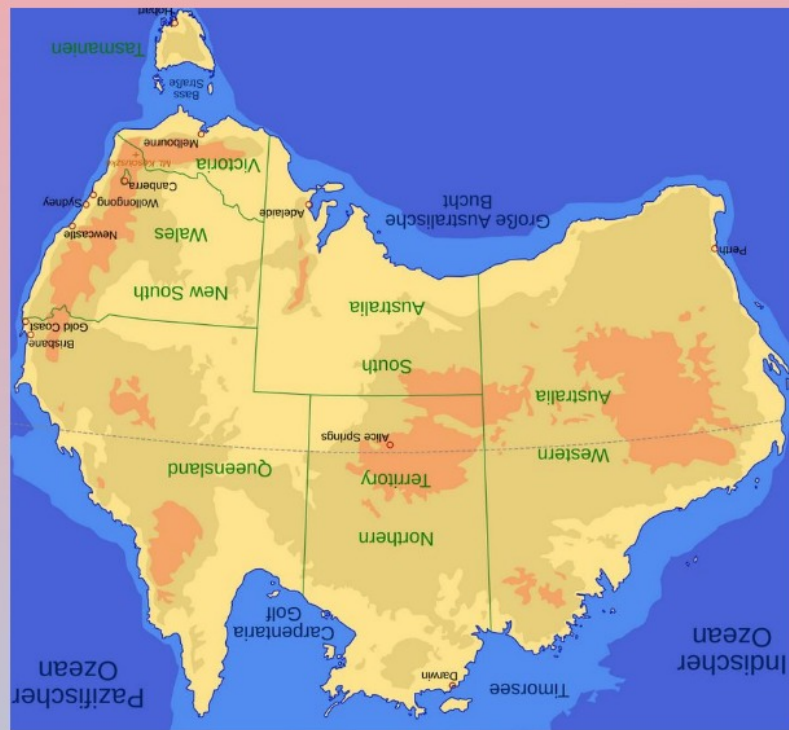


# Upside Down



John C. Nash

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*John C. Nash*

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Life might be like a highway, but for most people there are the bumps, traffic jams, potholes and icy patches thrown up by chance, villains and idiots. Our encounters with the rough patches can toss us around. Sometimes we can try to escape by exiting the road for a while, seeking to reset ourselves. This has its own hazards, as we try to recover from being upside down.

*Upside Down* is a work of fiction. Characters and situations are inventions, though geography and related matters are based on publicly available information.

*John C. Nash*, Ottawa, 2025

## Three men go into a bar

“An Englishman, an American, and an Australian go into a bar in an outback town and order beer. Being the outback, there’s lots of flies and one lands in each beer.”

I was on an airplane from Singapore to Perth, and the Englishman in the next seat, who had been drinking heavily since take-off, had descended to telling jokes, or at least to trying to tell jokes.

My essential silence since take-off had not, as far as I could tell, been noticed by the man, and he had carried on a completely one-sided conversation with me the full time, and was not stopping now.

“The American goes ‘Eeeugh’ and pushes his beer away. The Englishman – like me – flicks the fly out of his beer, but the Ozzie picks up the fly by its wings and says ”Spit it out!””

Needless to say, the man then roared with laughter. Several people around us in Super-Economy glared at him, and perhaps also at me, as if I had any influence on him. He’d been fairly loud all flight, and we still had a couple of hours to go in the nearly five and a half the flight took.

Two stewardesses were just up the aisle from us. I think they were debating whether to come and ask the man to be quiet. One of the stewardesses came down the aisle and said to me “Professor McNab. Do you have a connection in Perth? There are two terminals, and it’s helpful if we have an agent guide you to the shuttle bus.”

“No. I’m ending my journey in Perth,” I replied. “It’s been a long one, so I’ll try to rest for a while.”

I realized that the stewardess had avoided explicitly asking the Englishman to shut up. He was clearly about to ask her for another drink, but just at that moment the call light went on and there was a ping and she rushed away. If I was right, the other stewardess had arranged for that.

I was in the window seat, and given we were flying south and it was now mid-afternoon, I could have the shade up slightly and look out without making movie watching difficult for others. Before the man in the next seat could say anything, I turned to the window and made sure that it was clear I was looking out. Truthfully, though there was hardly any cloud cover, the sandy, dry land below was not filled with very interesting detail. Nevertheless, the passing topography had a soporific quality I welcomed. Mercifully, the Englishman didn’t try to bother me.

My thoughts returned, as they had every day, every hour for the last couple of years, to the breakdown of my marriage of 16 years. Three days before my fortieth birthday, the divorce was finalized. A week later I left for this trip, my first sabbatical after a decade as an academic. I suppose I was fortunate. I had managed to get one of the ”real” jobs that led to tenure and hence rights to a sabbatical. I was coming to Perth to research comparisons between its development as a community with that of Victoria BC. Both cities evolved as British-origin colonies over the 19th and then the 20th centuries, though with somewhat different stories.

Zelda and I didn't have any kids, which was fortunate. And unlike a lot of divorces, ours didn't have a trail of infidelities or episodes of abuse or violence, unless you include the traffic pile-up some years ago in a blizzard white-out where Zelda was injured. She had a nasty break in her leg. It was a time when doctors were being sold on the wonders of Oxycontin as a pain killer. Unfortunately, like with many other patients, the effect of this drug was that Zelda stopped being the Zelda I'd married. She probably became a stranger to herself, but in the seeming sanity of a solid dose of the junk, she instructed a lawyer and I'm now unwillingly single. Though perhaps I would not willingly have stayed with Zelda, since for some long, long months I never knew who I would encounter coming home or waking up in the morning.

So, here I was, on a 'plane half-way round the globe from my erstwhile home. Hell, I didn't have a home. We'd sold it and split the relatively meagre proceeds. Meagre because lawyers took a good portion of our shared wealth. At least I had a job and a salary.

The sabbatical seemed like a chance for a fresh start, but I had not packed any enthusiasm. I felt emotionally exhausted. Moreover, my intellectual energy seemed to have disappeared during the divorce proceedings. Perhaps it would come back. I'd better try, or most of the next year was going to be awkwardly uncomfortable.

Notice I didn't say unhappy. That was, at the moment, a given.

Somehow looking out the window had used up over 90 minutes, as I heard and felt the engines spin down as we started the descent into Perth. Time to paste on a cheerful face and do my best to deceive folk that I was enjoying what is a great privilege in any person's career.

## Feet on the ground

The pilot managed a smooth landing. As we got to the gate, I expected there would be a delay while Australian government agriculture workers sprayed for insects. A few years before, a colleague had said how much that upset his wife and children. However, we were now over a decade into the 21st century, and things must have changed. I found out later that the airlines spray the overhead bins with a residual insecticide at least every 8 weeks, or else have to follow other protocols. One less bother for a tired passenger.

We still had immigration and customs. The drunken Englishman managed to annoy one of the customs or agriculture agents and I saw his suitcase contents being spread out on the inspection table and proximate floor. He wasn't happy, and his former jollity now had morphed into belligerence, which of course got him more polite but firm inconvenience.

By this time I was leaving the customs hall. I'd been cleared pretty quickly. First, I'd talked to some people who had taken sabbaticals in Australia, so I knew to avoid any foodstuff in my luggage. When I was asked "Any food?", I was able to say that I'd learned from colleagues to ensure there was none.

"Alcohol or tobacco?"

“I don’t smoke, nor like to be around it, and I believe wine is cheaper here than outside. I rarely drink spirits.”

“But you’ve marked that you’re carrying more than \$10,000. Can you explain?”

“I’m here for almost a year on sabbatical at the University of Western Australia. I’ve got \$15,000 Canadian in bank drafts – 6, 6 and 3 so I can take home what I don’t use. Plus I’ve approximately a couple of thousand in Canadian cash, three thousand in Australian cash, a thousand in US, plus a small amount of Singapore currency left over, but that’s well under \$100 Australian.”

“You’ll probably need a bit more than that for the full year, but no doubt can have it transferred as needed. Since the majority is in drafts, which are generally not negotiable like cash, you likely didn’t need to make the over-\$10,000 declaration, but that you did makes things easier for everyone. Have a good sabbatical, Professor McNab.”

Outside the customs hall, I looked around at the waiting crowd. It took me ten seconds or so before I saw a cardboard sign “Prof. McNab” and went over to the young man holding it.

“Hi, I’m Ian McNab. Louise’ email said someone would meet me, and I appreciate it very much.”

“Gordon. Gordon Healy. I’m a Ph.D. student, and I have an old Toyota, so Louise gets me to do airport duty. I get a per kilometer rate that covers a good deal more than just my petrol. And she makes sure I get first dibs on any barman jobs when there’s a reception. That all the luggage you have?”

“Yeah. Decided to travel as light as possible. Probably need to buy some casual clothes, and also hope nothing needs black tie.”

I had one fairly large suitcase, a backpack and a computer bag. Not a lot for a year away, but I figured I’d pick up odds and ends. I did have a decent winter coat, and I’d put a good scarf, toque and gloves in the pockets and sleeves, then found a thin nylon fold-up bag to stuff the coat in for ease of carrying. The airline didn’t make any comment that this might be a technical breach of the baggage allowance. I suspect they realized the bag meant stuff wouldn’t fall out, so less work for staff trying to find things in the overhead bin.

Gordon led the way outside. After Singapore, the late June temperature in Perth was decidedly chilly. Gordon had a jacket on. My Northern Hemisphere mind was having trouble believing it was mid-winter here. I had a decent windbreaker in my luggage, as well as a couple of sweaters, one thick and one less so. Ian said “You’ll probably want your coat. You’re not the first person I’ve met off the Singapore flight.”

“Thanks.”

We stopped while I got the coat out and put it on, then proceeded to the parking area.

“Should I pay the parking?” I asked.

“Nah. The Department does this welcome bit. Makes life a lot easier for visitors. But you’ll need to arrange your own exit,” he said with a chuckle.

“No problem. I’d thought I’d have to take a taxi, and U W A seems to be quite a way from the airport.”

“It is a bit.”

We found Gordon’s car. Older, but clearly well-kept. For some reason we were both quiet for a few minutes. At a traffic light, the car ahead took several seconds to get going. Gordon said “WA is supposed to stand for Western Australia, but a lot of folk say it really means ‘Wait Awhile’. You’ll find people slow off the mark from traffic lights and things like that.”

“Do I sense you aren’t from around here?” I asked.

“Melbourne. But I actually like it here, though it’s a long way from anywhere else.”

Gordon had hit the nail on the head. It was why I chose Perth. A long way from anywhere else. The nearest major Australian city, Adelaide, was three hours away by jetliner. A bit over two-thirds of the roughly three million Western Australians lived in the urban island that was Perth. It suited me to be a long way from anywhere for a while. Truthfully, despite Perth having five decent universities, there was no critical reason I needed to come here to pursue my scholarly work.

Gordon, unlike my airplane neighbour, didn’t insist on chatting, and I let my mind review how I’d got here.

Over the past year, I’d written to several of the institutions about coming for sabbatical. There was haggling – all but U W A wanted me to essentially take a full course load, though they did offer some payment. That would add bureaucratic trouble relating to taxation for me, and the teaching work would be antithetic to a sabbatical. In fact, preparing new courses would make for a doubly heavy burden. With U W A I negotiated that I’d offer a set of half a dozen seminars over two terms, as well as do the academic arrangements on the History Department main seminars. Not too heavy, and give me reason to contact and communicate with lots of people. I’d get to camp in the office of one of their own profs who was spending the year in the UK. The man in question had hoped I’d take on his suburban house, but it was a five-bedroom, three-bathroom, triple garage and swimming pool palace. Just the utilities would be more than I could possibly cover.

Already the bank drafts and foreign currency had depleted my bank account. However, while I’d been travelling with layovers of a week each in Amsterdam and Singapore I should have had a salary deposit. The layovers were partly touristic, but mostly to avoid arriving with serious jet lag. The money I’d brought in drafts and cash would hopefully be enough to cover my main needs and wants here, but I had a Visa and a Mastercard. I’d set up online banking so I could pay the bills. I intended to use the credit cards for travel expenses around Australia, as well as purchases from shops and restaurants. With a little caution, I’d have enough money.

Being away for a year posed a few other problems, in particular filing income tax in April of the following calendar year. I didn’t have a real residence in Canada, though my mother kindly agreed to let me use her address. This was about 100 km from where I taught, so I wouldn’t be going back to live there, but it would serve as my Canadian mailing address. I’d given her a letter of authorization so she could receive deliveries needing a signature and she could



check the contents. Moreover, she would forward tax slips to an accountant I'd used this year, who I'd deliberately chosen because the accountant's office was local to Mom. My taxes should not be too complicated – I didn't have many investments or complicated deductions. The accountant told me to get the most out of my sabbatical, as the main thing was to file a tax return on time, which she would do. Corrections could be made later, though there'd be penalties if much were owing. As long as my home institution did the proper salary and remittance calculations, I shouldn't owe anything.

It was a pity mother didn't use email. Fortunately, her neighbour and friend, Rosalie, who was also her local hairdresser, did. I was becoming good friends with Rosalie as a result, a cheerful woman in her fifties, originally from Jamaica, who had a Master's degree in literature. When she'd come to Canada as a young graduate, she used her hairdressing skills while trying to get a teaching certificate. By the time she was able to apply for teaching jobs, her salon offered a more attractive occupation.

You'll probably be aware I'm sometimes preoccupied with details. I didn't want surprises, and had made and discarded many lists when getting ready for this year away. And I was clearly reviewing a mental version of such a list while Gordon was driving me to wherever I was staying.

I realized Gordon had said something.

"Sorry I missed what you said. Miles away."

"Not surprising. You must be jet lagged."

"Not too bad. I took a week in Amsterdam and a week in Singapore, and the latter is more or less in the same time zone as here. But what were you saying?"

"Just asking if the place you're going is where you plan to spend the year. It offers long term studio apartments as well as short term stays."

"Louise – I don't think I can pronounce her last name – recommended it for a few days, but said the long term rates are 15 to 20 percent higher than I'd likely get elsewhere. I booked for a week so I could look around."

"Yeah. Louise probably has that about right. We're lucky to have her. Really competent. Tells the Department Head what to do, and he's smart enough to just do what she says. Married to a fellow with a Polish name, but I think third generation. The grand-father-in-law was with RAF 303 squadron."

"The ones famous for the highest kill rate in the Battle of Britain?"

"Yeah. Though I think he was actually ground crew. Louise mentioned once how he met an Australian nurse and became a war-husband. Apparently him and several hundred women on an immigration ship after the War."

"Like Cary Grant in 'I was a male war bride'. Actually Canada got 45 war-grooms. Forget where I read that."

"A useful memory skill since you're a historian," Gordon said.

"Touché."

"Actually, I know one place that might be available and worth a look. I'll leave a message for you with Louise once I've checked, unless you'd prefer I didn't."

“Please do,” I replied, but was grateful for Gordon allowing me to refuse the favour. I realized he would be a valuable friend here. Have to see what I could do to repay his friendliness without seeming too obvious.

## Finding home

We got to the apartment hotel after 4 in the afternoon. I thanked Gordon and registered, noting that the office closed at 5:30. I found my apartment, set my luggage down, took off my shoes and flopped on the bed. What should I do now?

I’d need some food and drink. The information online about the apartment said there was a shopping centre a couple of minutes away. Maybe they closed soon. Better be safe than sorry.

I got up, having hardly lain down, and found the nylon bag I’d used for my coat. I was about to put on that garment when I decided my windbreaker and a sweater would be more comfortable. I opened my suitcase and found those. Then realized I should use the toilet. In doing so, I was able to put on the money belt I had where I could keep money and documents. Did the apartment have a safe? Find out later.

The Broadway Fair shopping centre seemed like a place I’d be visiting a lot. I found the IGA and got instant coffee, milk, bread, butter, jam, cheese, and – of course – Vegemite. When in Rome, etc. Should I get eggs? Decided yes. Odd. They weren’t refrigerated. Oh. Like Europe, they would not wash them and then they’d keep at room temperature. Also got some tomatoes, some bananas and some apples. I’d not starve, though tonight I decided I’d get something out.

After getting back to the apartment and putting the food away, I tried out the wifi and sent Rosalie a “safely arrived” message. I didn’t have a mobile phone, as it wasn’t clear what technical standards were in play. In the decade since Y2K things were changing quite rapidly. If I really wanted a mobile, I’d get it here. Otherwise I’d use long distance calling cards using special numbers. Should look into that soon, as Mom would no doubt appreciate my calling her.

Being the fusspot I am, I took out a small notepad I try to carry and wrote the date on a new page and wrote ‘phone card’. The first todo list here.

Given it was winter, it was already dark out. There were people about on Broadway, so I didn’t feel concerned about personal safety. Should have asked Gordon about that, I suppose. I walked south past the shopping centre to explore for restaurants. After passing a couple of places, I saw a seafood restaurant and went in. Despite some interesting offerings, I chose fish and chips, which I likely could have found elsewhere. Somehow fish and chips fitted my mood, providing familiarity in this new place.

## Settling in

I didn't set an alarm. After dinner I'd walked to the U W A campus, and found the building where History was supposed to be located. I'd written down Louise' full name in my notebook in case I needed to look her up. Universities often had quite Byzantine organizational structures, and finding who was in charge of what could be a challenge.

My list for today had contacting Louise as the first task, and I found her office just after 9. There were a few forms to fill in. I signed for the key to my temporary office and was shown where it was, and checked the key worked.

Noting a telephone on the desk, I asked "If the 'phone is connected, may I know the number?"

Louise responded "Looks like there's a recent list on the corkboard there. Try Macdonald, James. His extension should be that one, and unless we tell the central admin folk, asking for his line will get you."

Writing the main number and the extension in my notebook, I asked "Are there any rules I need to be careful about for calling? I'm guessing long distance to Canada is a no-no, but I'm planning to get a phone card for that today."

"Yes. Long distance – essentially outside the Perth area – needs a budget code, which we could set up for you, though I think your idea of a phone card will be less work for everyone. If you do make a call, eventually there'll be a bill come down and we'll ask you to pay it."

"But I'm sure that means a lot of nuisance for everyone," I responded.

"Thanks. Yes. Less work for everyone if you can avoid it. A couple of years ago a visitor got a whole lot of bills. Turned out it was a contract cleaner who figured university phones were a perk of the contract. Ran up several hundred dollars calling Lebanon, and not just from our visitor's office. Led to a lot of bad feeling too, as you can well imagine, with the visitor swearing innocence."

"Almost worth unplugging the phone and putting it in a locked drawer."

"The times of the calls gave him away. And we've got CCTV in the corridors for security, so could correlate the times of the calls made with when the cleaner was nearby. Made it pretty obvious what was going on. Still a lot of bother."

"Well, I'd better be off to the bank and set up an account, and see about getting a phone card. Then I'll start looking for longer-term accommodation."

"I know there's shops about that sell the phone cards, but I'm afraid since I don't use them, I'm not current on best prices. But perhaps you can let me know what you find out. Always like to have bits of information like that for visitors and students."

"I'll do that, though I may not research very carefully. And I must thank you for all the help, and for having Gordon pick me up. Do I owe U W A anything for that?"

"Probably isn't strictly part of the intended budget, but we charge it to the seminar account, and it really does make life easier for people."

"With that I'll definitely agree. And he seems a really nice guy."

"Oh. I forgot to point out your pigeon hole. The key is the small one with the office key I gave you. It's number 83, and Gordon said he'd left a note."

There's also a note from Professor Johnson, the department head. He's away until Monday next, but would like to meet you and suggested 10 a.m. for coffee. We've a rather informal coffee room that also serves for seminars, and there'll likely be other people there. If you haven't worked out where it is by then – it's near the pigeon holes – just ask."

"Thanks. I'll be there Monday. And Gordon had an idea where there might be an apartment. I'll check for the notes before I leave the building."

"Good. Then I'll see you around, Professor McNab."

"Ian, please."

"See you around, Ian."

And Louise was gone. I didn't really have anything to keep me in my office, so I locked up, and after picking up Gordon's note, I went in search of the bank, which I'd looked up on a map online last night. Unfortunately, it was a good walk – the better part of an hour. All the bank branches seemed to be in Claremont, though there were a couple of ATMs on the U W A campus.

The bank was relatively efficient. Fortunately I'd arrived at a time when few foreign students descended on U W A, so I was seen right away. My suspicions that the bank drafts would take several days or even weeks to clear was correct. I deposited \$2500 Australian from my cash to get the account open and provide enough for some rent. The account included a book of a dozen cheques, and there was apparently a fee for using more than 2 per month. I'd already more or less decided that I'd use my credit cards as much as I could, and cash otherwise. But I would likely need to pay for rent, and the bank account would save me carrying a lot of cash, though I still had the Canadian and US in my money belt. Probably safe enough there. The bank gave me an access card for the ATMs that they said was also a debit card.

I'd had to remember to have my passport out for the bank, and after I'd completed my business, I saw a coffee shop where a late-morning latte was welcome and I could use the toilet for its regular purpose as well as to put the passport back in the money belt. The bank had also been interested in my letter of invitation from U W A, and I'd made sure to have that with me too. The bank clerk had said "Oh, I see Louise is copied on this letter. She lives just down the street from me." Perhaps that was why she told me the account she set up for me was actually intended for international students and had slightly better benefits than a regular account as long as one didn't write more than 2 cheques a month. I began to realize there was an flavour of a village or small town that clung to Perth, even though it was a large city. The urban area was made up of a cluster of not-too-large communities, so people saw the world from that perspective.

At the coffee shop I remembered to get a receipt for my coffee and pastry. The Canadian Association of University Teachers had some information about sabbaticals that one of our administrators told me to read. I could and had arranged that part of my salary was identified as a research grant for sabbatical expenses. I was allowed to charge the grant my travel and accommodation for getting to and from U W A and for visits elsewhere. Except I didn't have to ask for reimbursement, as the money was deposited with the rest of my salary.

When I mentioned this to the accountant who'd done the last taxes, she was very insistent that I get receipts for everything and keep a good log of them. They could be requested by the tax authorities and if considered inadequate, the expenses would be denied. On the other hand, she hinted that just about anything reasonable and non-extravagant could be included.

"You probably can include a glass of beer, but not a bottle of champagne" was how she put it.

Thinking of this, I was finding it a nuisance to keep the receipts in my pockets and record them every evening. Seeing what we'd call a dollar store, I went in and found a modest pouch intended for pencils or make-up, as well as a small backpack that folded up into itself. I also found a card of fold-back clips that would serve to organize papers. I'm a sucker for these, as they are useful for all kinds of things. At home I'd tied some to bamboo sticks then clipped the sticks to curtains to allow the curtains to be slid more easily along their rails.

There were also some interesting chocolate bars I'd not seen before. I added a couple each of Old Gold and Cherry Ripe. Even paid with my credit card to see if there would be any trouble. None at all, as it seemed to work just like at home.

The clerk in the dollar store directed me to a store that sold phone cards – indeed it also sold phones and related items. A mobile phone was tempting, and as there were no other customers just then I asked lots of questions. There were plenty of deals, but it was really difficult to make sure which included important details like being able to call Canada, even if that were to be an expensive per-call add-on. I was willing to have to pay if and when I needed to make such a call. But I didn't want such a call blocked, and particularly didn't want incoming Canadian calls blocked. And Mom had a land line, so SMS texts weren't a possibility. Then there were all the discounts and adjustments. Mostly the "good" price was only for 6 months then the rate doubled. Seems it would cost me at least \$500 Australian to have a phone for the year. That might be worthwhile if the phone did all that I wanted.

