouses and orphanages. Do-gooders who thought they knew better or preferred dead Christian souls to healthy pagans. They told a pack of lies and did untold damage. Kids informed that parents were departed. Parents that kids had died. And in the so-called colonies it’s likely the majority of those who took in the kids exploited, abused, debased or otherwise damaged the poor Home Children and any others they could take advantage of. And most of those kids weren’t indigenous. There’s a pair of mass graves in Park Lawn Cemetery in Etobicoke with 75 kids in them. And I’ll bet there are some unmarked and undocumented graves behind a few barns around the country. Remember, we didn’t have radio or the internet then, and the newspapers were owned by the rich and staffed by people who wanted to keep a good job.”

Marcy said “I was reading a book about the Irish hedge schools. The middle of the 1800s was when governments started to take an interest in schooling, but they wanted to push a party line, and in Ireland that wasn’t a Catholic one.”

“Nothing new there,” Alvin said. “The Jesuits were doing much the same from the Catholic side where they could set up their institutions. People always fight over the curriculum and the purpose of schools. Scopes Monkey trial in the States. Re-education camps in Vietnam. And who knows what right now in Tibet or the Xinjiang Uyghur area of China.”

I hadn’t said anything yet. Indeed, not even a hello, since Marcy was hosting the online meeting. But it felt like some sort of attempt at consensus was in order.

“So is there a balance between Marcy’s complaint that there’ll be more noise than substance and Jeff and Alvin’s observations that the stories are already out there, but not well-known or well-understood and with a paucity of data and effort to provide proper documentation? That is, do we need some attempt to provide accurate data on the kids and a more complete panorama of the age in which the residential schools were set up along with the Home Children, various wars, and colonial and imperial trumpet-blowing?”

“Something like that would be better than empty apologies. Might help folk get a better view of how things happened,” Marcy opined.

Jeff grumbled, “Could do some good. Hardly anyone younger than us remembers that the natives didn’t get the vote until around 1960. And we called them Indians until pretty recently. In loads of films like "Stage Coach" they were the bad guys. Perhaps the worst thing about how they were portrayed is that they were mostly without an identity. Just Hollywood extras, paid by the day, who probably earned less than the horses and were down-on-their-luck immigrants rather than genuine native North Americans.”

Marcy wasn't going to be denied a final swipe. She said "Sure looks like there'll be some great opportunities for being a Victimhood Advisor."

J C Nash ©2021-06-06

Bloody Murder

I played hooky from the online coffee klatch this week. Well, I did have the video in a small window at one side of the screen, but I opened a second browser to watch the Canadiens beat the Golden Knights. Ice hockey when it was 45 Celsius outside. Go figure!

Well, hockey wasn't the only reason I didn't involve myself in the online klatch. And since we use Zoom, it would only have been an overlap of a few minutes, but Marcy got us off on the subject of murder. Well, murder mysteries. She likes the British ones. And of their genre, I guess the Brits do the best. But I ask you, how can a few villages in Somerset – well I think it's Somerset – have so many murders. The whole of England and Wales only get about 700 a year, and there's one a week in a set of rural settlements with a pretty small population that all have Midsomer in their name.

And the complexity of the stories. Well, I suppose they want enough material to fill 60 to 90 minutes. Man bashes wife over head with bust of Beethoven when she tries to change the channel during Chelsea vs. Leicester in the FA Cup won't make the grade. Might not even make the evening news. Even if they made it a musical with singing barristers in the Old Bailey you couldn't get more than 20 minutes. Of course, Gilbert and Sullivan did a good job on that type of thing with "Make the punishment fit the crime" in the Mikado.

Moreover, most murders do come down to a bit of the old "end of the rope" when someone snaps and does something extreme. Unless you want to look at gangland strife. That's generally uneducated young men with no visible source of income who drive cars that cost about \$100,000 getting shot by similar young men in slightly different versions of the same vehicles that they should not be able to afford. It might be interesting if it weren't so boringly sad. Almost enough to make one ponder whether people should be subject to recalls like vehicles to get them off the road, so to speak.

Enough thinking about that. Got to get back to proper organized violence. The second period is about to start.

J C Nash ©2021-06-17

Bunny rabbit

The other night on the coffee klatch online get-together, Marcy asked if any of us had some empty clear plastic pop bottles. She wanted them to make protectors for her plants. I had a few, so I said I'd take them over.

When I got to Marcy's, she invited me to sit on the deck and have a coffee. Her husband, Michael, was out at a medical appointment. Our group is helping sustain the large health care budget these days.

Normally, Marcy isn't my favourite company, but it was a nice day, so I accepted. She disappeared indoors to make the coffee. I sat down in one of the rather comfortable chairs on the deck and enjoyed the warm but not too hot day and the flowers in the garden border to the deck. There were younger plants – seedlings really – and I could see that some had the barrel of pop bottles protecting them. The top and bottom had been cut off. The plant could grow up to about 6 or 8 inches depending on the type of bottle used. There were some plants where the leaves were now poking out the top of the clear plastic cylinder.

As I was looking, a small rabbit edged out from under the deck. Not the jackrabbit type, but the modest round variety. Possibly a juvenile, but just as likely a small sub-species. Very cute.

The rabbit took a look at me and stopped dead. After a few seconds, it decided I wasn't an immediate threat and moved to one of the plastic cylinders, raised itself on its hind legs so it could reach the leaves poking out the top and quickly munched them all.

"Out of there!" Marcy roared behind me. She quickly put down a tray on a small table and rushed to the edge of the deck. The rabbit hopped away a few feet, then turned to sit and look at us.

"Damned rabbits. They took all the first batch of sunflower seedlings," Marcy said. "That's why I need the bottles, but they only protect for a while. But your bigger ones will let the plants get higher where the rabbit probably can't get them."

I commiserated and said I was glad to help out. We had coffee and some rather nice Nanaimo bars Marcy had made. The rabbit disappeared under a bush.

"I feel like Elmer Fudd trying to stop Bugs Bunny," Marcy said.

"No doubt the inspiration for the cartoon was a situation like you have now," I answered, then added, "But I don't think Bugs is nearly as cute as

the one we just saw.”

J C Nash ©2021-06-24

Forever Young

It looks like the coffee shop may be opening up again soon. Well, they've already got the patio going and the take-out counter has been doing a bit better recently since they split the order window from the pickup station and figured out some rope pathways that let people distance nicely between these.

Today wasn't a regular klatch day. And, of course, I'm not really a member, just co-opted by the group by accident. I picked up a latte and went across the street to my favourite bench. It has an "Single person or family" sign. Wonder when they'll take those down.

A robin hopped up almost to the side of the bench, pecked the ground vigorously and came up with its vermivorous breakfast. Not my cup of tea – or latte. But maybe the bird would think the same of some of the things I like. Pity they apparently don't like those pests the gypsy moth caterpillars.

I was still watching the robin, or rather a robin, since I couldn't really tell if it was the one that I first saw, when I heard Alvin behind me say "Nice morning, isn't it?"

Alvin had a latte too. I said "Yes, it is nice." Then I added "Didn't think you drank lattes."

"Sometimes they're a little less harsh on the aging stomach."

Well, I could agree with that.

Alvin had a coat over his arm. He said "Drape this over that notice then scoot down the other end of the bench and we'll be distanced and hopefully no officious twit will bother us."

We did this, and by sitting a bit awkwardly were pretty close to two metres apart. From the online sessions, I knew we were all well into our double vaccination period.

"Keeping busy?" I asked.

"Yep. With things opening up again – at least for a while – I've been trying to catch up with family. Had dinner on the balcony at my granddaughter's last night."

"Is she the one who just graduated nursing as the pandemic took hold?"

"Yes. She's had a pretty heavy time, but now taking a bit of time off to recuperate. Think it worried her how she might have aged. I even noticed some of what I call Oil of Delay in her bathroom, and she's not yet 25."