My head was spinning after about twenty minutes of this and I took a bunch of flyers and my notes and said I'd have to think a bit. I did, however, get a calling card that would give me an hour of calling to Canada.

When I'd shopped the previous evening I'd got a handful of change, and decided to try the bus back to the apartment. This worked, but the female bus driver smiled and told me I'd be better to look into getting a pass if I planned on using transit regularly.

That was a useful suggestion. Actually, I thought I might be wiser to try to get a bicycle, though transit might be welcome to get to some of the farther away locations. Could a bike be taken on trams, or even buses like some places at home where there were carriers on the front. I'd have to look into that.

Of course, I'd have to think about a lot. Moreover, my mind was occupied and distracted with Zelda. Little things like a particular set of salt and pepper shakers in a restaurant would remind me of times with her. Sadness, but also anger that I couldn't seem to move on.

At the apartment I made myself a cheese and tomato sandwich and checked

my email. A short acknowledgement from Rosalie. That reminded me that she and I had checked we could Skype. However, I felt a little bad about getting her to do that for Mom and I.

I also emptied my pockets of receipts and bits of paper. The new clips allowed me to put the receipts in order, and I used a nice red one for the receipts and chose a place in the bedside stand for the clip and for an envelope of those that were recorded in a spreadsheet on the laptop and on a USB thumb drive I'd bought on which to back up such computer files.

I picked up Gordon's message to re-read it and checked the address. It wasn't too far away. I should probably call first, but in a sense I wanted to see what the neighbourhood and property were like first. If I didn't like the area, I wouldn't need to talk to the owner.

It was cool and partly cloudy out, so I put on my windbreaker and stashed my water bottle and pencil case in the new small backpack. My notepad, a pen and a couple of clips were in the case, giving me at least the illusion that I was well-organized. I get these enthusiasms from time to time, then discover a wad of notes and slips in a pocket I've ignored when the effort seemed too bothersome.

The address I sought was to the north of the U W A campus, while the apartment was more west and a little south. The walk took perhaps 25 minutes to a street of straightforward but well-kept houses with lots of cars in their driveways signaling more than one family or tenant per building. A girl of early teen years was sitting on the front veranda reading a book.

"Is this Tanya Walker's address," I asked.

"MUM!" was the very loud response.

After a few seconds a woman of what I guessed was a similar age to my own came out the front door and said "Philippa. What have I said about yelling like that. You should come and get me. We don't need the neighbours complaining."

"This man wants to know if this is your address," the girl said by way of defence.

"I'm Ian McNab, ma'am. One of the U W A History graduate students, Gordon Healy, told me there might be accommodation available that would suit for my sabbatical here."

"Yeah. Gordon called me, which I appreciate, as we've had a bit of a sour experience recently with a tenant. Messy, expected lots of service – which isn't included by the way – and then his cheque was refused. Had to get a few buddies from the taxi company I work for to suggest he pay and also move on quickly, which fortunately he did.

Why don't you come have a look, and if you're interested we'll think about whether things will suit us all."

Tanya was wearing shorts and a T-shirt and had clearly been doing the laundry, as on the way to the rear of the house we passed a large kitchen where an ironing board was set up. Tanya looked to be solidly built, but there was no wobble of excess as she moved. Someone who worked hard every day, I suspected.

“The studio’s here at the back, but you’ll come in and out via the door at the side,” she said, opening a door.

The studio was a large room with a door at one side and a bathroom on the other. The bathroom had a shower stall, toilet and quite large sink, and the sink was embedded in a fairly long counter.

“There’s no kitchen sink, but the counter here’s large enough to do the dishes if you’re not planning on running a restaurant,” Tanya said. In the main room there was a double bed, a wardrobe, and a built-in cupboard and counter unit with some drawers, a hotplate and microwave, with a small fridge underneath. A toaster sat on a table that had two chairs. There was a bedside locker with a lamp that would allow reading in bed. There was a modest television on the wall.

I said “I think it would work for me. Shall we talk about price and conditions?”

“Yeah. Want a cup of tea?” I nodded in response. “Come in the kitchen. That’s where I’ll be anyway,” Tanya said laughing.

She filled the kettle and put it on its stand and got out the teapot.

“Tell me about yourself, Ian.”

Well, I preferred no ‘professor’ or ‘mister’ outside of teaching, so that was good.

“I’m here for essentially a year on sabbatical from a mid-sized university not far from Toronto in Canada. Until recently I was married – no kids – but after my wife was injured in a pile-up in a blizzard the doctors gave her Oxycontin and she got addicted, then decided she didn’t want to be married any longer. But the woman who divorced me didn’t seem like the one I’d married. Anyway, I’m here on my own, doing a bit of a reset.”

“Somewhat similar for me,” Tanya said. “Didn’t know he was bipolar – perhaps he didn’t either – when we married. Then later the ups and downs, then he got into cocaine. Not sure if it was bad junk or he didn’t want to go on, but a couple of years ago he died of an overdose. My family helped me keep this house and turn the master bedroom into the studio. The idea was to have a bit of revenue to help the costs for me and Philippa and Anne. Anne’s a couple of years older than Philippa, the loud voiced one you’ve met.”

Somehow both of us had cut through euphemisms and given quick but substantive accounts of our situations.

“Assuming you’d be willing to have me, what would be the rent, and what would it include?”

“I’m asking \$1200 a month, including electricity and hot water.”

“That’s about where I’d expected. For me there’s also questions of internet, towels, bed-linen, and access to a laundry, though for the last I could find a laundromat.”

“The girls use internet for their school studies, but I have a pretty basic plan. I suppose you could use it.”

“There’s internet at the university, but in the evening it would be nice not to have to go back. It’s mainly email I use, though depending on how timezones fit, I’m hoping to Skype with my mother. She doesn’t have a computer but her

neighbour emails with me and we've tested Skype. I've bought a phone card to call her if I have to, and for calls here in Australia. Actually, I also do a bit of searching online, but don't spend time watching dubious videos. Oh. Can I go back and check the light for working?"

"Yeah, sure. Tea'll be ready soon."

The lights would be fine. There was an electrical outlet not too far from the table. Hmm. Probably want to get a power bar. I'd seen some at the dollar store, as I thought of the shop. When I got back to the kitchen, Tanya poured tea. There was a jug of milk and a sugar bowl and some plain biscuits. She said "I hadn't thought about linen and towels, and I don't want to be doing the work of changing them, but I think I could provide them, especially if you don't mind taking care of putting them through the washer and hanging them out on the laundry tree."

"I'm used to doing laundry. Why not add, say, \$50 for the extras I've asked for, and also to let me do all my laundry including the sheets and towels you provide. But do tell me what times are off-limits. When I was in an apartment building with a shared washer and drier, there was always contention at certain times, yet they were idle at others."

"Should work. I've plenty of linen and towels, though they're far from brand new. A few a bit ratty and should be tossed. Don't be shy to let me know."

"Is there a vacuum cleaner and other things to do the housecleaning?" I asked.

"That's a question my last tenant would never have asked! Had to chase out some roaches. You'll find some of the roach motels in corners. Don't be afraid to let me know when they need replacing."

I drank my tea and had a biscuit. There was something awkward to say.

"Tanya. I've been teaching for over a decade, and it's given me a bit of a cautious attitude. Can I suggest that if you will have me as a tenant then you, or better you and I together, tell the girls that they should never be alone with me out of view of someone else. It isn't that I'm any risk, though you don't know that yet, but there can be malicious gossip. I'll be happy to be helpful and friendly, but it's better that we avoid any situation where there's a chance of misinterpretation."

"Thanks for being direct about that. It's sensible, even if it feels old-fashioned."

"I'm surprised your daughter isn't in school."

"Had a dental appointment earlier. A filling so her mouth is a bit frozen still. In fact if you'd been half an hour earlier you'd have missed us. And later I'm doing my afternoon and evening shift with the taxi."

As Tanya said this, I realized that the vehicle out front had a taxi sign on top and a logo on the side.

"Are you planning to have a car, Ian? We'd need to arrange parking so I can get out quickly."

"No. I thought I'd try to find a cheap bike. I'll need to get a helmet and some other gear too. The weather here isn't our ice and snow, and not too many hills. Though I might rent a car to take some trips about the state. Also



may see about using transit to get about and sightsee, but I'm not unhappy to cycle."

"Maybe I can sell you Joe's old bike for an exorbitant price," Tanya laughed. "Actually, it'd be good to get it fixed up in decent condition. How about that's the price. You fix it up, use it, and leave it in tip-top shape for me to sell."

"I like my bike in good shape, so yes. Absolutely. Now. Do you want a cheque for the first month? I'll move in next Tuesday if that's OK."

"The new month starts Friday, and it would be easier if we kept to calendar months for me. Any chance where you're staying will let you leave early?"

"I'll ask. And in any case I'm OK with sticking to the calendar month for payment. It'll save me a lot of running around even if it costs a few days rent. If I can't cancel and come here Friday, then I'll stay there until Tuesday, otherwise phone you to work out timing of when to come."

"If you're nearby, my taxi will save you lugging a suitcase."

"True. Though not a big fare. I'm staying on Broadway. I walked in 20 minutes."

"No worries. Just call me to let me know what's happening either way."

I wrote a cheque and handed it over. I was getting ready to leave when I had an idea. "Could I look at the bike? Might be I can get it functional and have some transport."

"Sure. But I'd better write you a receipt. My Dad is always on at me to keep good records."

"My tax accountant too. I don't have a lot of money, especially with the divorce, but I'm not starving either. But there's quite a few things that need records so you get the deductions and benefits. I'm guessing it's pretty much the same here."

Tanya just nodded.

We went outside, in fact via the studio, and Tanya unlocked a shed. There were four bikes. Two were obviously in working conditions. Two weren't, at least their tires were flat. Of those two, the women's pattern looked in better shape, and in fact I prefer a low cross bar.

"Would you mind if I pumped the tires on that women's bike to see if it's rideable. Especially if you have a lock. But I'll be more than happy to bring both up to snuff over the next few weeks."

"Deal. The pump's there. I'll go ask Philippa where the locks and keys are."

There was a certain amount of confusion and rummaging over the next quarter hour, but the tires came up OK. There was even a spare, if not very good, pump. A chain and combination lock was found and after three or four tries the combination was remembered. I wrote it down in my notebook as well as trying the lock a couple of times.

We wiped the bike down. Then I adjusted the saddle after Philippa disinterred a set of wrenches – they said spanners – from under a pile of seeming junk in a box. Then I tried riding up and down the street. It was an 18-speed cycle, often called a mountain bike. I managed to change gears, somewhat imperfectly, and also tested the brakes. I wouldn't want to do an emergency stop, as the shoes were hard and slipped, but they were working.

“It’s rideable. There isn’t a helmet law here, is there?”

As I said this, Philippa was holding one in her hand. “Yes. Australia introduced all-age helmet use in 1990. This one belonged to Dad. We can wipe it out for you.”

That’s what we did, and I was back at the apartment hotel in less than ten minutes. The office was open, and off the street enough that I could leave the bike propped against a wall while I asked the clerk if there were a rack where it could be parked and locked.

“Not as such, but I lock mine to one of the posts of the chain link at the rear.”

“Thanks. I’ve another question that may be more awkward. It turns out I’ve found an apartment for the year I’ll be here and I can move in on Friday. Can I cancel my stay here from Friday, possibly with some penalty?”

“Finding something that quickly is good luck. Yes you can cancel as long as there’s payment for four nights out of the week, which would be a 1 night penalty in your case.”

“Or I guess I could stay until Saturday morning, which might be easier for my landlady.”

At this moment there was a ping from the computer on the office desk.

“Excuse me a moment, Professor McNab.”

“I’ll lock up the bike and come back in a minute.”

When I got back, the clerk said “I just got a request for an apartment for Friday, so I’ll be happy to let you cancel then at no penalty. May I confirm the client’s reservation?”

“Seems to be my lucky day. I’d better go buy a lottery ticket.”

The clerk laughed.

“Thank you Professor McNab. I’ll just call the client then process your credit card refund.”

“Please do. And thank you.”

I didn’t mention that I’d experience a likely loss of around 10% on the four nights accommodation due to the rather wide spread in exchange rates. Hmm. I’d have to make sure I kept my credit card statement to justify that as an expense.

Once I had the paperwork for the refund I went up to the studio.

I decided to take a shower and bring the helmet in with me to wash out all the vent holes. It could dry overnight. Then I decided to fully unpack and take stock of what I might need. I’d brought a few rudimentary tools, but could use a few others for working on the bikes. On the other hand, there were probably tools in the shed if it were tidied up, and it made sense to wait until that were done before haring off to the hardware store. Or did they say ironmonger here? I checked by searching for hardware stores in Crawley, Western Australia and looking at the names. “Ironmonger” didn’t appear on the screen.

I suppose it was silly unpacking just a day and a half before I’d need to pack it all up again. But as you’ll have guessed, I’m a fusspot. I wanted to plan my next few days. I’d managed to find a laundry service in Amsterdam that was not too expensive. Actually a sort of laundromat where the staff ran the

machines. Advertised as wash, dry and fold. In Singapore there was a laundry service from the hotel that I'd thought of using, but then realized timing was too tight, since there were scheduled pick up and delivery times.

For the year I'd packed a dozen changes of shirts, socks and underwear, a pair of dress pants, black jeans, blue jeans, and a pair of tan convertible cargo pants that turned into shorts with the legs unzipped. I had a sports jacket and tie along with the two sweaters and windbreaker I've mentioned. One pair of swim trunks that would double as shorts. My winter coat rounded out my wardrobe. I'd not packed or worn boots due to weight and size, but did have some good hiking shoes, a pair of dress shoes, a pair of light runners. The hotel in Singapore provided some slippers that many might regard as disposable.

I was fortunate to wear a full beard, so didn't need shaving gear. Needing spectacles for farsightedness, I had a spare pair that I carried with me, as well as a couple of pairs of clip-on sunglasses. I'd a few small tools like a small crescent wrench and a multitool with pliers and some extras, a smallish screwdriver with exchangeable bits, a box cutter, scissors, a sewing kit, string, tape and glue, all in a pouch that got packed in the suitcase. I also had a flashlight and a small digital camera, as well as my laptop in its case with cables and adapters. The whole ensemble left very little space in either suitcase or backpack. I'd probably need to buy some things. A sun hat seemed a likely early purchase, though I had tossed in a baseball cap besides my winter toque.

Despite wearing a couple of outfits twice, I was getting lower than I liked on fresh clothes. The apartment hotel didn't provide daily housekeeping that might lead to complaints, so I washed some shirts, socks and underwear. They'd dry by Friday, and over the weekend I hoped to be able to do a couple of loads of laundry.

By now the waning light reminded me that I'd need to think of dinner. The night before, when I'd had fish and chips, I'd passed a sort of bistro, and having used my string to set up a laundry line in the bathroom and hang things to dry, I put on my windbreaker and walked there. As I exited the apartment, I detoured to see that my bicycle was still at the fence, which it was.

The bistro wasn't packed, but was well-patronized for a Wednesday evening. A blowsy, energetic waitress greeted me and told me I could sit anywhere that was free. After bringing food to another table she came to me with a menu, asking "Can I get you a drink while you look at the menu, sir?"

"Do you have a house white?"

"We've a decent Australian Pinot Grigio."

"A glass of that please."

"Besides what's on the menu, the cook's offering a steak pie with chips, carrots and peas as the daily special. It comes with a salad first, and a rice pudding after."

"Then I'll not even look at the menu. That sounds right for me tonight."

"You'll not regret the choice. I had it earlier for my own dinner."

As with most meals so far on my sabbatical, I was eating alone. I almost wondered if I was lonely. Aimless thoughts tumbled about as I sat waiting for my wine and food, seeing but not watching the clumps of people eating and

drinking or, in one case, playing darts. A creeping realization came to me that I felt less lonely now than when Zelda had been physically sharing our house but was not emotionally part of it. That was a time of quite extreme loneliness. Now was just ... empty. At least empty of much emotion.

I'd not had too much time to think during the busy-work of getting here to Perth – the locals would say Crawley, which was the name of the suburb. The bank had been in Claremont, an adjacent suburb. Meeting new people was a distraction. The natives I'd encountered were friendly. No doubt I'd discover their difficulties and problems later. Indeed, Tanya seemed to have a story with elements of sadness not so far from my own. She was strangely attractive to me. I'm not overly drawn to particular physical attributes in a woman. I'll be polite and conversational regardless, though extremely overweight women raise little sexual interest. Some men seem to chase after curvy, bosomy women, and when younger I'd sensed some male companions seemed surprised I showed much less interest in such women than they. Tidy – that was a word that described women I found attractive. However, up to now, tidy meant slender, almost thin, women of medium height. Tanya was about a hand width below my height, which is a bit less than average, and she was, as I'd noted, solidly built. A relatively big frame, carrying a bust that was small in proportion, with less than a typical narrowing at the waist. Legs that were proportionate – neither chubby nor sticks. She'd make a good rugby player. Maybe she did play for all I knew.

Perhaps it was her energy that was attractive. Raising two teenage daughters alone after a husband's death couldn't be easy. I had fewer worries and I was finding life hard enough.

The waitress brought my wine and salad, along with a caddy with condiments, including oil and vinegar.

“Enjoy!”

“Thanks.”

There was a roar from near the darts board. Someone had hit the triple 20 and was being applauded. Perhaps I'd have to take up darts or something like that.

## Fitting in

It wasn't much after 8 p.m. when I got back to the apartment hotel. The bike was still OK. I realized I'd not phoned Tanya to let her know I could move Friday. She'd given me both house and mobile numbers for her, and I guessed that she'd still be driving the taxi, so I called the mobile.

“Tanya's Taxi”

I didn't think that was the company name on the car, but perhaps that was her way of answering her phone.

“Ian McNab here. I managed to cancel after tomorrow night.”

“So they'll want you out Friday morning?”

“Yes. 11 o'clock latest.”

“How about I come by at 10. I end my morning shift around then. I’ll pick you and your luggage up and bring you here, but then I’ve errands to run. Shopping etc. You could come along if it’s helpful to you.”

“That’s generous of you. Yes. Good. Except you’ll be taking my luggage as I’ll ride the bike back.”

“Oh yes. Sort of forgot that. Is it working out?”

“It’s OK. Tomorrow I’m going to see if I can get some new brake shoes, because the present ones are a bit hard and less effective than I’d like. And look for some lights and possibly a carrier.”

“May do better on Friday over at Westfield Shopping Town. That’s where I’m heading then, after I collect your stuff.”

“OK. Do you have the address of the apartment hotel here?”

“Is it the one about a block from the shopping centre on Broadway but on the opposite side of the road?”

“That’s it.”

“No worries. See you about 10 or a few minutes after depending where I have to come from.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

I started my laptop and found an email from Rosalie acknowledging mine and saying she’d phoned Mom to let her know I’d arrived OK. Good. Still, I should communicate with Mom directly. And it occurred to me that at the apartment I’d not have a phone unless I cadged off Tanya. If and when I travelled about here in Australia to see people, I would have to ask to use phones. Probably worth getting a mobile. I could use my credit card. The \$500 or so for the year would probably work out to several dollars a call, but it would allow for a lot of convenience. Possibly security too.

## Touching Base

I woke fairly early. After a shower I thought I’d check email, since I was 12 hours ahead of Ontario. It would be last night there, just after dinner. Sure enough, there was a message from Rosalie.

Hi Ian. Evelyn is having dinner with me. If you get this before 8:30 -- morning for you, night for us -- let me know and we’ll Skype.  
Ros

I fired back a reply to say I was online, and made sure Skype was ready to receive.

About 5 minutes later, the familiar Skype call announcement noise sounded, and I clicked to connect. There were Mom and Rosalie sitting looking at the camera.

“Hi Ian!” they chorused.

“Hi to you both.”

The session lasted about 10 minutes. I gave them my news, and said I’d email my new address and the phone number at the office and also Tanya’s numbers. I said the latter were for absolute emergencies only, and to use email

in preference. However, I did mention that I was researching mobile phones, even though I'd more or less made up my mind to get one.

I did a search and found a couple of bike shops were on the Stirling Highway more or less near the bank I'd been at yesterday. Oh well. That was to be expected. I found the addresses on the map and worked out the names of the cross streets, as on the bike I'd prefer not to ride Stirling as it didn't have a dedicated lane and was four lanes with a cosmetic divider. The lanes seemed narrower than we'd use in Canada.

However, I decided I'd check the bike shops later, and went first to the Department, checked my pigeon hole. There was a note from Louise with another form to complete for internet access. I'd forgotten to ask about that. The note said to take the form to a particular computer help desk, but I had to ask someone who was also picking up their mail where that was. This served to exchange introductions with Janice Geoffries, who was one of my new colleagues.

The youngish man at the computer help desk was efficient. Once he'd phoned Louise to confirm the form was genuine, he got me set up with a username and password that let me connect to the WiFi on campus, though he suggested that if my office had an Ethernet cable, that might give better connectivity. For email I'd be Ian.McNab@uwa.edu.au for my time here. I probably will mainly use my regular Canadian handle, but I guess I'll have to check that address too. Unless I was mistaken, the Mozilla Thunderbird I used for email could handle more than one account.

Since I had my computer with me (I'd fortunately made sure the new day pack, as I thought of it, would hold the laptop – just!) I hauled it out and tested the connection. There was nobody around, so I asked if I could try to connect to email too, and the help desk agent was able to streamline the entry of the right parameters. From my Canadian email I sent my Australian email a message. It took a bit over a minute.

The help desk fellow said "That's a lot slower than I expected."

"It did have to go from here to Canada and back," I countered, and he mumbled a "Yeah. Suppose so."

Anyway, I was now connected here.

I returned to "my" office and did a bit of exploring in the desk drawers. Mostly empty, but there were some blank envelopes, a couple of lined notepads, a few pencils, or rather one pencil and several stubs. There was a stapler and a half box of staples, a plastic tray with elastic bands, and quite a bit of paper dust. I went to the washroom, which I had to find first, and came back with some wet towels and cleaned out the dust from the desk drawers.

The regular owner of the office had carefully filled some cardboard boxes that were stacked in a corner. The bookshelves were essentially empty except for an out-of-date U W A phone book.

The phone rang. After two rings, I decided to pick up.

"Ian McNab."

"Gordon Healy. Thought you might like to come down for coffee and meet whoever's there."

"Sure. Be right down. Thanks for thinking of me."

“No bother. See you in a mo’.”

There were about a half dozen of us who congregated around the electric kettle and made instant coffee or tea. There was a tin box with a slot in the top.

Gordon, after introducing me, explained the rules.

“You should get your own mug. Put in 25 cents for each drink – though hot water doesn’t count. The box is screwed to the counter and Sheila in the office counts it once a week. Honour system, and generally it makes a bit of a profit over the cost of tea, coffee, sugar and milk. Every so often we get some treats out of the extra and have a minor party. Milk’s in the fridge. There’s a rota there on the bulletin board. Add your name to the participants and fill in a week when you are willing to do the shopping. Sheila tells whoever’s on the list what they should get and pays them based on receipts. Guests are free, and mugs are in the cupboard, but the guest or their host is expected to wash the mug and put away.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t I volunteer myself for the week after next, since it seems open and will avoid having to apologize if something comes up later.”