"Good one! Yes, the pursuit of youth. I wonder what fraction of GDP

goes to lotions, potions, special diets, exercise regimes, crazy mental and magical rituals, and unnecessary surgery. Jackie made me take her to the Fountain of Youth Historical Park in St. Augustine last time we were in Florida, so it's not a new phenomenon."

Alvin said "Been going on a while. And there's stories like Wilde's *Dorian Gray*."

"Yes. That was Oscar Wilde's only novel. Odd, don't you think?"

"I always thought the moral balance of the story would have been better served if Dorian had got younger as the painting aged. You know, the character goes from being an attractive young adult to a snotty teenager as the painting balances it out by getting wrinkled and decrepit."

"You mean to make it clear that trying to stay young should be punished by being a lose-lose proposition?"

"Yeah, precisely," Alvin said. "The whole effort is on appearance. I can understand taking a reasonable try at remaining healthy, but all the attempts to be young when you're not mean you are wasting the time you have to live and to enjoy that time."

"For that sentiment, I'd better offer you this chocolate croissant," I said. I had meant to take it home for Jackie, but I could get another, and Alvin had reminded me of what was important.

J C Nash ©2021-07-21

Animal Insanity

This year rabbits and squirrels are doing well. Maybe the pandemic has so many humans out and about to overcome cabin fever that the foxes and coyotes are being scared away by the people or their dogs. Or perhaps the building of a new subdivision a few hundred metres away has deprived them of enough habitat that the predators have moved further out, while the rabbits can enjoy the protection of decks and garden shed foundations as well as a banquet of fresh garden plantings.

This Monday, I took my walk early. The forest fires in Northern Ontario are making the air bad, to the extent I can sense the onset of what my ophthalmologist terms lippitude, a big word for sore eyes. However, I wasn't too bothered on my walk.

I didn't pick up a latte, since Jackie had made unhappy comments about my empty cup the other day. The unhappiness was only nominally about bringing home trash, with added opprobrium for non-recyclable components. The real issue was that I'd had a nice coffee and she hadn't. Almost as if I'd done the **Double Exposure** line "I'm Adrienne Clarkson and you're not", or rather "I had a latte and you didn't". One has to hold on to a few brownie points to cash in on a rainy day.

I'd have a coffee another time. On this occasion, I wanted to get to the other side of the park to watch some rabbits. There was one scrawny specimen that was behaving very oddly. It's now high summer, not the breeding season of the March Hare.

Last two times I'd walked by this particular section of the park – a small clearing surrounded by a few scattered trees and bushes with a bench where I liked to sit and relax – this rabbit had been doing odd things. Like rolling on his back like a dog might do. Or trying to climb a tree, with obvious lack of success. At least obvious if you know rabbits.

This rabbit made me think about insanity. Humans have lots of words for those who've lost, or never had, the capacity for coherent thinking: imbecile, idiot, madman, lunatic, etc. And adjectives like insane, mad, demented, psychotic, and so on.

But do animals recognize such a state? We know rabies, and even carry the word "rabid" over to some aspects of human madness. And was this rabbit mad? I should have Googled rabies in rabbits.

However, there's the philosophical question: Can normal animals under-

stand when others have lost some aspect of their behavioural control? Even in the human world, we have great difficulty truly deciding who is sane. Or not. There's a lot of territory between the first hints of eccentricity and complete absence of any sign of rational thought, and the vast proportion of states in that space are primarily harmless to the individual or their social context. Disturbing maybe, due to the perceived strangeness of behaviour, but not representing a measurable risk. Clearly rabies would pose a risk, but crazy running around doesn't.

I got to the clearing, but realized I wouldn't learn much more from my strange rabbit. A pair of crows were busy with the recycling of his or her corpse. How it had died wasn't clear, but it was under a high horizontal branch of the largest tree.

Maybe in some absurd distortion of the general rules of life, the rabbit had managed to climb the tree, but then fallen. Or was the distortion merely in my own thinking.

John C. Nash ©2021-07-28

A False Pride

Today was the usual coffee klatsch day, but we've decided to try out some alternative venues. Our regular place has more or less been taken over by the owner's nephew, a young kid who has lots of ideas. Bad ideas, mostly. The only good one might be the tent, like many other places during the pandemic, so patrons can be spaced appropriately. Which would be fine, except the young guy's friends show a flagrant disregard for distancing and numbers.

Jason – that's the kid's name – has big plans to rebrand the coffee shop. He wants to attract the well-heeled female crowd for tea. Well, that's actually TEA with all capital letters, tiny sandwiches, microscopic cakes and eye-watering prices. He's thinking of calling it Her Majesty's Demesne. Pronounced, as I did, deh-mayn, not deemseh. Though it might become de mess if he's not wiser.

Turned out the explorers of a new place ended up being just Alvin and me. Still, we had a good gripe about Jason's follies. And found a strange place in an old 1950s service station. Called The Filling Station. They've even kept the service pit – you know, the hole in the floor where the mechanic could work on the lower part of a vehicle without having to lift it. They've put heavy plexiglass in place as a floor and some discreet lights in the pit. Clever.

Being an old service station, it already had washrooms, though thankfully they've cleaned them up. Service station facilities were never the greatest, and frequently an abomination.

A big plus for the place is that the large doors can be opened up, providing plenty of ventilation, and they've put out some canvas-roofed table shades. You know, the type that uses four pipes that bend to meet in the center and have a canvas roof but no sides. So plenty of spacing. The old reception counter is now where the big espresso machine is situated. They don't have a big selection of things to eat, but seem to have properly made versions of what they do provide, including one of my favourites, the chocolate croissant.

Alvin and I got there at the same time and the young woman serving motioned to a table she had just sprayed and wiped with disinfectant. Chairs too. Hope that stuff doesn't stain my khaki pants. Or dissolve them. Had that happen once in high school with a chemistry experiment that got outside

the test tube. And that was in the days when jeans with frayed bits weren't part of the fashion scene. Pretty awkward.

Alvin seemed agitated, so I asked him if he were OK. He said yes, but not very convincingly. After about a minute, he couldn't contain himself any longer.

"It's the couple across the street. Been married about 10 years, both a bit under 40. Turns out both were cheating on the other. And they found out when they turned up at the same hotel but with different room-mates, so to speak."

"Seems like neither party has much to complain about," I proffered as a comment I knew was unlikely to be close to the truth.

"You'd think the anger and shame would be pretty equally shared, wouldn't you?" Alvin said, "but it seems each of them is really mad that they weren't the one getting away with a bit on the side. So much so, they've got a close approximation to a good war going on, and neither will move out."

"Good recipe for trouble," I mumbled through the crumbs of my croissant.

"Yep. Right down to nasty pranks, except things can go wrong."

"Really?" I encouraged.

"Yes. Seems the wife called a towing company to say her car – but she meant the husband's – needed some specialty work from a shop a long way away. She used his credit card number, and they came like she asked, but the idiot in the truck towed her car instead."

"Better have another coffee," I suggested.

John C. Nash ©2021-07-28

Restart

The pandemic is far from over, but some things are starting to come back to life. The coffee shop we were going to isn't welcoming any more, not since the owner's nephew took over and tried to make it a Millennial Magnet.

Geoff, despite his cane, found one a bit further away, with a tent out front. We're all vaccinated with the double shot etc., but we'd prefer to stay out of the danger zone, so we're now at "High on Coffee", and Barbara, the forty-something tattooed lady behind the counter is friendly and chatty, and though they don't have chocolate croissants, I think I can get hooked on their cheese crusties. So we're sort of restarting the klatch, or at least giving it a try.

We were there this morning. Alvin seemed a bit quiet, enough that even Marcy said "You OK Alvin?"

"Yeah, sure. Just a bit thoughtful."