“Makes sense,” said a man whose name I think was Lionel. “And it will avoid anyone grumbling about freeloading.”

“I’ll have to use a guest mug today, but I’ll find one soon. Have to make it a souvenir.”

“Probably the university bookshop has some mugs,” the voice of Janice Geoffries said. I hadn’t noticed her come in. “Mind you. They tend to be overpriced.”

“I found a sort of dollar store yesterday that had some that might work. I’ll probably look for something with local connections but horribly garish so it doesn’t get ”borrowed”.”

“Yeah. I lost a quite nice one here a year or two ago,” Brian said. Another new name and face to remember.

## Starting the job

After coffee, I went back to my office and started my laptop. I plugged in the ethernet cable. The web browser responded a bit quicker than with WiFi in the apartment hotel. I opened a list of possible contacts for my research that I’d created over the past year in preparation for this sabbatical. Indeed, I’d already contacted most of those whose publications and other information suggested might be relevant to my own work. I thought of those as my A list. The others were the B list. Without deleting the original contacts file, I generated A and B list files.

I also made up a file of my contact information. Then I sent each of the A list a short message with my contact information, though I did customize each message a little. That’s the fusspot in me. I like to avoid those broadcast messages.

However, for the B list I created a message introducing myself as well as mentioning that I was organizing seminars at U W A if they were coming in our direction. Some years ago – I was tempted to think before what the Australians referred to as the First Fleet in 1788 – university departments had budgets to pay for travel and accommodation of sabbatical visitors and even for honoraria for them. The Dutch, I was told by an elderly colleague who had benefited from it, even had a special word for such honoraria: *toesprachgeld*. Now we hoped people would drop by and give a seminar as a form of exchange, and my role was to try to encourage this. Moreover, it would enhance my reputation if I managed to get respected academics to give talks, especially if their presentations were well-organized and well-delivered. My experience was that the majority of speakers were boring windbags. One of my great fears was that I was myself guilty of being such a windbag.

It was just after 1 p.m. when I felt I'd reached a point in this work where I could stop. Lunch at one of the several eating places on campus was a possibility, but I had food at the apartment-hotel. I didn't expect to save money while on sabbatical, but didn't want to back-slide too far financially during the year.

It was around three o'clock that I set off to look at the bike shops out towards Claremont. I found brake shoes at the first shop I came to, and bought 2 sets and scouted prices on some other items. The bike I was riding didn't really need any other new parts, though I was planning to adjust the gears. Be nice to be able to have the bike on a stand for that, but maybe one or both of Tanya's girls would help me. I could hold the bike up while the pedals were turned with a hand and the gear-change tested, adjusted, re-tested, and so on. Professionals had a stand to make this easier. I might be able to cobble together a sort of stand. In the past, I'd managed with a stick and a pair of clamps. Clamping the stick to a table or workbench provided a support to which the bike could be clamped at the saddle so the rear wheel was off the ground.

Thinking about Tanya's shed, I wondered if the door lintel or side frame would provide a way to suspend a bike. We'd see. No sense doing too much work on a stand or support when I'd likely only need to adjust gears on each bike once, or at most twice.

I dropped into the other bicycle shop too, mainly to see if there was any noticeable difference in offerings or prices. There wasn't anything particular I could see to choose one over the other, and I moved on to the discount emporium I thought of as a dollar store. I'd remembered they had some small flashlight lamps that ran on button batteries and had stretchy loops allowing them to be attached to handlebars or saddle posts. Each lamp was only a couple of centimeters in size, but I'd seen them in Canada and they were quite bright. They also would flash or give a steady light. The packages for these contained one red and one white lamp, that is, a pair suitable for night riding. They really weren't good illumination, but with street lights I mainly wanted to be seen and to satisfy local bike regulations.

After finding a packaged pair of lights – they were only a couple of dollars – I looked for a mug. There were plain ones, a few with solid colours, then various ones with gag sayings. Finally I saw one that showed a map of Western



Australia, marked with a big W and a big A, but the big letters were followed by small ones making the message "Wait Awhile". Perfect. Cost me \$6. Quite a bit above the plain or gag ones, but a great souvenir that would hold my daily beverage at the Department.

Then I went back to the phone shop and, wondering if I was making the right choice among the plethora of offerings, got myself a mobile. The shop assistant – he may have been the owner – remembered me from my previous visit, and suggested that he had a factory refurbished phone at a good discount, but with a 3 month warranty. Saved me \$60. We checked it was working by calling the shop's number and then a call back to check the phone number, which I carefully wrote down, even though it was on the receipt and some printed documentation. There was a charger for the phone.

"Probably a good idea to plug it in for several hours right away. And then watch how long it takes to go down. I don't recommend leaving it plugged in all the time to avoid over-charging."

Back at Broadway, I thought of supper, then decided to go to the supermarket and get a can of beans and have beans on toast. The idea that I could charge dinner to my grant in lieu of salary nagged at the back of my mind, but I really didn't feel like much more, and there was a paper I was refereeing for one of the Canadian journals for which the report would soon be overdue. Moreover, I should put my stuff away to be ready when Tanya came in the morning.

## Informalities

Friday morning unfolded as planned. By 10:30 I'd put the bike in the shed and Tanya was backing the taxi out of the driveway so we could go to Cannington. Technically Westfield Carousel Shopping Centre. It was a big mall, reflecting American style and architecture. Without the Australian accents we could have been in Texas or Minnesota or ....

There wasn't much I needed, but I tagged along with Tanya, who picked up groceries – I got a few things for the weekend for myself – but she was mainly there to get some items the girls wanted for school or apparel that were apparently easier to get there.

"I could get these things closer to home, but not all in one place," Tanya explained.

That made some sense. There were over 300 stores, and it was said to be the largest shopping centre in the state. I'd only once been to West Edmonton Mall, but it had the same flavour.

Spying a coffee shop, I offered

"Coffee? My treat."

"Normally yes. But I've some chores to finish at home."

"Take-away then?"

"All right. I won't struggle."

We were back at Tanya's just before noon. Tanya said she'd not be driving on the Saturday morning, and suggested I be formally introduced to the girls

around 9 if that wasn't too early.

"No, perfect. Shall I come to the side door then?"

"I'd not thought about the details. But yes, that'd be best."

I went to the Department after a quick sandwich and worked for an hour writing up the referee's report on the paper I mentioned. The ideas were OK. The exposition was, to be honest, a disaster. I suspected that the author – the name and affiliation weren't attached so the evaluation was blind – was not a native speaker of English, and did not have very good expressive skills. In very polite language, I conveyed this message and recommended the editor ask the author to rewrite and also to get editorial assistance. Whether they did or not, I never learned. Some authors simply shop their work around serially until it either gets published or they tire of the effort.

At tea, Gordon said a group of grad students were going to a pub to eat, then to a women's football game between a U W A team and that of another local school. Did I want to join them?

This seemed like a good idea. I had the Australian version of a fully dressed hamburger – "the lot" as the menu said. The slice of beetroot was definitely novel, but worked. There were about eight of us in the group, three being young women. I was introduced, and recalled after that one of the women was Amanda, another Naomi, but I didn't quite get the third. I thought Katherine. And there was a Michael and a Jason. All the new faces were taxing my name memory. But everyone was friendly, without paying me too much attention, for which I was thankful. The match was on one of the U W A fields, so I didn't have to make arrangements for transport. During the game, there was mercifully no academic conversation, just small talk about the play and good-natured gossip about other students and staff, as well as some comments about Australian events and politics, which sailed right by me.

Afterwards, riding home on the bike with the new lamps lit, I realized I'd enjoyed myself. It was a good feeling. When I got home, I sent Gordon a thank-you email.

## Formalities

Saturday morning I woke with the cacophony of birds. I'd noticed this at the apartment-hotel, but somehow the volume seemed greater here. The cockatoos had a particularly grating call, and were also particularly loud. There were Kookaburras too with their characteristic laughing noise. I'd get used to it, I supposed. Certainly didn't need an alarm clock.

I didn't get up right away. My watch showed a bit after 7.

Just before 8 I got up, showered and made a boiled egg and some instant coffee. At 9 I knocked on the kitchen door and Tanya let me in.

"Girls. Come and meet Ian."

Philippa, who I already had met, came in first, with Anne just behind. Anne was, Tanya had told me, 14, while Philippa was soon to be 13. However, Anne had a presence that made her look older. I might even have said 16 or even

older. Her curves were more pronounced than those of her mother. That could be dangerous for her if she weren't aware of the illusion.

"Hi, I'm Ian," I said.

"Professor McNab to you two," Tanya added.

"Maybe when talking about me to other people. But here, just Ian will do."

"OK. If you're happy with that, Ian it is," Tanya said.

"I'm here for about a year on sabbatical," I said. That was probably already known, but the situation was awkward. I decided I'd better say my piece. "I'm really pleased to meet you both, and I'll be happy to chat with you and, if you're interested, answer questions about myself or about Canada or whatever. However, I've been around young people at university for a while, and there are some awkward things that can happen. I'm going to ask you both, Anne and Philippa, to avoid being alone behind closed doors with me in case someone says anything malicious about you or me. I know I'm no risk to you, but it's unfortunate that there are people around who aren't nice and can do a lot of harm."

Tanya added "What Ian's saying is good advice generally girls."

Anne asked "Have you had something happen in the past?" This said with a tone of suspicion.

"Not me directly, but one of my colleagues was teaching an introduction to Canadian history. It's a course that gets close to a couple of hundred students in first year, so we have more than one section. After giving the first lecture, my colleague was in his office when a young woman knocked and asked if she could talk to him.

The girl – I should say young woman – introduced herself and said that she was an A student. My colleague said that he enjoyed students who could earn good marks, and looked forward to having her in his class. The girl said he didn't understand. He was going to give her an A. My colleague said that depended on her work. Then she said 'You'll give me an A or I'll say' – and I apologize for the language – 'you grabbed my tits'."

"Mum told me off for using that word," Philippa said.

"That's why Ian apologized first," Tanya answered. "But he wanted to make the point that the girl wasn't very nice."

I said "Indeed. It was a form of extortion. Marks rather than money."

"What did your colleague do?" Anne asked.

"He was sensible enough to go to the Department head right away. And also to suggest a fairly simple solution. Since there were two sections and two different professors, each prof would mark the work of the other prof's students. And that this would be announced as a way to ensure that the classes were taught and evaluated in a common way."

Anne said "Brilliant. I bet the girl was ...."

Tanya said "You were about to say 'pissed off', which I think is fair in this case."

I added "We were lucky to have the option of cross-marking. I'm not sure myself how to handle a single, possibly small class. But I can tell you I never let students close the office door. If we need to talk privately, I suggest going

somewhere like a park bench where the conversation is private but we're in open view."

"But we'd never do that," Philippa objected.

"Of course not," Tanya replied. "But other people can say nasty things that aren't true. Ian's being up front, which I appreciate. That doesn't mean you can't chat and help him fix up bikes. Just not out of view."

"That makes sense," Anne said. "I think one of the girls at school may have had a close call with a man her mother was dating. Apparently tried to come in the bathroom when her Mum was away and she was in the shower. Said he was desperate to pee. She never told the full story, but she said she screamed and he got out."

Despite the obvious concern for Anne's schoolfriend, I was glad that Anne herself had said something.

I said "I'm going to try to check and adjust the gears on the two bikes to be cleaned up. Then I think I'll do some sightseeing downtown – I mean in the C B D."

Here in Australia, Central Business District or C B D was used for the main urban commercial centre. So far I'd not been in central Perth, and I wanted to do so.

"Can I get my gears adjusted too?" Philippa asked.

"Sure," I said. "I plan to work outside by the shed. In fact, I want to do a bit of a tidy in the shed to see what tools are there."

"Philippa. Put on your old shorts and T-shirt. I don't want to have to get grease off that new outfit you have on."

"OK Mum," said with an air of reluctance, was the reply.

I fortunately had brought a flannel work-style shirt. With my jeans it would do for the tasks I was about to undertake, though the garments were not strictly "old" or "work clothes". I might have to do some stain removal if I got them greasy.

Tanya had given me a key for the lock on the shed. I took out the bikes and started to organize the garden tools and other things inside. There was a rough bench along part of one wall, with some boxes underneath. There were some tools lying on the bench, and at least one of the boxes had tools. Philippa had found the spanners in one of them the other day. I took them outside where the light was better. The shed had only a small window on one side and a single electric bulb above the door on one side.

I took out a lawnmower. It was an old push mower. And looking around the yard, it was time it got some use.

Philippa came out of the house and joined me.

"How are we going to do the gears?"

"I think I want to find and organize the tools and some oil first. It's hard to find the tool needed when they're all in a box."

"Yeah. I was just little, but I can remember Dad saying they should be on a rack so they could be seen. He had some old kitchen cupboard doors he was going to set up on the wall. They're at the back there. He never got round to doing it."

“Are there any screws or nails?”

“Somewhere. I’ll look for them while you sort the tools.”

We worked quietly for a few minutes. I noticed Philippa had found some 3 in 1 oil and some boxes of screws and other things and was setting them out on the concrete paving stones. I’d found the wrenches and was organizing them in order. There were, in fact, quite a few tools, and they were serviceable.

Philippa dragged out a plastic case that was very dusty.

“I think this is an electric drill.”

That’s what it turned out to be. An older, corded type. There was an outlet on the shed wall near the light switch. The drill case had a few drill bits. Probably not a full set. Still, a start.

“Philippa, Is it OK do you think to fix the old cupboard doors to the wall above the bench and put in some screws or nails to hold the tools?”

“Probably better ask Mum, but I don’t think she’ll say no.”

“Definitely not a problem,” said the person in question who had come out the house. Anne was there too. “We should have done it ages ago.”

Anne said “I should help too. There’s bound to be some of my old stuff out here I don’t want thrown away.”

“Go put on your scruffy stuff first, Anne Walker. Like I told your sister, I don’t want to be washing grease out of good clothing.”

It actually wasn’t grease that would be the problem, but accumulated dust and soil tracked in or brought in on wet garden tools.

Before Tanya disappeared, I asked her if she had any old wire clothes hangers I might have.

“Should do. Didn’t I put some hangers in the studio?”

“You put in some quite good wooden and plastic ones. I was thinking of bending one or two wire ones to make a kind of hook to suspend the front or back wheel of a bike. If I fold the hanger into a sort of double hook and hang it from that rafter on a stick, the bike will be held upright. And I can probably fudge it to hold the back wheel up while I turn the pedals and adjust the gears.”

“Cool!” Philippa said, I’m sure emulating Anne or other older kids.

“Yeah. That’s a good idea,” Tanya said. “I think there’s some pieces of wooden strapping in the back corner there. Joe kept stuff for doing odds and ends. Gee. If we put four sticks from that rafter, we’d have a sort of bike rack.”

It was noon before I got away for sightseeing, but the bike was definitely in better trim by then, and the shed had undergone a minor transformation. The girls took on the task of deciding where the tools would fit on the old doors. They even took off the knobs and drilled holes to fasten the resulting boards to the wall of the shed. Various nails and screws now held the tools, though I’d shown the girls how to use some scrap wood with holes drilled to support screwdrivers. We even put in nails to hang some of the garden tools.

Before I left for the C B D I grabbed a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk. It probably wasn’t quite as much as I wanted, but time was slipping away for seeing things. I wanted to get to the Swan Bells. Riding through Kings Park and looking around probably stretched the journey to four times the 15 minutes it would take if I made a direct journey.

The road to the Swan Bells took me through some of the main streets. The bell tower was impressive, and I spent some time looking it over, then dawdled around the various public buildings, the cathedral, and some of the main business streets. It was strikingly tidy and modern. Lots of concrete and glass.

Given it was winter, I had to consider the early dusk, but the temperature was reasonable. I was wearing just my windbreaker while riding, but had a sweater in my day pack if I got cold. A little after 4 I worked my way back along the water to U W A, then home. "Home". Well, that's what my studio at Tanya's was now. I had really no other home, since mother's address was a legal and postal necessity.

After my work and cycling today, I felt I deserved a nice dinner. I'd seen a little Italian place not far from home, and went there and enjoyed a bit of a blow out dinner. Salad, veal and pasta, cannoli for dessert, even a couple of glasses of wine. Got the receipt. I used my credit card, for which I always kept receipts anyway. We'd see later if I would charge the meal to getting established on sabbatical.

When I got back to the studio, there was a note taped to the door from Tanya.

Have morning shift. Don't let girls pester you. T

## The grass is greener

In the morning, I got up slowly. Sunday morning. I realized I didn't have a radio or TV. However, I had some mp3 files on my laptop, and the speakers weren't too bad. I suppose I could buy some decent but not-too-expensive computer speakers.

Or maybe a radio. I'd have to look around. Somehow a year was just the wrong time interval for getting comfortably set up. One couldn't get the proper use out of the investment in furniture or appliances or vehicles in one year. For a month or two, one can rent and make do. For periods of three or more years, one can purchase things that are new. But one year is awkward unless you can find second-hand things or borrow long-term. Well, that's what I'd have to do.

However, I'd decided that this morning I'd give the grass a bit of a tidy, so once I'd finished my instant coffee, I went and got out the mower, which was easy now the bikes were nicely ranged on their hooks. Before I started mowing, I oiled the mower and actually used a piece of sandpaper around a square stick to give the blade a minor sharpening.

Most of the yard was flower or vegetable beds, bushes, or gravel paths, so I didn't have too much to do. Took me a bit more than an hour. As I was wiping down the mower, Anne and Philippa walked in the driveway. They were in skirts and jackets.

"You've mowed the grass," Anne said. I noticed the word 'lawn' was not used.

"Yeah. Thought it needed it."

“Mum’ll be really happy. She was going to do the mowing when she got in from her shift, though she usually expects us to help,” Philippa said.

“When did she start this morning?” I asked.

“She aims to be in the taxi at 7. There’s drivers who work earlier, or else midnight to 8, but Mum figures she doesn’t much want those fares.”

“You two are dressed up.”

“We went to the morning mass at Holy Rosary at a quarter to nine,” Anne explained. “Mum likes us to go, but somehow she doesn’t want to come herself. Sometimes we go together on Saturday evening. She used to be really regular before Dad died.”

“Keep her in your prayers,” I said, even though whatever spiritual faith I bear could not be said to lend much support to that message.

After a shower, I spent much of the rest of the day tinkering with ideas related to my nominal sabbatical project. I could have gone to the office, but I wasn’t going to do much internet research. Several times during the day I stopped to check email. I sent a couple of messages to potential contacts. Reviewed my coming week. Tomorrow I’d meet the department head, for example.

Mid-afternoon I ran out of enthusiasm for my research and picked up a trashy novel I was reading, one of several paperbacks I’d picked up in a second-hand book stall I’d come across in my travels. This carried me through to bed-time, with some mp3 music in the background. Though I’d planned a meal, I ended up opening a can of tuna and having a sandwich with sliced tomato. Banana with a Cherry Ripe was a dessert I could get used to.

## Developing routines

I wouldn’t see Tanya until the following Saturday, though on Monday evening I found a new mailbox bolted to my doorframe with a note:

**Thanks for mowing. Thought you should have a mailbox! T**

I wondered how much I’d need it except for notes from my landlady. No doubt better than risking scotch tape, especially on rainy or windy days.

My meeting with the department head, Jerome Johnson, had gone well. I’d already developed a list of topics I’d present, had three people who’d agreed to give seminars from other local universities, and two of those had now set dates. The other was having to deal with possible cataract surgery. The medics were supposed to provide a date, after which we could plan a seminar. I also had a half dozen names of people planning to come through WA in the next few months that the previous seminar organizer had been in contact with. And I’d my own contact list, but so far it was much too early to have anything to report on those. Nevertheless, Johnson seemed impressed that there was so much.

“Good for you, Ian – and call me Jerome. You’ve got a lot more there than I’d anticipated. For the outside seminar speakers, by the way, the general drill is that you take them to lunch at the University Club with two other members of the Department – try to find people who have something to say rather than simply an appetite or a thirst – then they give their seminar, then maybe meet

up with a couple of people they want to exchange ideas with. Louise will fill you in on how to work the payment for lunch.”

“Is lunch restricted to faculty, or even to senior faculty?”

“You’re thinking of grad. students?”

“If their research might be advanced. It could also be good for department spirit. I’d have to avoid it being a kind of prize or reward for favours. And toss a coin if there are two students doing relevant work.”

“I’ll trust your judgment. We’ve only half a dozen doctoral students and maybe ten doing Master’s degrees. The number of faculty isn’t so big either. We’d all fit in one of the bigger minivans I think.”

That was Monday morning.

Tuesday, I’d started brown-bagging my lunch, and went out near the Riley Oval to eat it. I was just getting out my sandwich when one of the women at the football game approached and said

“Professor McNab. Can I join you?”

“Yes, as long as you call me Ian and remind me of your name because I’ve been forgetful.”

“OK Ian. I’m Katherine Stormont. Katherine with a K. Hopefully finishing up a Ph.D. this year.”

In the light of day, I realized I’d underestimated her age in the pub and sports field. She was a few years older than the rest of the students. A very tidy and presentable woman. No makeup or jewellery. Conservatively dressed in slacks and sweater. Rimless spectacles. Pony tail. Someone who was there but did not stand out, and who likely did not want to stand out.

“Tell me about your studies,” I suggested.

“After I did an undergrad degree in Sydney in Urban Development, I spent a few years working for a town on the East Coast. Someone had taken the trouble to set up a small but well-organized archives, and I got sucked into the history of how the town came about. After a bit of a personal disaster – I didn’t stay as late in the archives as my boyfriend expected, or he got too distracted by my best girlfriends’ wobbly bits – I decided it was too awkward to stay, so I came here to use what I’d learned in a doctoral thesis.”

“Sorry to hear about the wayward friends. I’m newly divorced.”

I related a sanitized version of Zelda’s addiction and its consequences.

Katherine said “Would you mind if I asked you about chances for post-docs or employment in Canada? My mother was born in Perth, Ontario, by way of coincidence, so I would likely be able to avoid some immigration obstacles.”

“Not at all. Fire away.”

“Actually, it was a more general request for permission to ask as I get a better picture for myself from doing some digging.”

“Thanks. Because Canada, like Australia, is spread out over a lot of area, or at least distance along the border, there’s plenty of things I won’t know much about.”

“Like me here. I really haven’t learned as much as I should about W A, or even the Perth area.”



“On Saturday I got on my bike and went to the Swan Bells and had a look at the ... C B D. There. I was about to say ”downtown”, but that’s not the Ozzie expression.”

“You know, I’ve never actually been to look at the bell tower. Now you’ve made me feel guilty.”

“What about the Batavia?” I asked. The Dutch East Indies ship had foundered on an offshore reef or island in 1629 with a horrific sequel of mutiny and massacre among the survivors. But the wreck had been found and a partial reconstruction and the artifacts were in the Western Australian Maritime Museum.

“You’re making me feel very guilty.”

“I’m thinking of going this Saturday,” I said.

“Is that an invitation to join you?”

“Sure. Maybe you can look up the best way to get there.”

“I’ve a car. I’ll look up hours and parking and email you. Are you using a U W A handle?”

We exchanged emails and agreed we’d set up the arrangements that way.

Conversation moved to other subjects. I’m sure both of us spent more time over lunch than intended.

That evening Tanya knocked on my door when she came in around 9 from her shift.

“Hi. I saw your light was on and thought I’d check if things are OK. You know. No tap drips, noisy teen-aged girls, etc.”

“I’ve not heard the girls except for occasional door closing. They seem to look after themselves.”

“My Mum or Dad or brother Frank come by to check, but they know how to prepare their meals. Even leave some for me.”

“But you worry they might get into trouble?”

“Yeah. All the time. I phone between fares. By the way, I didn’t thank you for the mowing, at least not face to face.”

“I think the local phrase is ”No worries!” Somehow I needed to use up a bit of physical energy.”

“I thought you did that riding to the Swan Bells the afternoon before.”

“That too, of course. I’m trying to see as much as I can of Perth and area. Can’t come for a weekend from Canada.”

“Those of us who live here sometimes forget that. And also forget to see what there is that tourists come to see.”

“One of the Ph.D. students who should finish this year more or less said the same thing. She’s got a car and is taking me to the Batavia on Saturday.”

“I’ve heard the name, and someone told me about it. Where is it?”

I explained that it was in the WA Maritime Museum in Freemantle, and a bit of the story as I knew it.

“I should take the girls, and it would be good to be there with a couple of historians, but I’ve a shift Saturday morning.”

“I could ask Katherine if the girls could come with us, if that’s OK with you. If you like, I’ll give you Katherine’s email so you can communicate with her yourself. I don’t have her phone number I’m afraid.”

“That would probably be good. I’ll ask her to phone me. Don’t want to impose the girls on her. And she may not have room in her car.”

## Old ships

Katherine picked up the girls and I on Saturday morning at 10. Anne and Philippa were shy at first, then realized Katherine wasn’t going to bite. They had a cooler – “Eskie” to Australians – that they said had picnic food for all of us. We put that in the boot – Australian for trunk. We got to the Western Australia Shipwrecks Museum pretty well at opening time. I’d thought it was in the Maritime Museum, but the two sites were about 10 minutes walk apart.

When we saw the exhibit, Anne said “It says they sank in 1629 about 60 km. off the coast. But the First Fleet was 1788. That’s 150 years later.”

I answered “Yep. The Dutch came here in the first half of the 17th century. But they wanted to get to Indonesia. They actually called it a name that is more like India to English speakers. They’d sail round the bottom of Africa and then use the prevailing winds to go east to this coast, then north round the top of Australia to get to what is now Java. The current Djakarta they used to call Batavia, which is the name of the ship that’s here – well the bits of it that are left.”

Philippa was reading about the shipwreck and the subsequent mutiny and murders. “It says there were 322 people on board. It must have been a big ship.”

I’d read up about the Batavia on Wikipedia, and said “It was about 600 tons displacement and 45 metres in length, which was big for the time, but really quite small by modern standards. The submarine HMAS Ovens, which is nearby and we could go and look at perhaps, is 90 metres long and around 2000 tons displacement. Submarines are considered rather tight for crew, but Ovens had less than 70.”

Katherine said “It’s difficult to imagine how they got over 300 on board the Batavia.”

Philippa said “It must have been pretty horrible and stinky. I bet they didn’t have proper toilets.” This caused some giggles, including from the children of a family nearby.

I said “They didn’t really have toilets on most ships of the time. The sailors would go to the front of the boat – the head – and hang out and do their business into the water. They went to the front because square-rigged ships want the wind from the back and well, you can guess why you want the wind blowing away from the ship. On ships, the toilets are still called the heads.”

We spent some time looking at the exhibit and reading about the macabre story of the shipwreck and its aftermath, as well as the other exhibits. It must have been about 11:30 when we got out.

Katherine said “How about a coffee or other drink and then we’ll look at the HMAS Ovens for comparison?”

There was a small coffee shop on the way to the Maritime Museum, to which we decided to walk rather than move the car. We found a table outside for our drinks – Anne decided to join Katherine and I in a latte, but Philippa chose some orange juice. I paid, after arguing that Katherine supplied transport and the Walkers the lunch picnic. Used my credit card. If my cash situation proved flush later in the year I could change payment mode to use it up.

Katherine said “People were really brave to sail round the world on such tiny boats.”

“They don’t feel so tiny,” I said.

“How can we know how they feel?” Katherine answered, and Anne and Philippa looked puzzled.

“Oh. I’m being a bit idiotic. About 6 years ago Zelda – my ex-wife – and I took a mixed holiday and academic trip to Holland and Belgium. It was the last time she was really herself before the car crash and the doctors getting her on Oxycontin.

Anyway, we were visiting museums, and Lelystad has the Aviodrome air museum as well as being the location of a project to preserve the skills for building old wooden ships. They built a replica of the Batavia. It’s at a place called Bataviastad, which is the Netherlands first modern shopping centre. Quite a bit smaller than Westfield Carousel Centre, and more like streets. But there’s the requisite Macdonalds and the international brands. But you park your car, walk through the shopping centre towards the water of the Zuiderzee, and suddenly you are smack in the middle of the 1600s with the Batavia moored in front of you.”

“Gee. Really neat!” Philippa said.

“My sentiments exactly, Philippa,” I said.

Katherine said “Is Lelystad named after Sir Peter Lely who did all the portraits in the time of Charles II?”

“I wondered that when I was there,” I said. “But it’s named after Cornelis Lely, the engineer who built the big dike that encloses the Zuiderzee, now called the IJsselmeer because it’s a lake or meer rather than a zee or sea. That was completed in 1932, after which it was possible to build dikes and enclose land. The Dutch added a whole province called Flevoland, and Lelystad was the second city established. Almere was first. It’s close enough that people commute about 40 km to Amsterdam. Lelystad’s a bit further.”

“Is the land below the level of the water?” Philippa asked.

“Yes. Some is. Particularly in Flevoland. We drove across a bridge called the Kettle Bridge in translation and the highway more or less ran along the top of a dike with water one side and the roofs of houses the other. But typical cartoons of dikes have them as more or less vertical walls. Some are fairly steep sided, but most, and particularly the big Afsluitdijk that went 32 kilometers to enclose the Zuiderzee is very wide and gently sloped so waves run up the slope to lose energy.”

“Do the Dutch have to go along and plug leaks?” Anne asked.

“You mean with a finger, like the boy in the story?”

“Yes. Hans Brinker.”

“No. Doesn’t work that way. And Mary Mapes Dodge who wrote the story lived in the USA, I think miles from the sea. Dikes don’t leak through small holes. But they can get weakened over time or by getting waterlogged. To stop them collapsing they use sandbags or truckloads of rocks. When a dike breaks, it’s important to stop the flow of water from tides or waves, and at times people have sailed boats into the break, then piled up sandbags on and around the boat. After the big storm and flood of 1953, the tide was so strong that trucks of rocks couldn’t close the biggest break. But someone remembered that the British had made some big rectangular concrete pontoons that they floated across the Channel during the D-Day landings. They could let water into these big boxes that were 190 feet by 60 feet by 60 feet so they’d sink into the sea floor and make a kind of dock. They used a few of these that were still around and floated them more or less into place and sank them to plug the hole. Kind of really, really big fingers.”

The female contingent of our group all chuckled.

“Did they take them away after fixing things?” Anne asked.

“They may have been moved a bit, but I think they built new dikes around them, then cleared out the mud and water and turned them into a museum to the flood. The name Watersnoodmuseum literally means the Water Flood Museum. We went there and it was interesting that different countries sent different things to help. I remember particularly because there was a crate marked “Gift of Canada” and it had rubber boots and axes and sledgehammers. Other countries sent food or clothing. Someone in Canada must have been familiar with dealing with floods.”

Anne and Philippa went off to the toilet. I asked Katherine “Are you OK with staying to see the Ovens?”

“Yeah. Not high on my list of things to do, but in some ways I should be aware of the more modern parts of history. And it will be helpful to see just how sailors live and work in such a vessel.”

Katherine dropped us off at home around two thirty. The girls thanked us profusely. They’d clearly enjoyed the outing. Tanya stepped outside and I introduced Katherine, who was thanked again.

## Communications upgrades

August.

I’d been here just over a month. I’d started to think about how I’d visit other places in Australia, but so far only had some preliminary notes on places, times, fares and accommodation. Here in Crawley, if I wasn’t going to see someone at another of Perth’s universities, I’d get to my office between 8:30 and 9. This morning I was at the earlier end of this interval, and while I toted my laptop back and forth to “home” as I now thought of the studio in Tanya’s house, I generally minimized using the internet so the limited bandwidth was

available to Tanya and her girls. In the office, I hooked up the ethernet cable and switched on. Opening the Thunderbird email client, several new messages showed up. Most were anticipated, such as responses to my own messages, or else administrative announcements or, of course, spam. But today there was one new correspondent, **evmcnab@teksavvy.com**

I wondered if it was a joke or a scam, but opened the message, which was,

Hi Ian,

I decided to join the computer age, and Rosalie helped me to buy a laptop. Not too expensive. Let me know when we can try Skype. I've been practising with Rosalie, learning a bit how to surf the web. The Library has courses for seniors on computer use and how to avoid trouble on the internet. I've registered and start in a couple of weeks. Hope to talk soon.

Love, Mom.

PS. My Skype username is evmcnab65.

I replied right away, suggesting that we should aim for 8:30 in the morning Australia time, which was best for me, with the same time in the evening usable but second best, since I'd possibly be using Tanya's connection. That would be 8:30 in the evening for Mom on the day before my morning slot. I asked Mom to let me know in advance, as I was planning to visit people off campus and might not be available every day, but could do weekends if I had a heads up.

There now?

came back right away, so I replied

Yes. Calling now.

We had a 10 minute video call, and I was able to swing the laptop around to show my office. Mom seemed well, and excited to be able to use email and the web. I cautioned her about Facebook and other social media, noting that a lot of people gave away personal information that could be used by criminals for fraud, or to learn who was away or living alone. Far too many seniors posted pictures of themselves and family, especially grandchildren. Yes. There were settings that could be made in the software and interfaces, but also there were plenty of ifs, ands and buts. Better to be cautious. I also said there was lots to learn about "reply all" and mailing lists to avoid over-sharing and also cluttering mailboxes.

I remembered to congratulate her on registering for the Library courses. From what I'd heard, such courses tended to be quite helpful in giving people skills and also contacts where they could get reasonably reliable information.

It was only after we'd closed our session that I realized that for her it was Sunday night of the Civic Holiday weekend.

## First foray

Adelaide

Stephen Church and I had been in touch for about a year. I'd thought of taking my sabbatical in Adelaide, but the department head was trying to squeeze blood from a stone, or rather 4 courses on different periods of history out of the loan of the office of a professor who was going to the USA for a year.

Stephen was originally a Brit, and from the photo on the University website was more or less my age. We did different sorts of history, but our email exchanges had a certain liveliness. He suggested if I came and gave a seminar, he'd put me up and show me round. We were both recently divorced. His wife could not put up with being so far from the UK and her family.

I flew to Adelaide on a Thursday evening. My seminar would be Friday, and I'd fly back Monday, avoiding the Sunday evening popular flight.

In his car on the way to his house after I'd arrived, Stephen asked "How are you coping with being single again?"

"I'm not sure I am. I chose to come to Australia as a way to reset."

"Yeah. But anyone you meet here is going to have the same issue my wife did. Unless you plan to love 'em and leave 'em."

"Not really my style. Truthfully, I'd not really thought things through. As you may suspect, I didn't really want to divorce. Just that the Zelda I married faded away with the opioid."

"Yeah. Jane and I didn't have any great uproar. I think we both still love each other. Glad we didn't have kids, though, otherwise she'd have stayed and felt trapped, or else left and the poor kids would be stuck somewhere in between."

"How long has it been for you?" I asked.

"Two years since she went back to England."

"You're still on your own?"

"Yes. So far. I'm starting to think about how to meet someone who I could get along with. Trouble is that the women I meet with whom a conversation is worth having are colleagues or students, so more or less out of bounds. I've had a couple of dates with some women who are pleasant socially and physically, but it's obvious they share very little of my intellectual interests. Partnering with them would be for sex, food and money reasons, which isn't fair to them or to me."

"I haven't started looking yet. Probably will go folk dancing. Don't have to go with a partner, and you're not expected to take someone home."

"A singles dance I went to was a real disaster. Total meat market, but it was hard to figure out if you were the meat or the butcher."

I laughed. "I've not tried, but suspected it might be like that. Too much pressure to pair off."

Despite the obvious negativity of this conversation, the trip to Adelaide was a great success in my view. Stephen and I had lots of academic ideas to discuss, but we were able to toss ideas around while seeing sights or sharing meals or some domestic chores he had to attend to. And I got an even better feeling of

how cities in Australia are islands of population and culture separated by vast expanses of desert and sea.

## Hem and haw

It was the beginning of September. Spring was starting here. It had been quite warm today. Now Friday evening, around 6. Anne and Philippa had gone to their maternal grandparents after school, thence by car towards Albany to go to Valley of the Giants Tree Top Walk near Denmark. Tanya pulled into the driveway just as I was putting my bike in the shed.

“Hi Ian. Good day?”

“Good. But I’m at a tedious stage of my research where I’ve got to cross check lots of notes and references. You know. How do you eat a whale? One bite at a time.”

“Guess I never thought about professors having to do dull work, but there’s gotta be grunt work in every profession.”

“How’d your day go?” I asked.

“Guess my day was a bit dull too. But I didn’t get ripped off by someone saying they were just going inside to get their money, then slipping out the back of a building where they didn’t live to avoid paying the fare. And nobody barfed in the back seat, but those are usually after midnight, and I only do those shifts when one of my buddies is sick or New Year’s Eve. No. Today was all granny to the doctors, Mr. Businessman to the airport, three kids across town to divorced Dad for the weekend. Pretty boring, but steady fares and more or less ordinary people going about their lives. Sometimes seems like I get to watch everyone else living.”

“Maybe you need someone to take you out to dinner?”

“Maybe. Though I don’t want to walk, and I do want to have a drink.”

“Someone to get take-out then?”

“OK. I’ve a box of chardonnay in the fridge. Haven’t even cracked it yet. Got it last summer for a friend’s birthday, then she went off to Sydney with a bloke she met and hasn’t come back.”

“Hope that doesn’t mean you’re going to get maudlin drunk.”

“Nah. Hopefully just a bit relaxed.”

“Any ideas what I should go and fetch for us?” I asked.

“We could do pizza, though it seems unimaginative.”

“I’ve strained enough brain cells today. Is there a decent place nearby?”

“Varsity in the Broadway Fair seems to be popular. I’ve been there once and it was really good. We don’t get out much on the money I bring in. I know they’ll deliver.”

“I like to get it hot from the oven so it’s really fresh when I eat it. So we can order, then I’ll ride to get it. If you’ve an old towel, I’ll wrap the box to insulate it.”

“Anything you don’t like?” Tanya asked.

“I’m not into blue cheese, but I doubt they do a blue cheese pizza.”

Tanya already had her mobile out and was calling the restaurant, which was actually a sports bar. On a piece of paper, I scribbled 'I'll pay!'. I intended to use my credit card, which I'd been doing for purchases like this.

"They said 20 minutes," Tanya announced when she'd finished the call.

"I'll leave now and wait if I have to. Do you have that old towel?"

"Not so old, so don't get it oily on the bike," she said going to a closet where she kept linen.

I hardly had to wait at the restaurant, and got back as expeditiously as I could. Tanya had the kitchen table set and some wine poured, and we wasted no time getting seated and opening the box.

"Wow. It's still steaming. Good on ya', Ian."

There wasn't much talk for a few minutes as we tucked in, though we did raise our glasses to each other to take a sip of wine. We actually ate all the pizza, in equal portions.

"Maybe we should have got two?" I mused.

"Nah. I was actually full about half way through the last triangle, but it was too tasty to leave."

"Yes. I'm comfortably full too."

"You want some dessert, Ian? I've a bit of chocolate cake my Mum baked. And ice cream in the freezer."

"In a while, unless you're eager to clear away."

"No. We can take the wine in the other room and put on TV or some music."

"I've no idea what music you like," I said.

"Same here. What do you like, Ian?"

"I don't follow pop music much. Back home I'm usually tuned to the CBC, but that's more news and features, though sometimes there's a review of musicians, and I'll have it on. But I don't remember any names. I'm not a very good promoter of national interests."

"If it weren't for what the girls talk about, I'd not know any names either. But from what I hear that they play, the Australian artists doing well are either crooners or imitators of American country music. OK for background, but I don't pay close attention. Sometimes have the oldies station on when I'm in the taxi – at least until I get a fare. Some drivers leave it on, but I think you never know what the passenger likes, and silence is better. People here generally don't tip, or very little, but why diminish the possibility?"

"I like some of the oldies too. Guess they've lasted. I also like some of the music that's used for folk dance. Zelda and I used to go to English and American folk dance."

"I don't know if I've ever heard any of that."

"I've some on my laptop as mp3 files if you want. Could even plug into your TV speakers I think."

"Sure. Let's have a listen."

It took a few minutes for me to find the audio cable that had RCA jacks on one end and the 3.5 mm headphone on the other and work out how to get things passed through to the TV, but then I was able to play some of the recordings I'd purchased of Playford dances and the jigs and reels of American contra. I



allowed the laptop program to scramble the order, and I set the volume low enough to allow easy conversation but still be heard. We didn't speak for the span of several tracks as we sat at each end of the sofa, listening and sipping our wine.

"I think some bush dances would use music like some of those lively ones. But there was a really haunting tune in the middle there," Tanya said.

"I don't know most of the names off by heart, but that tune I do know. It's called Shebang Shemore, though there are lots of spellings and pronunciations. We danced to it a couple of times, though the dance is a modern choreography. The tune dates to the late 17th century and is attributed to Turlough O'Carolan, the blind irish 'harper' as they called him."

"It's gorgeous. Hard to think it's so old."

"O'Carolan lurks through lots and lots of modern pieces in all sorts of genres."

"Have you looked into dancing here, Ian?"

"I made a brief attempt one day, but then someone knocked on my office door. I should see what's available, though Perth is so spread out, I'd have to find something pretty local."

"Sometimes I think I need to do something like that to provide a bit of social life."

As Tanya said this, a shadow of sadness passed across her face.

"Nobody in your life since Joe died?"

"Nah. Sometimes I join some of the other drivers at a local pub, but if I'm in the car, it's lemonade, and all the guys but one are married. The one who isn't married is definitely not for me. Too young and much too rough round the edges. What about you?"

"Similar. I've been to dancing a couple of times on my own, but most of the women are older, or else married. I actually like the older women. It's nice to have their friendship. Possibly in time they may have introduced me to their daughters or nieces, but we never got there. I think I was too heavily involved with dealing with Zelda anyway. Possibly mourning the loss of the person I'd loved."

"Yeah." There was a long pause. "People forget that just because your partner is dead – or in your case changed – you don't still love the person you committed yourself to. And on top of it, you lose the physical comforts. Especially women. Men can go to prostitutes."

Tanya could be, I'd been learning, rather direct.

"I'm not sure I'd know how to find a suitable prostitute," I said. "My lifestyle doesn't bring me in contact with anyone I'd recognize to be in the trade, though I'm sure I must have encountered women who do sex work. But I'd got used to sex, as well as easy and comfortable sexual affection, with someone I talked with, ate with, slept with, bathed with, travelled with. People talk of love and being in love and losing themselves. I had some of that with Zelda, but also quiet affection that would only be noticeable to someone very observant. When that disappeared, there was a huge hole in my life. That includes the physical side, but sex without friendship doesn't appeal to me much."

There was a silence for a minute or so. Tanya said

“What you said about ‘sex without friendship’ probably applies to me too. But, given the responsibility I have for the girls, I can’t take a chance on a passionate, or even a dull, romance. Mind you, a good bump and grind with a safe friend would likely feel pretty good.”

“Women have to worry about pregnancy. Sometimes about violence. And all of us about STDs. I suppose if I start to get really horny I’d better buy some condoms.”

Tanya said “I don’t have to worry about pregnancy. Had my tubes tied after Philippa. Joe was starting to get crazy. I said two kids were enough, but subconsciously I think I knew it would be really, really bad to have another kid when he wasn’t right.”

“A wise decision in retrospect,” I said. “But I’m sure you’d much rather Joe hadn’t got sick.”

“Of course. And I’m sure it’s the same for you with Zelda. Do you think she feels the loss too?”

“No idea. In the last year, I’ve not had a lot of communication with her, and what there has been has been about money and process. She’s not nasty to me. I suspect she may be a slave to getting her fix, and I’m just not part of the equation.”

“From what I know of you, Ian, you deserve better.”

“Well. Now I’m starting over. Coming here may be good as a means of a change of scenery, and that was my intention once I knew the divorce was going to happen. However, I’ll be the bad guy if I meet anyone here and then toodle off home after a year. These days it’s a huge amount of bureaucracy to get immigration either to Canada or Australia, even if a genuine marriage is going to take place. And truthfully, I’d be hard pressed to find a position here. There are so few real jobs in academe, and my specialty isn’t on any of the lists in Australia. The universities like a few visitors to move ideas around, but they also enjoy the fact that sabbatical fellows are paid elsewhere and yet generally do some work for the hosts. I’m organizing and running the regular seminars, for example.”

“That’s essentially a foreign country to me, though your talking about it gives me a better understanding of what universities are like.

But Ian, do you really think it would be so bad for you to have a fling or two here, as long as you are up front about your situation like you’ve been with me?”

“I guess I had that sort of thing in mind when I started looking for a sabbatical placement. Now I’m not so sure.”

“In my own case I’ve thought of trying to find a no-strings-attached affair so I don’t cling onto the first man who shows an interest, even if he’s really not good for me or the girls. I have to think of them too. They’ve a lot of baggage from Joe dying and they’re both at a vulnerable and formative age.”

“They’re good kids – well, young women. Keeping balance isn’t easy.”

“I’m lucky with my parents and my brother. They’ve got good families. Not perfect – lots of noise and sometimes verbal fights – but lots of rough love too.

Good examples for them.”

“And they’re nearby. Zelda’s family was out in British Columbia. Like having your family in Sydney or Brisbane. My Mom was not far away. My Dad ran off with a neighbour woman when I was a kid, and he hasn’t kept in touch. He left his paramour within six months – stranded her in northern Alberta. He never managed to settle down.”

Tanya said “You didn’t really answer when I suggested a fling might be good for you. Do you really think not? You went with that woman Katherine to the Shipwrecks Museum. I thought she seemed nice enough.”

“Katherine’s completing her thesis, and it isn’t out of range that I’ll be asked to be external examiner. Conflict of interest. Maybe after she passes the thesis defence.

But a fling surely depends on the woman, and how the fling works out. I could ask the same of you.”

“Fair go. And I’d have to answer pretty much the same way, with the additional concern of how to have a noisy orgasm with the girls around. Or rather how to avoid what’s called the walk of shame afterwards.”

“One of the sad things about society is how we use such a term for what should be something to applaud.”