"That could be dangerous," Geoff said, though I think he was maybe referring to himself.

"Just trying to not to be too much of a bore these days," Alvin said. "With different friends and relatives dying all over the place, you can start to try to tell all their stories before your own glass runs out. But it's easy to rabbit on."

Alvin had a point. I didn't mind being known as a curmudgeon. Almost a badge of honour. But a curmudgeon and a bore. Hmm. That could be pretty ghastly.

Marcy said "You mean to your kids and grandkids?"

"Afraid it gets to be to anyone who seems to listen. But I'm working on keeping a little quieter."

Geoff offered "Well, around us, you can rattle on. We're old enough friends to tell you to put a cork in it, especially if we know why. And I've got to admit, I sometimes wonder how to tell my family some of the stories that they'll never find on TVO documentaries. Or the dark web."

"Guess that boring folk actually works against having them learn the stories," Marcy said.

"Yes, that is part of what worries me," Alvin said.

"So what are you doing about it?" Geoff asked.

"I've started writing up the stories as letters to Sophie."

Now some time ago Alvin mentioned that his 18 year old daughter died

in a road crash caused by a drunk driver. Alvin and Margaret had married at 19 and 18 themselves, and the death of their daughter led to a breakup.

“But –” Marcy started to say then hesitated. I was afraid she’d bring up the fact that Sophie is dead, but then she continued “That’s a good idea. You can tell the story to someone who is of the next generation.”

I agreed with that sentiment, but asked “How are you getting the stories in front of people who should read them?”

“There’s a couple of web sites that publish such things. If I get them to the state of a book, then obooko.com out of the UK will work. For the moment, the National Capital Freenet has web space for each account holder. And I’m putting them on archive.org as community texts.”

Good for Alvin. But now I was thinking about how I tell stories. And bore the very people I shouldn’t. It was time to do something similar to what Alvin was doing.

At the same time, I realized that I needed to go home and give Jackie a hug. She might wonder why, on this particular day, I’m coming home from coffee and giving her one. I’ll just tell her she’s important to me, and I want her to know it.

Maybe it’s also time to admit I’m an official member of the coffee klatsch.

J C Nash ©2021-9-27

La Dentelle

We don't have much lace around our house now. It used to be an important part of setting up a household. Part of the wedding dress. On the tablecloths, fancy curtains and doilies that were wedding presents.

Haven't used tablecloths except once or twice for the last decade. Doilies? Can't remember when one of those was needed on a tea tray or sideboard.

I do remember seeing lots of lace in Belgium in 1979. Big part of the tourist scene there at the time. Not so much now.

Hand made lace has to have one of the slowest production processes on earth, especially bobbin lace. Needle lace is a bit quicker, and you could probably get a good war going between Venice and Flanders on that topic if anyone were seriously interested any more.

Tatting is similar. Hours of work for a tiny piece of flimsy cloth. One woman started a business to try to broaden the market for her product in the form of tiny women's bathing suits. She reversed the familiar idiom of an action in response to something you don't like. You know, "tat for ...". Oh. I think the moderator is getting upset. And he won't be happy if I use the Dutch word for lace – spelled K A N T, but pronounced ... well, you get the idea.

But I started out to write something about the romance of lace. Somehow I was thinking of a time about a quarter century ago when I was driving from Utrecht to Leuven to pick up my wife from a conference she was attending. Stopped in Brussels – a silly choice given the parking situation, but I found a space miles from where I wanted to find a lace shop. Walked and walked, then found a sign in two languages that said "Vacances / Vakantie". And a long walk back.

It worked out all right, though. I found a restaurant in Leuven that had "Paling in t'groen" and my gal was really happy I had found it and took her there. Not to everyone's taste. Eel in a cream parsley sauce, giving it a bright green colour. And eel has now become super expensive. I worked out that if you bought smoked eel at Schiphol airport in a gift pack in 2017, it was a dollar a gram. Almost as expensive as hand made bobbin lace.

John C. Nash ©2022-02-10