“Yeah. One of my girlfriends jokes how she’d like to hold up scorecards like in figure skating for technical merit and artistic impression for how good a ... fuck ... was had.”

“The sex manuals say you’re not supposed to be judgmental about partners or the experiences, but I think it’s inevitable. I’ve had very few partners, and they were each very different. I’m not sure I could rank them, though. I cherish the memories, but can honestly say that one or two experiences were embarrassingly awkward. And I might have been the source of the awkwardness at least once.”

“Does anyone get it right every time?” Tanya asked.

I didn’t answer the question, but finished my wine. Then picked up the laptop and found a tune I thought might be appropriate to the moment and started it playing. The sensuous playing of a slow jig on a harp flowed into the room.

## Falling to a decision

“That’s gorgeous,” Tanya said. “What is it?”

“It’s another O’Carolan piece. It’s called ‘Quarrel with the Landlady’.”

Tanya spluttered a laugh then moved along the sofa.

Suddenly serious, she said “Ian. Put your arm round me. I feel ... suddenly lonely.”

I did as she asked, and she rested her head on my shoulder until the end of the track. When she lifted her head, my shoulder was wet.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You didn’t. Or at least, what made me cry was realizing that this is the first time for a long while that I’ve talked to a man like this. You know. About trying to live life and deal with the feelings.”

“Me too.”

She reached up and put her arms round my neck and gave me a little kiss on the lips. We both hesitated, then did a proper kiss, though not a slurpy one. With my arms round her, I could feel there was no bra under her sweatshirt that she was wearing over some comfortable shorts that came to six inches above the knee.

“Am I allowed to comment on no bra?” I asked.

“I wear a singlet to keep my nipples from showing too much, but don’t really need a bra.”

There was an awkward pause, then she said “I’m trying to decide if I should take off my top and have you play with my ... tits. But that would lead to ....”

“How about another half glass of wine while we decide how we want to proceed. Not a full glass or the decision might not be well-considered.”

“Wise thinking,” Tanya agreed, getting up and taking our glasses to the kitchen. In a minute she was back and handed me my glass, saying “A toast. May sex always be good for us.”

We toasted, and I said “Are we agreed on that?”

“If we’re not, I’ll be washing the juices out of my panties for nothing.”

I didn’t admit that I’d had an uncomfortable swelling in my pants for a few minutes. I said “Shall we shower or bathe and take our time?”

“Our bathroom’s a mess, so let’s shower in your place.”

We finished our wine, turned off lights and laptop and moved to the apartment. I made sure curtains were drawn, turned on the bedside lamp, extinguished the central light and turned down the bedclothes. The bed was a double, but of the narrowest dimensions.

Tanya was standing in the middle of the room looking a little awkward. “I’m suddenly feeling a bit shy,” she said.

“Want me to undress you?”

“No.... Yes ... I don’t know.”

“Last one undressed is still naked,” I said, dropping my jeans and starting to unbutton my shirt. At this, Tanya pulled her sweatshirt and singlet over her head at the same time, then undid her shorts and finally pulled down her panties just before I got my underpants down.

“You’ve still got your socks on. Sorry these are grandma knickers. They’re comfortable, but women seem to wear dental floss these days.” There was a wet patch in the crotch as she had implied.

I pulled my socks off, rather awkwardly balancing on one leg at a time and nearly falling over. I put my specs on the night stand.

“Did you remember a towel?” I asked.

“Damn. No. And the curtains in the kitchen aren’t closed.”

“Wrap my towel around you and maybe bring back a dressing gown or nightie. Also a spare towel to lie on so I don’t have to sleep in a wet spot.”

Tanya laughed. She actually took her clothes away too. She was back quite quickly and we went into the bathroom. The shower stall was roomy enough for both of us.

“Let me get the water adjusted,” I said.

“A gentleman, too.”

“Maybe just a naked man wanting to get a naked lady in the right mood.”

“You saw my panties. Doesn’t that indicate I’m in the right mood?”

We both giggled and I stepped into the shower, pulled Tanya in and slid the door shut.

“Try not to get my hair wet!”

I took the shower head off its mounting so I could point the spray. “I’ll hold and you wash off, then we’ll swap.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Tanya took the soap and washed her torso, turning to rinse. Then she said “Point the water at my bum, then I’ll turn round and we’ll get my ... er ... sports equipment washed off.”

This we did, and she used her fingers to make sure the spray got in the nooks and crannies. It was easier for guys, but when the time came I warned “Better not get soap in the little hole. It stings.”

“Yeah. Joe said that too.”

After I turned off the water, we realized the towels were on the other side of the room. “Stay here,” I said. “I’ll get them.”

I think both of us were getting anxious to be together, and probably weren’t fully dry when we lay down on my bed. We spent a bit of time kissing and running our hands over each other. Tanya’s breasts were, as she’d indicated, relatively small but pleasantly responsive.

“You’re getting wet too,” she said.

“Does that surprise you?”

“No.”

I started kissing her gently down her body. When I got to her belly button, I blew in it to make a noisy fart noise.

“Why d’you do that?” Tanya asked, not angry but surprised.

“To ensure we don’t take ourselves too seriously,” I answered.

“I’ll reserve judgment on that.”

I said “Lift your bum and I’ll put that pillow under you, and the towel on it.”

“Is this for some sort of kinky sex position?”

“If you consider a good tongue lashing of a pussy to be kinky, then it’s a kinky sex position.”

“Oh. Er. ... Joe would never ... you know ... do that. Though rather unfairly he expected me to suck his ...”

“Cock?”

“Yeah. And sometimes he’d go off in my mouth. It’s sort of exciting to do that to a man, but I’m kind of neutral about the taste, and he’d be a bit out of control and ....”

“If we get doing that, I’ll make sure you know if I’m close to going off,” I said.

“But you’re going to lick me?”

“Unless you don’t want me to.”

“Yes. I want you to, but I’m a bit worried you’ll find it a bit icky. I’ve stretch marks on my tummy, and a hairy bush. And my lady bits are kind of floppy.”

“We can trim the bush if you want. It makes things a bit more ... er ... accessible. The floppy lips might be fun to gently munch on.”

“Ian! You are really, really wicked.”

By now I’d got Tanya on the pillow, so I pushed her legs up and wrapped my mouth around the aforementioned floppy bits. Tanya responded with a startled intake of breath.

After this, we didn’t negotiate our activities, except Tanya asked me to turn around so she could play with me at one point. When I felt things getting close to an ejaculation, I gently pulled away and took a moment to come off the boil, then moved to enter her which she seemed eager to have me do. I didn’t last long, but she was more or less with me when I came.

After a decent interval, I reached for tissues and we disengaged. I sorted out the pillow and Tanya curled up against me with my arm round her shoulder. For a moment it felt a bit cramped, then we adjusted to each other and it was comfortable.

“I needed that,” Tanya said. “I had a really good orgasm on your tongue, and another little one when you were in me.”

“Is this where I hold up the numbers?” I teased.

“For me, you mean?”

“Don’t worry. I had a really, really good time.”

“Yes. It was really nice. Wonder what time it is?”

“I think around 9:30. We didn’t take much time. Ten minutes in the shower, fifteen with the sex.”

“Is that all? Too fast by at least half,” Tanya said.

“Probably the long wait since the last time for both of us.”

“Yeah, probably.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“We could try again in a few minutes,” I suggested.

“You’re in a hurry to make up for lost time,” she accused in a mocking fashion.

“And you’re not?” I shot back.

“Oh no. I could wait a long, long time. At least ten minutes.”

We laughed and I kissed her.

“How about cake and ice cream and a cup of tea? We’ve both been spewing fluid all over the place and need to replenish. I could feel myself gush at one point when you pressed your tongue on my clit. That was a new experience, by the way.”

“If I were in sex studies, I’d have to write that up in a paper.”

“So that my daughters could read it and have me die of embarrassment, I suppose.”

“Are you worried that they will be upset by your ... er ... sexuality is I guess the word?” I asked.

“Probably more that there is a possibility they could be upset by it, and that I don’t want to take the risk.”

“That’s understandable. Are you able to talk to them about sex and other awkward topics?”

“I’ve forced myself to talk to them as openly as I can, mainly because in the current world it’s dangerous for them to be ignorant. But so far we’ve talked mainly about the basic biology. Not much about feelings, or about pleasure. Or about contraception, which since we are nominally Catholic is supposedly forbidden. So’s tubal ligation. However, the Pope and his friends are all bachelors. Still, I guess I should try to work around to such topics soon. Though Anne actually asked me something the other day that could have been an opening. I’ll tell you later.”

“Let’s get dessert and tea. We can continue the conversation until we decide other things are more important.”

“Like sex? Or sleep?” Tanya asked.

“Whatever we both find suits us. Are we sleeping together?”

“I hadn’t thought. Yes. Why not? But my bed’s wider. Bring your pillow. I’ve got one that I find I particularly like.”

We put on pyjamas and ate our dessert in the kitchen, but took mugs of tea to Tanya’s bedroom. I’d brought the spare towel to lie on.

“Are you assuming we’re going to go at it again?” Tanya asked.

“Are you?” I shot back.

“Yes please!”

“How do you want to proceed?” I queried.

“Do you think we should reduce my bush? And I got a hair or two of yours up my nose, so we could trim you a bit too.”

“Gives lots of opportunity for studying the sports equipment,” I suggested.

“I don’t want a razor near my sensitive bits,” Tanya said. “I mentioned earlier about Anne asking me something. She said some of the girls in her class said they’d got a Brazilian wax because boys expected it, and she asked if she could get one. I said it wasn’t necessary, and rather fobbed her off, but now I think I’d better talk to her and see what she thinks.”

“You’ve never tried waxing, I take it?”

“No. You? Or Zelda?”

“No. Zelda had a small electric razor thingy that was called a bikini trimmer. We used that. It had a sort of comb guard that was adjustable to get a short carpet. Once or twice we tried her lady shaver and got things mostly smooth. That was interesting, but the effect doesn’t last long.”

“I’ve a friend who works in women’s fashions who says waxing is the only way, and well worth the pain. But from what I gather, she has to let the hair get a certain length before she goes to the salon.”

“I honestly didn’t have any trouble getting at what you called the floppy bits. But we could try your electric razor. I assume it’s well shielded.”

“I’m feeling wonderfully naughty. I think you should make me a landing strip, but ever so thin.”

“We’ll want to rinse you off after or I’ll have to contend with bits of hair. Me too if you want to reduce the length.”

## The morning after

I woke to a ray of sun coming between a crack in the curtains. From the sound of the street, it could not be early. A mop of hair beside me stirred. A hand reached back and encountered my pyjamas at my hip.

“Oh. You’re here. I wasn’t sure if you’d stay all night or go back to the apartment if you woke up.”

“I just woke now. Not sure what time it is.”

Tanya lifted her head, and I realized there was a clock radio on her side of the bed. The time was 8:28.

“Wow. I slept right through.”

“We didn’t exactly roll over until well after midnight.”

“Yeah. But I wasn’t exactly watching the time. I hope the neighbours couldn’t hear me. I think I made quite a lot of noise.”

“More moans and groans than screams, though there were a couple of little squeals of joy in the mix.”

“I’m thinking Janice may be right about waxing. At least getting the hair off so you can get at things.”

“There’s probably a bit of enhanced sensation from that. But likely the process of removing the hair, rinsing off and then having some lotion applied like I did gives time for things to build up steadily, then tongue and fingers have more effect.”

“Yes. You gave my lady bits a really thorough manhandling.”

“I hope not too much or too rough.”

“Absolutely not. At one point you could have slapped me or bit me and I’d probably have gone off again. As if I didn’t go off several times. Ian. It’s a pity I didn’t get a mirror. You talked of turning my pussy into a ... cunt. That language kind of bothers me, except it’s clear you say it positively.”

“Don’t you feel a change when you get stimulated? Like me getting erect and wet too.”

“I guess so. Just I can’t see it, even though I don’t have to try to look past big tits.”

“You have lovely tits.”

“Oh come on. They’re way too small for my body.”

“I like ’em. I expect most men would. They’re firm and respond nicely. And they’re part of you. Don’t get distracted by all the hype. There’s too many people trying to make people feel inadequate so they’ll spend money unnecessarily.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Just that I’ve always been a bit jealous of gals with big ones.”



I reached between her legs – she had on only a large T shirt – and discovered fresh wetness. Raising myself on an elbow I kissed her, held the kiss gently but firmly as I rolled on top of her. My PJs had an opening at the front. Somehow Tanya let her legs apart and I slipped in.

“I’ve never managed that before,” I said.

“Do you regard it as consensual or non-consensual?”

“Madam. Would you wish that I withdrew from your eminently splendid lady parts?”

Tanya laughed, in fact so hard I popped out.

“Seems my lady parts gave you their own answer,” she teased. “Now lie back. I want to examine your equipment in the daylight.”

For the next while we both examined each other’s equipment. Well, more than examined.

Afterwards she came in my arms again.

“This is going to be very inconvenient,” she said.

“Meaning Ann and Philippa?”

“Precisely.”

“And it may be quite painful emotionally when I have to go back to Canada.”

“Yes, it will. But you know, Ian, if we come to love each other, and I expect we will, we’ll have the knowledge that we helped each other through the bad patch. And we talked very clearly about how difficult it would be for one of us to move to be with the other. It happens that you are passing through my life just now, but like you said, there’s no career for you here. And for me, I’d lose the support of family there, and who knows how the girls would adapt. Small kids get to grow up with a system, but Anne and Philippa are almost grown-ups. So we’d better enjoy each other while we can and not pine for what we really can’t have.

But as I said, having fun together is going to be really inconvenient.”

“Sneaking around will be difficult, and very embarrassing if we’re caught. It could be worth asking the girls what they think about you and I sharing time together, leaving out most of the details, but being honest that we enjoy each other and that we give each other emotional support at a difficult time.”

Tanya said “If I do, they might expect to be able to bring boyfriends here to sleep over.”

“Yes. They might expect equal treatment. But I’m guessing that it’s a lot safer for a young woman to be able to enjoy sex, hopefully with proper protections, in her own home than the back of a car or a cheap motel bed or somewhere else inappropriate.”

“It’s hard to think of the girls as ... you know ... doing it.”

I said “They’re not quite of age yet, but only a couple of years shy. Trouble is parents clearly had to have had sex in the past, but somehow kids can’t imagine it now. They probably would find it hard to recognize Mum doing what she did over the last half hour.”

“That’s a low blow.”

“Is that an Aussie expression for what you were doing to me with your mouth?”

“Ooh. I’ll get you for that.”

“We seem to have both been getting each other. And how marvellous it is,” I said, giving her a kiss.

We showered – together, but without any real fooling around – then went out for breakfast. There was some shopping to do for things needed for the house and the bikes. The day became gently domesticated. Along the way, we picked up tickets for a local amateur theatre production, which we’d go to that Saturday evening. In the afternoon, we each did things we had to do, neither avoiding nor seeking each other, and in fact often in the same room.

The play was a bit uneven. A couple of very good actors; a number of very wooden ones. We’d had a simple dinner of stew beforehand. Tanya had made it a week or so earlier in quantity and frozen some for an easy meal later. After the play I took her to a bistro for dessert, but she asked if we could share a club sandwich, which actually suited us both better. After that we came home and tumbled into her bed.

In my arms, she said “Should I wash off so ... you know?”

“Are you needing another orgasm?”

“No. Just worried it’s expected after a night out.”

“I’ve had a nice day,” I said.

“So have I. Night Ian.”

She fell asleep rather quickly and I had to carefully extricate my arm. She’d told me she was doing a Sunday morning shift starting a bit after 7 a.m. so I checked the alarm was set for 6:30. She knew how to get ready quickly, and breakfast would be very simple, though I planned to get up and make sure it was ready for her.

## Awkward discussions

Like most weeks, I didn’t see Tanya because she was working morning and afternoon shifts. I suppose we could have knocked on each other’s doors to talk. Or phoned each other – we’d exchanged numbers as soon as I got a mobile. And we had email, though Tanya and the girls had just the one computer, so not a great idea.

Friday afternoon as I wheeled in to put my bike in the shed, Anne and Philippa were on the front veranda. Anne asked “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Sure. Is it purely a social offering, or is there something you want to talk about?”

Both girls looked flustered, but Anne composed herself and said “We like talking with you, but there is something that we’ve been wondering about.”

“Better put the kettle on then,” I said “And also better find a chair for me.”

“I’ll get one,” Philippa volunteered.

A few minutes later, I had a mug of tea in hand and there were some biscuits on a plate on a small plastic table. Anne said “Mum’s been all nervous. Then she started asking me about some school friends who’d been talking about getting

a Brazilian. I'd mentioned it a few weeks ago, and and at that time she tried to change the topic."

"And she asked me if I was sure to be carrying menstrual pads with me in case I started," Philippa said. "Actually it happened a couple of months ago. She'd told me what might happen, so no surprise. And it wasn't a big deal. Anne helped me make sure no mess, so I guess Mum didn't even notice, as there wasn't anything special to see in the laundry."

"So you're wondering why your Mum might suddenly have decided to talk about things that relate to sexuality?" I said, confronting the elephant.

"Yeah. I guess that's it," Anne said, though I sensed the real question was whether I was sleeping with their mother.

"Well, last weekend when you were away, I came home and your Mum was, I think, rather thoughtful. Perhaps a little sad. So I asked if she'd like to go out for dinner or do take out. We got a pizza and had some wine and had a really frank discussion of how life can be quite difficult. You both are aware that I was married, and that I cared a great deal for my wife who, through an accident and painkillers, became a different person than I married. I think from your own unfortunate experiences with your Dad, you have at least some understanding of how people can get into a state that makes it difficult for the people who love them."

"I hardly remember Daddy before he ... you know?" Philippa said.

"I'm sure there's some good memories. Sometimes it's harder to remember the good times."

"Yeah," Anne said.

There was quiet for over a minute. We drank our tea and nibbled biscuits.

Anne said "So you think Mum is thinking of trying to meet someone?"

"I know she's thinking about it. That's part of what we talked about. I've been wondering where I'm going myself."

"But you're a man," Philippa said. "You just have to go out and ask."

"Maybe not," Anne said.

"Definitely not. I loved Zelda. We shared a lot of our lives and interests. It's not easy to find the right balance. And here in Australia, if I take up with someone and am not completely up-front with them, they may think we can team up for life. But in less than a year, I go back to Canada, and nowadays immigration is really slow and difficult, even if you marry. If I wanted to stay here, there's likely no job that builds on my training and background. So I could be a love 'em and leave 'em guy – in other words be pretty nasty – or I can be very honest and careful. And I don't think your Mum can envisage uprooting the two of you and leaving behind the rest of her family, let alone adjust herself to a whole different country."

"I always thought being grown-up was easier," Anne said.

"We thought you and Mum were – you know ..." Philippa said.

"Pippa!" Anne said.

"Certainly your Mum and I had opportunity. And I can tell you that I think she is very attractive and personable. From my perspective it's most important that I can talk to her as someone with rather similar experience to

my own about the difficulties of living with the loss of someone you love. But to confront Philippa's concern, do either of you think it would be terrible if your Mum found someone who treated her respectfully and with whom she could share some fun."

"The Church takes a dim view of fun," Anne said.

"They take a dim view of quite a lot of things other people consider sensible and positive," I said. I wasn't sure if they knew about Tanya's tubal ligation. But then Anne said

"Yeah. One of the priests learned she had a tubal ligation after Philippa was born. Big stink. Threatened to have her excommunicated until Mum pointed out that would make it awkward for us to go to church. And they push for us to go to the Catholic school, but Mum can't afford the fees, and won't go begging for favours."

"It's a real pity so many people think that everyone else has to share their particular flavour of religion or politics. I really like sitting in a church, perhaps with some organ music playing, and think – meditate perhaps – about things going on in my life. It helps to face the ups and downs. Makes things a bit brighter. But I don't need anyone telling me exactly what I should believe or exactly how I should behave if it's not hurting anybody but me if things don't quite work out."

"Do you go to church, Ian?" Philippa asked.

"Not recently. Sometimes outdoors serves as well. Somewhere that I can think without being disturbed. I don't find I'm inspired by chanting prayers with a lot of others. Though I must admit, well-sung hymns can be uplifting."

"Some of the singing at Holy Rosary sounds like a bunch of sheep with extreme constipation," Anne said.

I couldn't help laughing. "A powerful image. Good one!"

Philippa said "Did Mum seem unhappy when she was talking to you?"

"No. I don't think unhappy is the right word. I think she is trying to figure out how she might find someone she could share life with who would amplify her strengths and minimize her weaknesses. But she worries that if she pursues her own wants and needs, you two might feel that you were being left out of her love and energy."

"Uncle Frank says she needs a good bonk," Anne said.

"With someone who is a friend and treats you with respect, a good bonk, as you put it, can be very rewarding and good for the spirit. I hope your Uncle Frank put some conditions on what he said."

"He didn't know we were listening to him and Aunt Clarisse," Philippa interjected.

"And he goes to church every Sunday, but it's clear he doesn't believe all the message," Anne said.

"Do you believe all the message? Will you wait until you're married to try out things?"

"Maybe. Maybe not," Anne said.

"Well, I'm not going to encourage you to break with the Church. I will urge you to be kind to your Mum, and try not to upset her. But also to try to live

by your own code of morals and ethics, not hurting others and not letting them tell you how to live. That also means being really aware of what you are doing, of possible consequences. Nobody who takes life seriously finds that easy.”

There was a silence for about a minute.

“Thanks, Ian,” Philippa said. I was impressed that the younger girl recognized when it was time to draw a conversation to a close.

“Yes. Thanks. Especially for not being all huffy and not talking to us,” Anne said.

“Thanks for the tea and biscuits.”

## Quiet discussions

That Friday evening I’d joined Gordon and Michael at a local pub. I had a hamburger and a cider, then we played some darts, at which I proved a liability to anyone whose team to which I was attached. We didn’t stay late and I got back around 9, just as Tanya was pulling into the drive.

“Hi Ian.”

“Hi. Good shift?”

“Not bad. Got several fairly long drives and fares back.”

“The girls wanted to have a chat with me today.”

“Oh. Bother. What’d you tell them?”

“That they should be kind to you. That you cared about them, which made it difficult to follow your own wishes and wants. That you and I both had lost people we loved and our conversations were about trying to figure out how to live our lives well.”

“I’ll have to go in. They’ll have heard the car.”

“Come round when you’ve sent them to bed. Tell them you need to ask me something about the rent cheque.”

“All right. May be a while.”

As it turned out, it was about 25 minutes before I heard a knock on the outside door. I’d actually wondered if she’d come to the communicating interior door, but that was near the girls’ bedrooms.

I let her in and we kissed. It was a short kiss, as Tanya was anxious to ask about my conversation with Anne and Philippa.

What followed was an exchange in not much more than a whisper.

“Did you tell them about us?”

“I told them that we’d talked about the people we’d loved and lost. I pointed out that we were both without a partner at the moment, but I was going to be going back to Canada after a year and that it would be very difficult for me to stay here, so I had to avoid doing anything to cause hurt to someone. And they told me the local priest learned about your tubal ligation and threatened excommunication, and that they weren’t much impressed by the Church. Apparently they overheard your brother Frank saying you probably needed a good bonk. I said that a good bonk could be very rewarding with a partner who was respectful and kind. They said they thought it was odd that Frank went

to church every Sunday but didn't believe the message. That allowed me to suggest that they should be true to their own moral compass, as long as that didn't hurt others. Nor should they allow others to direct their lives. At about that point, Philippa recognized I wasn't going to say anything more explicit about us, and then a few seconds later Anne did too. And that was the end of the conversation."

Tanya had listened rather stone-faced to all this.

"So they don't know for sure we've ... bonked?" At this she giggled, despite herself.

"I tried, and think I succeeded, in steering the discussion to the important issues that we each need to make our own decisions as we try to do our best to live our lives."

"Thanks Ian. Well done."

"I expect there'll be more to say all round. But hopefully you'll be closer to Anne and Philippa out of it."

"Unfortunately not closer to a few good orgasms."

"We'll live in hope."

After a big hug and a kiss, Tanya left by the way she'd come.

## Thirteenth Birthday Party

That Sunday there was a birthday party for Philippa. Her actual birthday had been the week before, and the tree top walk was a present, even though Anne got to share it. I was invited to the barbeque in the front yard and on the veranda. I was told to come around near 4 o'clock.

In a second-hand bookstore I'd found a paperback of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and I put this in a paper bag with a couple of chocolate bars as a present. When Philippa opened the bag, it was clear that the chocolate was very welcome, but the book was an unknown quantity.

"It's considered one of the major Canadian novels," I said, "but it isn't necessarily an easy book. My guess is that you'll find it grows on you. I know that when we had to read it for school, I thought it wasn't very interesting, but when I read it again ten years later I found it really moving."

"I'll remember that, so I don't toss it," Philippa said. "But thanks. And for the chocolate, which I won't keep for ten years." The last words were said laughing, and I laughed with her.

I was introduced to Frank and Clarisse Thomas, Tanya's brother and sister-in-law and their three children. Alan was about the same age as Anne, but seemed younger, though I've already noted how Anne appeared older than her years. Christine and Jacob were 10 and 8, respectively. It was difficult to decide if Frank was older or younger than Tanya.

Tanya's parents, Jack and Angela were also there, and I spent the first half hour or so chatting with them. They'd been to Canada, but on the requisite Vancouver, Banff, Toronto, Montreal, PEI/Anne of Green Gables tour. My mind immediately registered that Tanya's Anne was with an E. How did I know

that? Must have seen it written somewhere. Musing on this, I almost missed a question from Angela. She'd asked if I missed my family.

"I keep in touch with my mother, who recently got a computer so we can do email and Skype. My father left when I was young – he couldn't settle down and we lost touch with him. Other family live far away and we exchange Christmas cards, but not a lot more. If Tanya told you anything of my history, you'll know I'm recently divorced. My ex-wife got addicted to a painkiller after a car accident, and she became a different person who didn't want to be married to me."

"We know more than we'd like about drug addiction," Jack mumbled.

"I've had a couple of conversations with Tanya. Other people can overlook that death or divorce end the everyday interaction with someone, but they don't turn off your feelings."

"Too right!" Angela said. "We just hope Tanya finds a way to be happy. Right now she seems to be in a fairly good place, but I think there's a loneliness, even if Anne and Philippa are around."

The "barbie" was loaded with sausages and shrimps, as well as some vegetables to roast. Food would be ready soon. I found myself next to Frank.

"Tanya seems a lot happier with you in the studio than that larrikin she had there whose cheque bounced. Cost her a bit of cash she can ill-afford."

"I guess I'm glad he messed up," I said. "Finding a place so quickly was really helpful. And I like it, as well as Tanya and the girls."

"Anne and Philippa really enjoyed their outing to the ships museum. Having two historians probably helped. Anne showed me the replica of the old Dutch ship on the Internet. Pretty cool."

"Yes. Even as a historian, visiting Bataviastad shopping centre and suddenly being in front of a Dutch East Indiaman was quite the shock."

"Clar and I haven't got to Europe yet. On the books, but gotta get the sprogs a bit older so we can go without them. I make decent money with construction, but taking five of us all that way's a bit pricey."

"Yes. I'm fortunate this year that there's just me, but I still have to be a bit careful with the spending."

"I've no idea what professors get paid. Is the money good?"

"Well. It depends on the position. A lot of universities are now playing games hiring people on two to three year contracts so they don't promote them. The main problem with that is that these gypsy lecturers have no long-term commitment to giving students a good education. And universities often use student evaluations for deciding who gets to stay. That's a recipe for game-playing and inflating the marks to keep students happy. But I was lucky to get what is called a tenure-track position, and I've a regular job – a permanent one that means I'll only lose it for misbehaviour or no students to teach. The pay for that is reasonable. It'd be better if I was in business or engineering or medicine. History isn't paid any premium, but I get enough to have a decent life."

"Things are never quite like you imagine them. People talk as if the ivory tower is easy-street. You think that profs only have to teach a few hours a week,

but I'm guessing there's lots more."

"We're expected to administer programs, and we have to develop and update the courses, write the texts or the readings. Marking essays is one of the least joyful tasks, especially for the intro classes of nearly 100 students."

"Strewth. Reading 100 essays. How many pages?"

"I limit them to 10 pages double spaced with a 12 point font or they'd write novels. Had one student appealed his mark because I disqualified a 100-page essay single spaced and 8 point. The font was almost too small to read."

"How'd the appeal go?" Frank asked.

"If he'd had 11 regular pages, probably would have been accepted, or I wouldn't have disqualified him anyway, but my rules were clearly stated on the syllabus that was published when the students registered. And I'd put them in big letters and boldface. You learn to think ahead about how students will try to weasel their way out of following instructions."

"Yeah. When we get new people on the crew, I have to watch they're not taking shortcuts. Caught a guy last week who didn't get his measurements cross-checked. I like to have two guys, one measuring, another going back to check them. But this guy was the checker and he just ticked the boxes. I was actually in the portapotty but there was a crack at the edge of the door. Lucky I saw him do it, because one measurement was way off. Worker had got digits 3 and 4 as 4 and 3. Would have cost us ten to fifteen thou to fix. Fired him on the spot, then had to go write it up so we don't get a wrongful dismissal lawsuit. And I had to get the original worker to sign off a statement, but he was OK with that. Admitted he's dyslexic, which I'd sort of figured out over the time he's been with us. But he's a good worker. We'll just tell others that they've gotta do the checks."

"Having a good team's important," I said.

"I think that's what hurt Tanya the most when Joe went silly. Clarisse and I go at each other a bit, but it's all noise and bluster. She's a damn good woman, and I hope she knows it."

The lady in question must have been close by, because she almost jumped between us. "Who'd you say was a damn good woman, Frank Thomas?"

"I might – just might, mind you – have been referring to my lovely wife."

"Well, I guess I'll let you say that." She gave him a big sloppy kiss, then asked me "You ready for some grub, Ian?"

As dusk approached I said my thank yous and went back to the studio. I put the radio on softly. I'd acquired a clock radio within a couple of weeks of moving in here. Cost me around \$20, and I now realize a good investment. It served as a clock, but also to jog me to change tasks, get up and move around, and so on. Also the place didn't seem to solitary. I guess that emptiness still hovered.

Around 10 I was still dabbling at a paper I'd been writing for a while when there was a soft knock at my door. I opened it and let Tanya in.

Softly she said "Thanks for coming today."

"Surely I should be thanking you. Great meal. I liked your parents and Frank and Clarisse."



“They liked you too. Frank said he hadn’t realized that university profs were regular blokes before. Clarisse was a little more ... blunt.”

“Meaning?”

“Her words were ‘In your place I’d make sure he knew I’d empty his balls for him.’”

“Is she normally so graphic?”

“I think she was trying to shock me a little, even though she knows I spend a lot of time with the taxi drivers, who aren’t known to be delicate of expression.”

“I appreciate her vote of confidence, though it takes no account of Anne and Philippa.”

“I have an awful feeling Philippa overheard.”

“That could serve to open a channel of conversation, but perhaps best coming from her.”

“Yes.”

There was a distinct pause. Then I asked “Did Clarisse’s comment cause panty wetness?”

Tanya giggled. “It did. Rather uncomfortable with Mum and Dad around.”

“Are you here for wet panty relief?”

“I’m not really sure. Probably more that I needed to talk about it. We can’t make a lot of noise.”

“Short and sweet but quiet and gentle?” I suggested.

“Yes. That might be the ticket.”

## Delicate diplomacy

Katherine joined me in the coffee area at lunchtime one day during the week. It was showery so outside wasn’t attractive. People would then grab a tea or coffee and sit in the seminar room to eat. Today there were just the two of us.

“How’s the thesis coming?” I asked.

“It’s essentially done. Has been for three months. I’m doing re-reads and lots of checking references and the formatting rules.”

“That’s impressive. Many students leave before finishing their dissertation. In North America we often say ABD for ‘all but dissertation’, but really it’s almost a tragedy how many people don’t get the degree.”

“I realized that almost as soon as I came here. But I’m following up the archive material I mentioned earlier, so I had a good start. Jerome Johnson is my supervisor, and we’re about to start the submission process.”

“From what you said, we both research the history of the evolution of communities, so I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest I’ll be a name mentioned as external examiner.”

“I think Jerome had that in mind when he invited you here.”

“Means we have to be a bit circumspect about social interactions,” I said.

“Yeah. No dating. But I think the visit to the museum with Tanya’s daughters was certainly within bounds. And group gatherings like the pub and football.”

“It’s sometimes difficult in academic circles to function socially in a normal way. You have to walk on eggs to avoid any – I want to say intimacy, but that word’s been polluted with sexual overtones – so I guess closeness will have to do. Yet the people you meet in your academic life are precisely the people with whom you could have a really strong partnership, since you share a lot of important pursuits right from the start. But there’s all sorts of conflicts of interest over evaluation and promotion and supervisor / worker matters.”

“And even if two people do get involved, there’s never two jobs separated by less than half a continent.”

“If I say ‘Terrible pity’ in response do I risk a charge of sexual harassment?”

Katherine laughed. “No. But I think you’ve summarized the situation rather well.”

We turned to eating our sandwiches. The conversation had me a little ... rattled. Up to now I’d been aware of Katherine. As I mentioned, she was a tidy woman. About as tall as I, perhaps a little taller, that is, about average for a man but a bit taller for a woman. Not conventionally pretty, but if you looked carefully, handsome. If she smiled, which was rare, then striking. I’d got so out of practise in looking at women that the realization I was very attracted to her had crept up on me as a surprise.

Katherine said, “I’ll suggest we only talk about specific topics of our research, and not discuss the thesis. Discussing the thesis with people who might be examiners isn’t against the rules, but I suspect we’ll both be happier to avoid it.”

“That makes sense. Tell me, are the formatting rules here awkward.”

Katherine laughed. “Of course they’re awkward. I think universities must have people thinking up ways to make doctoral students learn the innermost secrets of text processing software.”

“Do they provide a template?”

“Yeah. There’s templates for Word and LaTeX and maybe other software. I’m using LaTeX. My ex-boyfriend was a geek and showed me how to use it. Steep learning curve, but there’s always a way to do just about anything. And I’ve also learned how to work with Subversion, a version control system. Had to do a bit of negotiating to get server access so I could store the repository on a University machine.”

“How does that work?” I queried.

“Each time you start working, you update the local copy of the work, which can be a big collection of directories and files. When you finish, you commit the changes back. The neat thing, though I don’t use it, is that two or more people can edit the same document at the same time, and their commits will be merged if there are no conflicts. Otherwise they must agree the merge. But I just take advantage of the versioning. I can revert to earlier texts if I decide I’ve made a mistake. And I get off-site backup as a bonus.”

“Doesn’t Word do something similar?”

“Probably. I found Word was constantly being far too helpful. Then I couldn’t seem to get back to what I wanted. Even the help documents for Word from the University warns to keep a thesis in small chunks that can be backed

up in case of corruption. Subversion isn't always friendly – I've had to fix some glitches once or twice – but it's not too bad. Moreover, LaTeX is a plain text format, and there are tools to view differences between files. Unfortunately, the computer types are moving to *git*, which is the version control system Linus Torvalds created to handle the source code of the Linux kernel."

"Do LaTeX and Subversion cost much?"

"I'm running Linux, so everything I use is open source. Supposedly free, but that word covers lots of sins, since you inevitably spend time learning, and there's a moral imperative to help others too."

"Interesting!" was how I summed up our conversation.

## Helping out a schoolchum

Around the first of October, Philippa mentioned to her mother that a schoolchum, Rachel, was worried because her father was supposed to have a hernia operation. Philippa knew the name, but had no idea what that meant, except that he would be in hospital at least one night and probably two.

For most families, this would be an inconvenience and a temporary upset, but two years before, Rachel's mother had died of breast cancer. Ed Morse had managed to look after Rachel. Ed worked as an accountant, and his partners were kind enough to let him establish an office in his house from which he worked, though since the house was in a residential area he couldn't have clients come there except to drop off or pick up documents. However, he could and did go to his clients when Rachel was in school, though sometimes he would arrange someone to mind her if he knew he would be late.

Rachel was a few months younger than Philippa, and Ed couldn't leave her alone. He was exploring how to hire someone to live-in for a few days when Tanya called to offer that Rachel could stay with Anne and Philippa, even though Tanya would be out with the taxi some of the time, of course.

I wasn't aware of the situation until the second night that Rachel was staying at the Walkers. When I wheeled in late in the afternoon, Anne, Philippa and Rachel were on the veranda, and I was introduced and the situation explained. Feeling unable to offer anything else, I expressed my wishes for Rachel's father to recover quickly.

At the time, I took little note of Rachel's stay, but it led to later events that were important to Tanya and, indirectly, to me.

## Small mercies

In October I gave two of my own seminars on two rather different aspects of Canadian history. One was the emergence of Canada in reaction to the American 'manifest destiny' doctrine. The other was the decidedly more local story of Perth Ontario, which I confess I chose to present for the coincidence of names that Katherine had prompted.

With the seminars, a couple of papers I was working on, my research into the development of the Perth area in Western Australia, I didn't have a lot of personal time. Still, I kept up some social activities, going to some minor sports events and pub nights with a varying collection of grad students and the occasional professor.

Tanya and I wanted to spend more private time together, but Tanya's schedule and family obligations worked against us a lot of the time. However, the night after Ed had been discharged and Rachel had gone home, there was a quiet knock on my door.

"How are things?" I asked, after a hug and kiss.

"Not bad, apart from not enough ... talk and sex."

"Yeah. After our rather busy weekend, we've managed only three pleasant but constrained interactions."

Tanya said "More quiet ones would be nice. A few noisy ones too would be even better."

"I'll not disagree."

As usual, we talked softly. Nothing had been said, but we were undressing as we spoke, and were soon embracing in bed.

"Oh. Some good news. Frank and Clarisse have invited the girls on a weekend camping up at Wannagaren Nature Reserve in two weeks time. I think I'll take a weekend off from the taxi."

There was much less talk for the next few minutes. Sadly, it was too short and not nearly as uninhibited as either of us would like. Still, there was affection and gentle pleasure.

## Stolen weekend

The weekend near the end of October when Frank and Clarisse took the kids camping was an important one for Tanya and I. We were able to spend two nights together. While some might expect it was all sex all the time, we actually spent a lot of our time doing some tourist activities, as Tanya admitted that being a local meant one put things off because they were 'always there'. On the Saturday, we took a drive to Bunbury, and on Sunday to York. I was particularly impressed by the mangrove shores near Bunbury. We don't get such shorelines in Canada.

It was also the time that the Jacaranda trees bloomed in their splendid blast of mauve. They would punctuate my memories of this weekend – almost a stolen weekend – with a woman I very much enjoyed spending time with.

Both days I made sure to take Tanya out for meals. Moreover, I did a bit of research and was able to choose places that were more than standard pub or take-out establishments. The trick had been to avoid going too up-scale, or Tanya might get uncomfortable about how she was dressed or what the names on the menu meant. We didn't book ahead, but I'd made a couple of lists of possibilities from internet searches.

After lunch in Bunbury, Tanya drove to Binnigup Beach. She'd told me to bring my "bathers" – Australian for swimsuit and I managed to record that I'd swum in the Indian Ocean. Tanya, having told me to be ready to swim, then discovered that after a decade of no use, her own "bathers" had lost all stretchiness in the fabric.

"Maybe we can go shopping along the way?" I suggested.

"Or go to North Swanbourne Beach,"

"Why there?" I asked.

"Clothing optional. Or more like clothing forbidden. Nude beach area. You hadn't heard about it? It's not so far away up west of Claremont."

"No. Though I had heard that a lot of Australian women go topless to sunbathe. Sorry sunbake. But would you like to go there to swim?"

"In some ways it would be nice as long as one didn't feel watched. As long as everyone was just ... there."

"That makes sense. Though I suspect there's a lot of voyeurs."

"I've only driven by. Had a couple of fares up that way, but they weren't going to the beach. And pick ups wouldn't earn me any money."

"Oh. Why?"

"Where'd they keep their money?"

I laughed. "Agreed. My stupidity."

In the event, we shopped in Bunbury and got Tanya a simple one-piece, much like that worn by competitive swimmers. She didn't need what is termed 'support'. As we came out of the sea after a swim, I said "That swimsuit looks good on you."

"It feels a bit ... thin."

"Yeah. Hugs the curves, so it makes it clear you are a woman."

"This breeze is making my nipples hard, and they show through the material."

"Better to just ignore that. It doesn't look provocative. What happened to the sentiment that you might like to swim nude?"

"Bedroom bravado. Disappeared at the front door."

We both chuckled and settled on our towels. We didn't say much for about half an hour as we watched people and the sea while we allowed the sun and breeze to dry us, then headed for the facilities to change.

York was the first major settlement inland by the colonists in Western Australia. Sunday in the fascinating Town Hall I wished there were dancing to join, as I suspected the splendid wooden floor to be sprung, that is, to have horse hair or other material hammered between the joists underneath. A lot of modern buildings put wood over concrete. By the end of an evening, ankles are then sore.

## Sand fly woes

On Monday morning I noticed a sort of rash on my wrist. Even some small blisters. And it itched like hell. I had to be really careful not to scratch until it

bled. When I got to the Department I went to see Louise to ask if there were a clinic on campus. When I showed her my wrist, she said “Almost certainly sand flies. Where’ve you been in the last two days.”

I told her about Bunbury and York.

“Probably the mangrove shore at Bunbury. We say sand flies, but its a whole range of midges and small flies, often smaller than a millimeter. Locals get immune to the fly saliva that causes the itch. But maybe get it checked at the health clinic to be sure. I’ll show you on the campus map.”

A male nurse at the health clinic confirmed what Louise had said. Also to not believe a tale that the rash was an allergic reaction to fly pee. “It’s a protein in the saliva that causes the reaction, and a nasty one too. But that protein is heat-sensitive. A very hot shower helps, but even better is a spoon that’s been dipped in water that’s been brought to the boil and left for a minute or so. Be careful not to get a burn, but the contact should feel painful, just not damage the skin. There are even special heat-pens, but probably not worth the money. And since you seem sensitive, use a DEET-based insect repellent if you’re going where the buggers might be. And come back if the rash or blisters don’t go down or get infected. That’s the main risk apart from going nuts from the itch.”

I had to fill out a form for the clinic, and wondered if I’d have to pay, but it seemed that a short consultation with a nurse such as mine was considered part of the general management of health on campus. Probably U W A didn’t want students to stay away if they had a communicable illness.

Back at the Department I did the hot spoon treatment. The itch wasn’t gone, but it was reduced.

When I told the girls about the bites that afternoon, they were less sympathetic than they might be.

“Mum should’ve known the sand flies would be about,” Philippa said.

“Don’t you have them in Canada?” Anne asked.

“Not as such. We have mosquitoes and black flies. The latter are probably closest to sand flies. They breed in fast moving water, though. And mosquitoes that breed in stagnant pools, old tires and bird baths. Some people joke that the mosquitoes up in the North are big enough to carry off a small moose.”

“So you can use a screen to keep them out?” Anne asked.

“Yes. And some of the black flies, though others are pretty small, apparently like the sand flies. Got your computer going?”

Philippa said yes.

“Search for ‘National Film Board Black Fly Song’.”

She did this, and they had a good laugh at the animated performance of Wade Hemsworth’s song. Anne said “It’s the same here with folk remedies. People talk about using Vegemite to stop the sandflies biting and things like Dettol and eucalyptus oil.”

“The nurse said some of the locals get immune to the bites more or less,” I said.

Philippa said “Maybe. But I got bitten when we went camping, though just a couple of them. I used the hot spoon treatment so I wouldn’t scratch too

much.”

## Potential dilemma

The first week of November I had a workshop conference in Melbourne. I added three days to play tourist, though I ensured I had a meeting on one of those days. I was giving an informal paper, actually a repeat of one of my seminars at U W A. That let me avoid extra work and I got a practise run on the presentation. Apart from seeing a bit of Melbourne and doing some academic work, the trip was pleasantly unremarkable. As I entered expenses into the sabbatical record and backed them up, I realized I was getting more efficient at making such records. Hopefully the Canada Revenue Agency would accept the charges as allowable. I was careful to also put non-work expenses into the file. I placed these in a separate ”personal expenses” column. For the Melbourne trip, I did that for one day that I just spent on tourist activities. I also had a section of notes, and one of these was to ask the accountant if I had to remove one night of hotel charges. The tourist day was between the workshop at the University of Melbourne and the meeting I had at Monash University. At the workshop, I met a fellow from La Trobe, and managed to set up a coffee chat there also by shifting my flight.

Having a phone was helpful. Tanya would be my taxi service – paid of course – even though one of the trips was outside her usual shift. I texted her the change of plans and got an almost immediate confirmation. Good!

She picked me up quite late – just after 10 p.m. when I got out of the arrivals area.

“Good trip?”

“Yes. On the work front it went better than expected, and the tourist stuff was pleasant too. Would have been nicer if you’d been with me, of course.”

“Flatterer. But I would have definitely liked to have been there.”

“Things OK here.”

“Yep. No fights. Girls doing OK. Anne got top marks on one of her class assignments. Philippa said the teacher was impressed how much she knew about the Batavia.”

“And you?”

“Same old, Same old. Though there was one development.”

“Are you going to tell?”

“Well, Ed Morse phoned. He said he really appreciated my taking Rachel while he was in hospital. He’s invited me out to dinner at Outback Jack’s.”

“Should be nice.”

“Yeah. But though there was nothing said, I get the feeling he might be wanting more than just to say thank you. You know. He might be looking ....”

“So you’ll go out on a date. Hardly a tragedy, unless he’s a guy who thinks buying a woman dinner means she has to respond by doffing her knickers.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure Ed’s not that sort of guy, though who knows. He was around when I was in school, but I never knew him well. Clarisse had him in

classes, I think. But I'm more thinking that I'm currently involved with you."

"You think you'll feel conflicted? Worried about loyalty and so on?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think that's it."

"Well. We've been clear that come the middle of next year, I'll be leaving. It won't be easy for either of us unless we have some horrendous fight. A quarrel with the landlady." Here we both giggled. "I think you should definitely accept the invitation now at face value. If Ed is interested in you, I think you should – rather carefully of course – explore the possibilities. Probably it would be reasonable to do some family stuff with all the girls to get a good idea what he's like and how everyone gets along. But it would be really unfortunate if you missed the opportunity to find a nice man for the long term. And I'll tell you, that gives me a very uncomfortable feeling, because I've been really, really enjoying our times together."

"Me too. Probably because the times are so good is why I'm a bit leery of spending time with Ed. But what you said is reasonable. On the other side, if you take up with someone else, I'm going to be very annoyed, even though I shouldn't be."

"I've no plans. You asked one time about Katherine, and I told you why I can't do more than very casual socializing with her, and essentially only non-private activities. But she and I do share intellectual interests and she is wanting to come to Canada, at least for a while. If there were no conflict of interest I'd likely at least ask her out, much as Ed is asking you out. Did I mention that her mother was born in Perth, Ontario, so she probably can get immigration without a lot of fuss?"

Tanya seemed a little flustered.

"No. I didn't know that. Or that she wanted to go to Canada."

"Sorry. I thought I'd mentioned it. But right now she's off-limits, and I fully intend to keep to the straight and narrow."

"If I try to put myself in your shoes, Ian, that has to be awkward, possibly also for Katherine."

"True. But it's the way it is."

"I shouldn't be, but somehow I'm almost pleased, and then I feel guilty that I am."

Tanya turned off the main road. We'd been driving along the south side of the Swan River. I wondered if she knew a short cut, which was quite likely since she drove all over town every day. But she pulled into a parking space that had a view over the expanse of the river to the C B D with its tall buildings, then turned off the engine.

"Ooh. Parking to watch the submarine races," I quipped.

"Submarine races? . . . Oh. I get it. Actually I just wanted to be able to talk, and if we do that in the driveway, it'll attract attention."

"I didn't figure you wanted to steam up the windows. Yes. Good idea to be able to have a few minutes to ourselves."

Tanya. I realize that suggesting you go out with Ed might almost seem like pushing you away. That's far from how I feel. Truthfully, I've realized that I've come to really value your friendship, and I definitely like the benefits, but the



expression "friends with benefits" is much too insipid. I believe I've come to love you, but I'm hoping – and this may seem negative – that I don't get to be in love with you, nor you in love with me. I think being in love makes it very difficult to see what will be best for others."

"Yeah. That's a good way to put things, Ian. I don't want to be in love either, but I'm pretty sure I already love you too."

I took Tanya's hand in mind. Somehow we didn't try to kiss. Well, there were seat belts, a hand brake and a gear shift in the way of a full-on embrace. We sat holding hands for a while in silence.

Tanya said "Do you think we're prepared for the rest of the year?"

"Probably not. But we're as ready as anyone can be. And we talk about things. Let's work to make the best life we can together and for each other in the coming months. Who knows. Down the road we may be able to look back and see that we helped each other to get to better lives, to find new partners. And that we'll stay friends – hopefully friends who share our feelings and problems somehow, providing that listener or letter reader who helps one to find a sensible pathway."

At this point, Tanya did lean over and we had a gentle kiss. Then she started the engine and we went home.

## Date night

The second Saturday in November was when Ed was taking Tanya out. The girls were going to Ed's apartment and were going to watch movies and sleep over, though I think it had been made clear that Ed would be home overnight. Before Tanya and the girls left for Ed's place, she came round and knocked on my door.

"Ian. I need to know if I look all right."

It was the first time I'd seen her in a dress. She had on a quite simple one, hem slightly above the knee, and short sleeves but a cardigan over her arm in a suitable colour. She was wearing heels. Not particularly high heels, but it was clear she rarely wore them and walked awkwardly. And they weren't a good match with the dress.

"The dress is nice. You look nice. But those shoes cause you to walk awkwardly, and I think they don't work with the dress. Do I sense you're actually wearing a bra?"

"I DO have one, Ian. Actually two. This one is a bit padded to give some semblance of a curve."

"The effect is good. I wasn't meaning to cause offence."

"None taken. And I did come round to get an opinion. The girls said I looked good too. But I'll go get some other shoes and we'll see what you think."

She came back with some simple black mocassin-like shoes with a low heel.

"You walk much more naturally in those, and I think they give a better overall appearance," I said.

“Interesting. Anne was all for the heels. Said it would push out my bust and my bum. But Philippa said much the same as you, that I walked more naturally.”

“You’ve a physical attractiveness that I think is based on looking comfortable and natural,” I said.

“Oh. I never thought of myself that way.”

“We don’t see ourselves as others do. Go have a good time.”

That night I was meeting some of the crowd to go to a sports event. When I got in, quite late, I was in my pyjamas when there was a knock on the communicating door.

“How was the date?” I asked when Tanya, in her nightie, came in.

“It was nice. But it’s pretty clear Ed’s looking for someone to be with.”

“Did you have to fight him off?”

“No. Not at all. We talked about what we were looking for. But I said I was still figuring things out and we should take things slowly.”

“Makes sense.”

“But actually, he’s quite an attractive man.”

“Oh dear. Wet panties?”

“Not actually, but maybe figuratively.”

There was very little further conversation.

## Frank talk

The following Friday night I was at a pub with Gordon and a couple of other of the male grad students. It was early in the evening, more or less a stop-off at the pub for a beer on the way home, except I’d likely stay for a meal. Possibly one of the others would stay and join me.

I’d been to the toilet to offload some of the beer and was on the way back to my companions when I almost collided with Frank, Tanya’s brother.

“Hi there, Frank.”

“Hi yourself, Ian. Come meet a couple of my workers. This is Thomas and this is Ivan, who just got promoted to team foreman, so we’re raising a pint with him.”

We said hellos, but it was clear that Frank’s colleagues had finished their beer and wanted to get home, so they made their farewells. Frank hung back, and then said “I’m glad I bumped into you. I wanted to let you know I’m glad you moved into the studio. Tanya’s got a lot brighter lately, and I think it’s down to sharing some time with you.”

“She’s a very nice woman. We had a talk early on about our backgrounds and about our lives with Joe and Zelda and their problems.”

“Yeah. Lot of common ground,” Frank said.

“But you know, there’s a reality that I go back to Canada at the end of my year here, even if I wanted to stay. When I saw we’d like to spend time together, I made sure Tanya understood that. And it’s clear she’d have a tough time shifting half way round the world. We talk about that reality sometimes,

but it's obvious we enjoy our time together, and on that basis alone it's certain there'll be a measure of sadness when we have to say goodbye, and that includes Anne and Philippa. I think we both want to avoid causing emotional upset."

Frank said "Sometimes you have to take a few risks to get some joy out of life. And Tanya's not going to get pregnant, since she had her tubes tied after Philippa was born. My guess is she had a premonition about Joe. But now she should have a little no-strings-attached fun so she doesn't get tangled up with someone who might not be good for her. To get some experience out and about so she doesn't screw up. It's pretty easy to find someone to be with, but pretty difficult to find someone who's good for you and who you're good for too."

"You don't think Anne and Philippa will be upset?"

"Nah. On the camping weekend, I thought they were going to start a sweepstakes on how many times the two of you would manage to ... you know. I think they see how she's a bit frozen emotionally."

"They're smart girls. I like them a lot. If anything, Philippa has more awareness of people than Anne."

"Yeah. I think you're right. And now I'd better go or Clarisse will wear iron knickers for a month. See ya' soon."

## Frankly

I was home by 7:30 and dabbled with several bits of work, though not very seriously. I heard Tanya come in around 9:30, but it wasn't until nearly 10:30 that there was a soft knock on my door and I let her in.

"I can't stay. One of the drivers' wives has gone into labour, so I'm taking a shift tomorrow from 7 to 3. Longer than usual, but he's helped me in the past. I know we were going to do some chores and errands together. Maybe you can come and share dinner and a DVD."

"Sure. But the girls and I can cycle to get the shopping. Leave them a note to knock on my door after 9. As I recall, we didn't have a whole lot to get, so three of us should have no trouble bringing the stuff back."

"I'd argue, but it would cut into my sleep."

"Remind me when we can talk to tell you what Frank said to me. I bumped into him at the pub where he was toasting the promotion of one of his men."

"Now I'll be awake all night wondering what he said."

"Nothing to worry about. Actually the opposite, but probably worth some discussion."

"Well. I guess you've not conned me yet. We'll find some time tomorrow. Without the girls, I assume?"

"Yes. Frank spoke Frankly!"

"Oh dear. I know what that means."

I gave her a kiss and sent her off to bed.

## Movie night

When Tanya got back from her special shift on Saturday afternoon she was clearly tired. I said, with Anne and Philippa present, “Why don’t you go in the studio and take a shower and then a nap. We’ll wake you around 6 for supper, then we’ve several DVDs from the library to choose from. Or we can read or listen to music.”

Tanya was clearly about to object, but the girls had crossed their arms and were looking at her very sternly.

“All right. I’ll just get my towel, wash-bag and nightie.”

Supper was going to be macaroni done in the oven with tomato sauce and cheese, with a salad on the side. The girls and I were easily able to do the preparation and put things in the fridge. The macaroni casserole would be put in a slow oven around 5. In the meantime, I had some work that I could do on my laptop, sitting on the veranda. Philippa was reading *The Stone Angel*, and Anne had an essay for homework she was working on.

At one point, Philippa asked “Ian. In this book, Hagar is looking back, and she’s pretty sad about mistakes she’s made, or thinks she’s made. Is the message of the book really that sad?”

“Good question. My view is that she comes to terms with the mistakes she’s made, and that others have made that affect her, and that she forgives herself and perhaps them. That resolution, which comes very late in the story, is, I agree, pretty sad, but also a sort of absolution.”

“You mean absolution like in confession?”

“I wasn’t raised in the Catholic Church, so I’m going to have to extrapolate from what I’ve read about confession. But I’ll say yes, that I think that the idea of absolution – a washing away of sins – is part of the message. But you know, my field is history, not literature. A friend of mine who teaches English at a university in the West of Canada says he’s part of the Can Lit racket, for Canadian Literature, of which Margaret Laurence is considered a bit of an icon. There’s likely to be a lot of opinions about the message to be found in her book.”

“I wasn’t sure I’d like it. Perhaps I don’t, but it sort of pulls me along to keep reading, so I guess I do.”

“Some books and movies are like that. They kind of annoy you, but you stay with them anyway.”

“Yeah. Hadn’t thought of things that way. Thanks.”

After the salad and macaroni we decided that dessert would wait until after the first DVD. The girls wanted to watch *When Harry Met Sally*, but both Tanya and I had seen it twice, so we opted to go into the studio and listen to music. Well, that’s what we said, though I’m sure we both intended to talk and maybe smooch a little.

We’d unlocked the communicating door to the studio when Tanya went to shower and sleep, so we went through that way.

“Come and fetch us for dessert when the movie’s over,” I said.

Once in the studio, we shut the door so the movie and music would not interfere with each other.

“Are we going to ... er ... ?” Tanya asked.

“I hadn’t planned on that just now. Thought we might catch up a little. But if you’re horny, I can lock the door.”

“I think I’d not be able to stop listening in case one of the girls came to the door.”

“What Frank said touches on that.”

“Frank should mind his own bloody business sometimes!”

“I think his heart’s in the right place, actually. Though he can express things ... er ... colourfully.”

“Colourfully my ass!”

“Before we deal with your delightful ass, maybe you’d be interested in what he said to me.”

“Yeah. Of course I DO want to hear what he said. I’m just expecting not to like it.”

“Well, one of the first things he said was that he was glad I was the person who moved into the studio. He thought you’d been a lot brighter since I did.”

“Did you tell him the reason for the ‘brightness’ as he put it?”

“No details. I told him I found you to be a very nice woman. And I explained how we had talked about our backgrounds and the parallels in our experiences. But I also said how we’d talked about the dangers of getting too attached because I had to leave in less than a year. That I didn’t want to set us all up for a lot of grief, including Anne and Philippa.”

“What’d he say to that?”

“Surprised me a bit. Said sometimes you have to take risks to get some joy out of life. If I recall correctly, those were his exact words. He said he thought a bit of no-strings-attached fun would be good so you could gain some experience and avoid getting mixed up with someone who might not be good for you.”

“With that I suppose I reluctantly agree.”

“Why reluctantly?” I asked.

“A gal can’t agree with her brother when he tries to tell her she needs to bonk someone.”

“Of course. I should have realized that.

Anyway, I said I thought that there was a strong disincentive because the girls might get upset. But Frank said that during the camping weekend the girls were concerned you were frozen emotionally and that you and I should ... er ...”

“Bonk,” Tanya completed.

“Frank said he thought they were going to start a sweepstakes on how many times we’d done it during the weekend.”

“Those little ....”

“Before you castigate your daughters, you might consider whether it offers us a less awkward way to enjoy what time we have together,” I suggested.

"If only I wouldn't feel so terribly embarrassed. I suppose I shouldn't, but they don't offer courses in *How to have wild, noisy sex without scandalizing your kids*,"

"True. Perhaps just continue as we have. When you come home from shift, you drop by for a while. We neither hide nor advertise what we do together. Anne and Philippa aren't nasty. I suspect they want to know you're safe and won't be leaving them. And they seem to want you happy. They may actually indicate to us how they expect us to behave towards each other in front of them, though probably in a round-about way."

"As long as they don't expect an exhibition."

"It's reasonable for us to set boundaries on how much we're prepared to share with them."

"And with Frank!" Tanya said firmly.

There was music on the laptop. I'd found a pair of inexpensive computer speakers that gave a better sound than the tiny laptop ones. Moreover, I'd set up a playlist that would last a while. Kicking off my slippers, I lay on the bed and offered an arm.

"This is more comfortable than the sofa," Tanya said.

"That was my feeling too."

"I slept for nearly two hours this afternoon, but I might still fall asleep again."

"So might I. Does it matter?"

"No, as long as I'm not awake at two in the morning. I've a regular shift in the morning, but I don't have to start super early unless there's a panic, in which case the dispatcher will call my mobile."

For a while we didn't speak. I may have dozed, and so may Tanya. Then we heard Philippa's voice loudly outside the door "Dessert anyone?", though she didn't knock or try to come in. Diplomacy!

We got up right away and joined the girls in the living room. There was a short discussion about what to have, but it seemed there was some chocolate cake that Clarisse had sent over with Alan, though nobody was quite sure of the reason for the gift. However, it went very nicely with some sliced banana and ice cream.

"Did you enjoy *When Harry Met Sally*?" I asked.

"Really good!" Philippa said.

"I'll have what she's having!" Anne said and laughed.

"The older lady was played by the mother of the film's director," I said. "Her name was Estelle Reiner, and when she died at age 94 in 2008, the New York Times said that the line was one of the most memorably funny in all of film history."

Anne said, suddenly serious, "Mum, I have a question about the scene. Two actually."

Tanya looked nervous, but said, "Well, I can't decide whether or not to answer them unless you ask. So go ahead."

"Well, Meg Ryan's character makes all this noise, then goes back to eating her meal as if nothing happened. I guess I wonder if people really make all that

noise when ... er... having sex. And then if women actually fake orgasms?"

"And could a man tell?" Philippa added.

Tanya was looking very uncomfortable, so I said "I'm sure your Mum is feeling awkward because she can't say much in answer to the questions without talking about her own experiences, and I think everyone finds that quite difficult. I've not had a lot of experience, mostly just with my ex-wife. From that I'd say Meg Ryan's performance is, shall we say, amplified greatly."

Anne said "Some girls at school said some women never have an orgasm, but just fake it so the men won't get upset."

Tanya still looked like there were mice running around her chair, so I continued "I wouldn't know about the faking, or else Zelda was a very good actress. Still, I think most people enjoy sex, though probably much less loudly than in the scene. Also, from what I've read and a couple of women who felt able to talk about it, quite a few women don't find sex very pleasant. There are medical issues that make sex painful like endometriosis or gonorrhea or a yeast infection. And there are men who are either selfish or clumsy. I'm old enough to be able to admit that when I was much younger, I may have been the clumsy one. There are a couple of episodes I'd love to forget and hope the women involved can forget and forgive too."

I will say something, nevertheless, that might help both of you. Talk a lot and listen a lot to whoever you do try to share physical pleasure with. Hollywood movies pretend that people somehow magically come together and all is wonderful. I don't think it's ever like that. Actually, one of the good aspects of *When Harry Met Sally* is the little vignettes of couples of all ages talking about their partnerships. Apparently those were real stories, but they used actors for filming them."

"Some of the couples were really old," Philippa said, "but it was clear they'd really got a ... connection."

Tanya said "Ian's right about talking and listening. Not just sex but all the ways you bump along together in life."

"I suppose," Anne said, sounding somewhat unconvinced.

"I guess Anne and I were ... kind of curious ..." Philippa said.

"About?" Tanya asked.

"Whether you and Ian were ... er ... a couple."

Anne added "If it was clear you wanted to ... you know ... spend the night together, we could just ask what time breakfast would be."

This was so poignantly funny that I wanted to laugh and had difficulty maintaining a measure of dignity so I didn't embarrass Anne.

Tanya said "That wouldn't upset you?"

"No. Can't see why it would," Philippa said, then added "Unless, of course, we had to wait until the middle of next week to get anything to eat."

At this we all did laugh.

"I think we realize you don't want to upset us," Anne added.

"I'm probably also concerned we might be setting a bad example," Tanya said.

“Only to the priests and their puppets. Some of them do a lot worse, and they pressure their victims to keep quiet.”

I wondered what Anne had read or heard, but simply suggested “Perhaps we should watch a movie and decide on breakfast time later.”

I picked up the 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice*. “This has some scenes of dancing that are rather well done,” I said.

“Do you know how to do the dances, Ian,” Anne asked.

“Can’t say that I could teach them, but I’ve done some of them, and some of the tunes are on my computer.”

Tanya said, “Ian made me laugh one evening by playing a lovely tune by a blind Irish harpist from the late 1600s. But the name of the tune was *Quarrel with the landlady*.”

“That’s really the name of a tune?” Philippa asked.

“No kidding,” I said. “But I don’t think it’s used for a dance.”

“Let’s put the DVD on,” Anne said.

We enjoyed the movie. I’m not sure how familiar the others were with the story. We re-ran a couple of the dance scenes, with music that I remember by a British group called the Assembly Players. Zelda and I had danced to a couple of the tracks several years before.

When the movie was over, I said “Goodnight all. See you after your shift tomorrow Tanya,” and went to the studio. I’m guessing the girls were a bit surprised, but I knew Tanya needed her sleep to be able to get away early. She was nominally going to do 8 to 2, but actually planned to start around 9 unless there was a phone call from the dispatcher.

## New arrangements

That Sunday I went to the office and got quite a lot of work done. Two seminars I was preparing got tidied and ready to present. Several invitations and responses were handled, and announcements composed and emailed. Even some bits and pieces of writing and cross-checking for my Perth and Victoria history of development project got organized.

However, I did forego lunch, and cycled home around 2. When I got there, Tanya was just home.

“The girls left a note, They’ve gone to Frank and Clarisse. Supper there at 5:30, but we’re to bring some dessert. You’re specifically included.”

“Any ideas for dessert?”

“How about we get a couple of pies from the supermarket, assuming they have them? We can get some ice cream as well if there’s not enough in the freezer.”

“Do we have to make sure we get there before they close?”

“Yeah let’s go now. Pity we can’t shop on the way, but there’s the hours and also empty shelves.”

We were back by 3, having found two fruit pies and some additional ice cream. I paid with my credit card, though Tanya made a bit of an attempt to



do so. Once the purchases were in the fridge or freezer, I said "Shower?"

"Definitely. Do you want some water or juice? I'm a bit thirsty."

We enjoyed ourselves for the next hour or so, then dressed suitably for the evening.

Tanya asked "Ian, Do you want to drive? I think I saw you have a license."

"Better not until and unless we know that your insurance fully covers me. It probably does, but there may be conditions we need to know about."

"I'll phone this week, mainly so I know for the future. Anne will be wanting to drive in a couple of years. But apart from that, do you like driving?"

"That's the first time I've ever been asked that. I think I'm basically someone who drives to get from A to B. Most guys have a real love affair with cars. I'm probably more a bike guy. When Zelda and I bought our very first new car rather than a second-hand one, the salesman asked us what sort of car we were looking for. I'll never forget how his face almost dropped to the ground when I said '4 wheels and goes'."

Tanya laughed and I kissed her. We assembled the things for dessert and put them in the Eskie and headed to Frank and Clarisse house which was in North Claremont, one suburb away.

I don't know what had been said about us before we arrived, but there were no remarks that could be construed as having extra meaning relative to Tanya and I. In fact, things felt much more relaxed. We were able to talk about our excursions to Bunbury and York. Tanya had asked me to bring my laptop to show some pictures we'd taken.

"Mum. You got new bathers," Anne said.

"Looking good, Tanya," Clarisse said. "I couldn't get all of me in one of those."

"No worries, love. I like all of ya'," Frank said.

## Santa season

The calendar flipped to December. But the weather was getting warmer! I still wasn't quite used to being in the southern hemisphere. On the First I was eating my lunch sandwich outside when Katherine came along and asked if she could join me.

"Sure. Anything particular on your mind?"

"No. In fact, we should probably stick to talking about the weather or things like that since I've submitted my thesis. In fact, over a week ago. I suspect you'll get a request to be External soon. Jerome said he was going to ask you."

"Yes. He'd mentioned that to me some time ago. Do you have any idea how long before your defence will be scheduled?"

"Seems to vary. If the examiners dawdle in reading the thesis, it can be several months. I hope not. But I expect with Christmas and summer holidays it won't be before the end of January at the earliest."

"I'm having trouble putting Christmas next to summer holidays. My mother said they've had the first snow that stayed on the ground today – well yesterday

for us here because of the time zones. Yet here it's hot and sunny."

"I've only lived south of the equator, so hot and sunny in December is normal for me. Christmas movies with snowflakes are a northern cliché."

"I've also just been watching this shadow of the tree top move across the path. It's going the wrong way for me!"

"Not sure I follow," Katherine said.

"Look at where the shadow is now, with its edge on that small stone. Now wait and ... give it some time ... a little longer .... There! The stone is now in the shadow, which is moving from our left to our right and the sun is behind the tree. The shadows move counter-clockwise around the tree. Just doesn't feel right to me, but I know it's just because I'm from the other hemisphere."

"Interesting that you said 'counter-clockwise'. Maybe with sundials, people in the northern hemisphere got used to the shadows moving that way."

"Good observation. Might be a history paper there! I'll let you have first author."

"Actually, I might take you up on that. It's not likely to be a major work, but kind of quirky. The sort of thing that gets some popular attention. Be interesting to see when the term 'clockwise' or its equivalent in different languages came into use."

"You're right. Go for it, Katherine. And I won't insist on being a co-author."

"The idea wouldn't have come about without us talking about the shadows together. Already an inadvertent collaboration."

"True. But we'd better wait until you're clear of the thesis bureaucracy."

"Too true. It'll seem a long wait."

## Thesis reading

My conversation with Katherine had been over barely ten minutes when I found a copy of her thesis in my pigeon-hole with the formal request to be External Examiner. I knew one of the two internal examiners, but the other was a geography professor who taught urban development. The Departmental professor who I already knew would be chair of the examination committee, and it was to him I emailed a message accepting the task and asking if he could suggest an estimated timeline for moving things forward. I also signed the formal paper document and sent it through the internal mail system.

Then I did a quick overview of the thesis. Ah. It was mercifully compact. Not thin – history theses never are – but it wasn't hernia inducing. And I noted that the structure didn't seem to have any nasty long bits of heavy academic detail.

My eye fell on a silly error "urbane development". From experience, I knew there were always one or two. This would not have got caught by a spell-checker, since the error was in usage, not orthography. I was about to email Katherine to ask if I might have an editable soft copy in which I could embed suggested corrections when I had the thought that this might be construed as inappropriate. Instead I emailed Kevin Mercer, the examination chair and

asked him if the candidate could supply a soft copy so such minor errors could be flagged directly for easier repair. Before the afternoon was out, Kevin had responded “Good idea. Save us all some fiddle.” In fact, I had an email with the attached file by the next morning. The paper thesis was left in a drawer, and I worked entirely with the computer version.

My approach to tasks like examining theses is to blitz them in a few days. By the end of the first full week of December, I’d read Katherine’s document twice and made a draft report. I’ve learned to do a 1-page assessment in three blocks: strengths, weaknesses, and overall impression. With theses, I also would append some indication or list of typos and similar errors. In this case, the one I’d noted was joined by surprisingly few others. Not bad. And the strengths outweighed the weaknesses. It was a good thesis, but academic examiners never allow that the candidate’s work is perfect.

I also prepared several questions to ask at the defence. Some examiners like to ask questions of tricky detail to show how erudite they are. If the thesis shows such detail has been investigated, I don’t need to spend time talking about it. Better to get an idea if the candidate will make a good teacher and researcher and can give a decent exposition of ideas.

While the job was essentially done, I still informed Kevin that I’d have everything done by the first Monday in January. No sense letting people know I could carry out an evaluation that quickly. Also I’d go through things one more time and polish up my report.

It was, of course, awkward seeing Katherine about the Department. And I couldn’t even do things like go to museums with her now. We had, however, to endure a Christmas party for the Arts School. This would be a barbeque outside the building and ran 4 to 7 p.m. There’d apparently be some carol singing and some games.

On the afternoon of the party, I closed up my office and put on the sun hat I’d found for a couple of dollars at a discount store, slathered on some sunblock and went out to the area where people were gathering and there was a DJ playing music, thankfully not so loud as to inhibit conversation.

I could see Katherine helping Gordon and some other students set up the food tables, carefully putting coverings over plates to keep flies off. The flies weren’t nearly as bad as I’d been told they could be in Australia, but there were still enough to warrant such covers. I made my way to the drinks table which was on the opposite side of the area being used for the party. I was looking to decide what to have when I realized Kevin was standing at the table.

“Decisions, decisions,” I said.

“Yeah. Can’t decide if I should go for beer or wine or a soft drink. Gotta drive home after, and getting stopped for a breath test would ruin the holidays.”

“I’m trusting they don’t test cyclists unless they’re really wobbling all over. Even so, I’m going to ask if I can have a tall glass with soda water or Perrier and a splash of white wine.”

“Good thinking. Marion, did you hear that?”

“Sure did, Prof. Mercer. Coming right up.”

We took our plastic glasses – they even had straws – and found a pair of chairs that had been set up with folding tables to allow people to sit down with food.

“Thanks for accepting to examine the Stormont thesis, Ian. Sometimes we get a lot of excuses, and the poor student is sitting around forever in limbo.”

“Did you have any trouble with the other examiner accepting? He’s not in the Department.”

“Nah. There’s no official quota of thesis examination work, but the Uni has its ways of implying there might be a less favourable attitude when you want something like permission to go to America for sabbatical or things like that. It’s the externals who we have to hold out the begging cup to.”

“There was a hint that it would be expected when I was negotiating – well I think of it as negotiating – with Jerome by email last Winter. Oh. It would have been summer here. Still have trouble getting my head round the seasons.”

“Yeah. I’ve that problem when I go to Europe.

Did you manage a look at Katherine’s thesis yet.”

I wasn’t going to tell Kevin that I was essentially done. “Took a quick look and skimmed through it. Didn’t see any major problems. Probably find one or two things that will need an edit when I get into a closer read. Did you get a chance yet?”

“Brief look. Struck me pretty much the same way. I’m probably not the right person to chair her exam committee, but James Macdonald whose office you’re in would be the staff member with the closest experience. My field is medieval history, though I’ve recently started to learn a bit about Australia before the Europeans. That’s getting on a few agendas now, and I’d like to be in front of the crowd.”

“Not so different in Canada. And I must confess to being less well-informed than I should be.”

“Looks like the food’s almost ready,” Kevin said.

“Kevin. I find it very awkward being around Katherine, because it’s got to be on her mind that her future is in the balance. We’ve had very few doctoral candidates in our department in Canada. The Master’s students theses are more heavily supervised than Ph.D. ones here, so we more or less encourage the ones who are going to fail to leave without submitting. And the evaluation is done much quicker.”

“Yeah. Always awkward. But I met her coming down the hallway yesterday and I told her to have a good Christmas and that she shouldn’t lose any sleep over the thesis.”

“That’s a reasonable message. There are apparently schools where they seem to take pride in failing candidates. That’s a huge waste of time and effort. If someone is not doctorate material, it’s better to steer them elsewhere pretty quick. Keeping them on wastes our time too.”

“There’s no official policy like that, but I think we do some weeding unofficially in order to avoid extra work for ourselves and the ugliness of dealing with failed candidates. In fact, I can’t remember anyone formally failing here, though a couple have had to do major revisions. That’s less than 1 in 10 though. I’ve

seen a few never finish up the dissertation for a variety of reasons, some of which were probably a quiet word that the work wasn't up to snuff. To be honest, I can't see that happening to our Katherine, can you?"

"No. And that's honestly a relief. Clearly the thesis is the first actual concrete bit of work of hers I've seen, but we've chatted on a few occasions – she was kind enough to drive me and my landlady's daughters to the Batavia – and seems competent and well-spoken."

"Well, she's a bit older and more world-experienced than most of our students. Ah. Here come the shrimps and the sausages."

There was controlled chaos as we all got paper plates of food. I sat with Louise and Gordon and a couple of office staff from another department in the school. The conversation was light and general. Gordon was driving home with another grad. student to the latter's home to somewhere a few hours north of Perth. The three women were very much concerned with presents for younger members of their families, but asked questions about how such matters were decided in Canada. I had to dredge my own memories to answer.

An announcement was made that trifle was available. I gathered this was a common Christmas dessert. Here it was offered in quite generous plastic glasses. Having got one, I was heading back to the table when I nearly bumped into Katherine.

"Hi there," I said.

"Hi, ... Ian. Sorry. Getting awkward."

"Yes. Understood. But I concur with what Kevin told you. Don't lose any sleep."

"OK. But I wanted to ask you something about Canada. I've already been in touch with the High Commission, and it seems since Mum didn't renounce her Canadian citizenship before I was born, I'll be considered Canadian if I wish. Not sure of the details, because I want to avoid losing Australian citizenship.

But I've had a sort of offer from Wilfred Laurier. They've got some partial funding and can offer an 8 month post-doc. Someone came for a few months and left, apparently. They said the short duration might make a visa difficult, but I won't need one."

"That's not far from where I teach," I said. "Less than an hour's drive. In fact half way to my mother's place. Unfortunately, I hardly know the people there. Still, it's fairly central, but outside of the GTA – the Greater Toronto Area. I think that means lower costs of housing, but things have been getting more expensive in Canada. Since I'm without a house right now there, I may have a challenge myself."

"I've been looking at tourist stuff and municipal web sites. It looks fairly ... oh ... I want to say ordinary, and that sounds negative."

"I think I understand what you're trying to say. I'll be interested to hear how it works out. Are you staying here for the Christmas break?"

"No. Going home to parents in Wollongong. I've a sister too. She's married with two kids. Her husband works at the steel mill there. And I hope to find Mum's birth certificate and other papers to get them copied and notarized so I can get the proper documentation I need to go to Canada."

“I assume you’re not driving to the East coast.”

“Flying to Sydney. My sister might pick me up if she wants to do some shopping, but more likely take the train. Or trains. Have to go towards the city then take another south again.”

“My knowledge of Australian geography is embarrassingly weak.”

“See you in the New Year, Ian.”

## Christmas dinner planning

I’m not quite sure how Christmas dinner came to be at Tanya’s house, but somehow I was co-opted to participating in the event. That was fine by me, since I had been apprehensive I might be twiddling my thumbs on my own a lot of the time during the holidays. Given that Christmas coincided with summer holidays, it seemed a lot of regular business just shut down for possibly several weeks.

Anne and Philippa took the lead in the planning and execution of what they called Operation Xmas. Tanya was wanting to help out, but Christmas week was one of the best times for taxis to make money, and despite Australia’s generally “no tips” attitude, generous exceptions were common at this time. Thus she took on extra or longer shifts, and they were profitable. Later she said she made about four times the usual weekly income.

Frank and Clarisse and their family and Jack and Angela were coming. Anne was on the phone a week before Christmas to arrange who would bring what. Clarisse, knowing Tanya would be driving, said to call if we needed to pick up some supplies.

Clarisse was going to provide potatoes in two forms, roasted and scalloped, but the latter with cheese added. She would also bring a salad plus some vegetables to roast in the oven. These would be served hot with the potatoes, but the main meat dish was to be a cold ham, baked a couple of days before, apparently with some sort of glaze. Anne said that some people even used Canadian maple syrup for this. We agreed that was a waste of maple syrup. There would also be some cold roast chicken. Both the ham and chicken would be pre-sliced, meaning less work at serving time. Jack and Angela were bringing the meat.

Our household would supply the desserts and nibbles. I got Mom to send me a recipe for Nuts and Bolts. I knew it wasn’t too hard to make, though I had to use Tanya’s oven for the heating stage. I also found some mixed nuts in one of the supermarkets. Each group would bring some drinks, alcoholic and otherwise, but we’d make sure there was tea and coffee.

The girls decided to make Pavlova for the main dessert. It would have lots of fruit. We had lots of egg yolks left over from making the meringue, which Anne proved very competent at making.

The evening the meringue was made I used the left-over egg yolks and made sabayon. One of the bottles on the list of drinks was sherry, and I knew that the Emu cream sherry was decent enough to substitute for Marsala in the sabayon.

We had it when Tanya got in. She was quite late – after 10:30 because she got a good fare at the airport all the way to Rockingham.

Anne also made some pastry dough and it was in the fridge. Two days before Christmas, the girls rolled it out and I got the job of filling mince pies. The mincemeat, however, came out of a jar from the supermarket. With good planning, there was enough dough for some sausage rolls. I cycled to get the requisite sausage meat, as it turned out that had been inadvertently omitted from the shopping lists.

It was, for me, strange to be part of this festive preparation. Even more so given the warm weather and sunshine. In the shops, images of Santa had him in shorts. Yet sometimes there were pictures of decorated Christmas trees with snow. Confusing.

We weren't having a tree, and the girls said they were too old for Christmas stockings. Besides, who wore stockings at this time of year? There remained a question of presents. As we were filling mince pies, I asked the girls

"Anne, Philippa. I've an awkward question."

"Better ask it straight out," Philippa said.

"Well, I'm wondering who gives presents to who. And are there some guidelines about cost or what's allowed or not allowed?"

"Well, Mum gives each of us a present. Not usually too expensive, though sometimes we'll work out that the present is combined with no pocket money for a while, like when I got a new bike last year," Philippa explained.

Anne added "As a family we give Grandma and Grandpa each a present, and one for each of Uncle Frank's family. Their family gives us one thing each, not one from each person. Same with Grandma and Grandpa. Because they know Mum hasn't got a lot of cash, there's a sort of unofficial limit. It used to be \$5 until two years ago, but we've sort of slid up to \$10, though hand-made presents are sort of outside the rules, since sometimes they're things we have that would cost more but are fancied up."

"Yeah. We cleaned and polished that briefcase of Dad's for Uncle Frank last year. I saw one over at Westfield for \$65 not long ago," Philippa said.

"I'm wondering how I fit in the picture," I said. "It's really awkward if someone gives you a gift and you haven't got one for them."

"Oooh. Yes. That could make you feel really uncomfortable."

"Maybe one of you could phone Frank or Clarisse and suggest I be outside any gift exchange. Also your grandparents. Here, I'll suggest that since you're including me in the festivities, which I really appreciate, that be your gift to me. I'll find small things for you and your Mum, and stick to the \$10 limit, though I might get one shareable present for all of you that costs more. Going to have to think carefully."

"I'll call Aunt Clarisse now," Anne said. "I want to ask her about some of the arrangements anyway,"

When I asked my question about presents, I already had in mind what I was going to give. Maple syrup was easily available, if expensive. I'd looked around and finally found some Quebec Amber No. 1. Some of the other offerings didn't seem to have reliable quality designations. From reading I'd done some years

before, I believed the Quebec quality regime to be the best organized, though of course it was cheap to print fake labels. I also found wild rice was available in a couple of places. In view of the distance from source, I easily spent the limit. In fact, over, since I wanted a present that wasn't appropriate in size to a mouse.

There was also another present that wouldn't be given publicly. I thought of something fancy and typically romantic for Tanya, but then realized she would not accept anything where she could not reciprocate more or less in kind or value. However, I'd been browsing in Big W, which used the Woolworth name, even though they'd disappeared in North America. I saw some 16GB USB drives on sale and bought two. Definitely over the \$10 limit.

When I got home from buying them, I labelled one IAN and the other TANYA – they were different colours anyway – and put photos we'd taken in appropriate directories. Tanya could also use hers to back up records from her computer. Nobody ever did enough backup, of course, including me. The thought caused me to actually do some backup of my work. I had several USB's with me for this purpose, and was using two in a rotation to ensure no two were ever in the same location. I didn't want to lose my practical records, nor academic work.

## Christmas Eve

Tanya phoned about 8:30 p.m. from the taxi. She'd just received a request to take some people from a flight from Singapore that was delayed and not landing until nearly 10. The girls decided to go to bed.

"I'll leave her notes on the kitchen table and her bed to let me know when she gets in, no matter how late. I won't feel at ease otherwise," I said. "I'll tell her the communicating door is unlocked from my side so she doesn't need to go round, but slide the bolt on yours."

"Thanks Ian," Philippa answered. I think they were getting less conscious of the need to preserve a level of precaution. Best if they were gently reminded from time to time. I knew I wasn't dangerous. The outside world might think otherwise, and silly misunderstandings could grow to become big problems.

I undressed, picked up a book I was reading, *A Commonwealth of Thieves* about the first four years of British settlement in Australia, and settled into the modest armchair we'd moved into the studio for me.

The sound of the door opening softly woke me. I must have dozed off.

"Hi. Did I wake you?"

"Yes. But my note asked you to let me know you were home safely. What time is it."

"Just gone 11:45. Almost Christmas Day. It was a long shift."

"Do you want anything to eat or drink? There's sausage rolls and mince pies in this fridge. We didn't have space in yours for them all."

"Oh, yes. One of each and something to drink. Some tea maybe. Do you have any milk?"



“Yes. I put milk in my instant coffee, and I’ve a few tea bags I collected from hotels. Sometimes I like a cup. Shall we share a teabag.”

“Sure. Maybe I’ll take a shower while you put on the kettle.”

“What if I need a shower too?”

“Why not? As long as we don’t make too much noise.”

“Why would we make a lot of noise?”

“Tongue on sensitive bits?” I countered.

Tanya didn’t answer, but went in the bathroom. We’d taken to keeping extra towels there in case she wanted to use the shower rather than the tub. Even though the latter did have a hand held shower attachment, it was less convenient to keep the spray from getting on the floor. I put on the kettle and got out the snack.

We didn’t fool around much in the shower, but I think both of us wanted to freshen up despite the late hour.

“Damn. I forgot my nightie.”

“I suppose most men would consider that fortuitous, but I know you sleep better with it. I’ve a large T shirt if you don’t want to go fetch the nightie.”

“Sure. I don’t want to wake the girls.”

I found the T-shirt and Tanya put it on. It just covered her bum plus an inch or so. Well, it should do for night wear. I gestured to the armchair and she flopped into it and I finished dipping the tea bag and put a splash of milk in each cup.

“Just what I needed. And now it’s actually Christmas Day if your clock radio is set right.”

“Then you’d better see this,” I said, putting a small, rather irregular package that used red tissue paper as a wrapping.

Tanya looked awkward. “I’ve not got anything for you.”

“That’s a share present, so you don’t need to,” I answered.

She opened it. “But why two of them? And marked for each of us.”

“When you get a chance to put them in a computer, you’ll see they have the photos we took. There should also be space for you to back up important files from your computer in case of disk failure or theft or fumble fingers deletion. But I’m hoping we’ll each have a record of some of our time together, you know, down the road.”

“Yeah. Pity that’s going to happen. But this is a nice idea. For a moment I thought the package had some expensive romantic trinket, which would make me feel awkward because I couldn’t reciprocate, and possibly couldn’t wear because of the questions it would raise. This is ... thoughtful. And no matter what happens, I’m going to want to remember times we’ve had together.”

“Me too.”

By the way, are you staying here or going to your own bed?”

“After such a nice welcome home. You’ve got to be kidding. And I’d better get up off this chair before I leave a message.”

We didn’t spend a long time enjoying each other, probably because it was so late. Tanya clearly reached a couple of climaxes, but somehow the noises were muted. Afterwards, we put our pyjamas or the T-shirt back on and curled

up together, then decided bum to bum let us fall asleep without having to disentangle. Already this was my best Christmas in a decade.

## Road trip

We didn't get up until half past 9 the following morning. Tanya woke and had a little panic that the girls might wonder where she was. I pointed out that the car was in the drive and since I didn't see her car keys, they were probably on the kitchen table.

"Yeah. Next to your note. Oh. I can hear movement in the kitchen. Let me get dressed. This outfit is too much of an advertisement of last night's fun and games."

I got dressed too and we went through into the kitchen where there was a strong smell of bacon.

"Bacon's in the oven. Coffee's ready, and Philippa's making toast. Do we want eggs scrambled or fried?" Anne asked.

"Scrambled," Tanya said. "And I really appreciate that it's almost ready. It was around midnight when I got in."

"I heard the car and heard you come in, then fell asleep again," Philippa said.

"Weren't you hungry, Mum," Anne asked.

"Ian made me tea and we had a sausage roll and mince pie each. By the way, they're very good. The best we've managed – you've managed – ever."

"Thanks Mum."

I asked "It's both Christmas Day and a Sunday. Are any of you going to church."

Anne answered "The English mass isn't until noon. If we knew Italian, we could go at 10:30. Oops. We'd be too late."

Out of curiosity, I went along. Given the spirit of the day, nobody said anything to Tanya or I in the inevitable mingling and greeting after the service. I had to agree with the girls' assessment of the singing. A pity.

The rest of the day unfolded as one might expect. Christmas can be a time of overly high expectations as well as collisions between different family traditions. However, the outside meal and lazy conversation seemed less demanding than I recall experiencing at some Christmases in Canada. Of course, Mom and I were often on our own or with families of friends like Rosalie.

In the evening, after the guests had gone and we'd cleared away, I Skyped with Mom. Tanya sat with me. Mom knew we were spending time together, though I didn't provide any explicit information. But I thought it was important that she have a true mental picture of a woman I was involved with, even if that was time limited.

We didn't spend too long with the session, as on Boxing Day we were taking the girls to Margaret River to stay until New Year's Day with their paternal grandparents, Henry and Georgina Walker. About two weeks earlier, Tanya

had asked me if I wanted to come, but it was clear the invitation was almost a command, and that she wanted me with her.

“It’s kind of awkward, Ian. They never really liked me. Thought I wasn’t good enough for Joe. I don’t think I ever told you that he worked in the WA government as a mid-level manager. We met when I did some filing work in the same office. After we married I really just stayed home until I needed to go out to work, and fortunately I liked driving and had my license and a car that suited. But they thought of me — actually I don’t think they thought of me at all, and probably still have the same view. Still, they’re the girls’ grandparents, so I’m polite and make sure the girls get some time with them. However, though I’ve invited them up here, they make excuses. Henry’s a land surveyor. Claims the only quiet time is around Christmas. Anyway, that’s how it is. We’ll take the girls down, stay for lunch, then we can come back, or find a hotel and let you see the area. Lots of wine from around there. And we could go on to Albany.”

I was delighted to have a chance to see the south west corner of Australia, though the social minefield of Tanya’s in-laws might be a challenge. In any event, I did some research and booked us a hotel in Margaret River for a night, then one in Albany for two. Tanya had checked with her insurance company, and once it was confirmed that I had a valid driver’s license and declared no outstanding traffic offences I could take the wheel, even if Tanya weren’t with me.

## In-laws

Henry and Georgina clearly were happy to see the girls. I wasn’t sure how strongly this was reciprocated. Both girls said they generally enjoyed their visits to Margaret River. Being a surveyor, Henry knew of a lot of interesting places that were not generally advertised. Apparently he’d take them thither and yon, but Georgina would stay home and read, or else visit with some women friends.

We’d left Crawley before 9 a.m. on Boxing Day. Traffic was light until around 11, when it was clear people were going to visit friends and family around Bunbury. We got to the Walker’s house around 11:30. I was introduced. While the girls were settled into the guest room by Georgina and Tanya, Henry offered me a glass of wine and took me out onto a rear veranda.

“What part of Canada are you from?”

“I teach at a medium sized university a bit west of Toronto. Though right now I’m using my mother’s address near Stratford, Ontario, which is further west.”

I gave a capsule account of my situation, but carefully avoided any parallel to Joe.

“The girls call you Ian. Would’ve thought you’d prefer to be called Professor McNab.”

I realized what Tanya might mean in her description of her in-laws.

“They’ve treated me with great hospitality, and formality would be awkward. But when I moved in I insisted that Tanya and I together tell them never to be alone with me out of sight of someone. Not that I’m any risk, but they can’t know that for sure, and from incidents at places I’ve taught or had colleagues, there can be malicious talk that puts me on the wrong end of gossip.”

“You mean professors fooling around with students?”

“Actually more the implication of that from students wanting to blackmail profs for marks.”

“Oh, yeah. The tarbrush. And these days there’s plenty of suspicion.”

“In the case of Anne and Philippa, I think it would be a third party. Someone wanting to make trouble for Tanya and her family. Though I can’t think why. I’ve been treated with great generosity by Tanya and her family.”

“You don’t find Frank and Clarisse ... er ... awfully common?”

Oh dear. I wanted to say something pointed to Henry. However, that wouldn’t make the day go any better, and could cause upset for Tanya now or later. I settled on “I’m in this country as a guest, and my impression is that there are a lot of people in Australia who are genuine, generous and hard working, but unpolished socially. I find Frank and Clarisse rough and ready, but they’re surprisingly well-attuned to other people’s needs and wants, and not afraid to act on that understanding. I’d be a real fool to shun them because they aren’t intellectual. We seem to find plenty to talk about, and I’ve learned quite a bit about Western Australia in the process.”

Henry seemed to want to say more, but couldn’t find a good counter-argument, so we talked about my sabbatical projects for a bit, then were called to the dining room for the most formal meal I’d had for several months.

## Unburdening

The air conditioning in our hotel room was running quite hard, and the air temperature could not have been that high, but as Tanya flopped on the bed after a particularly energetic ride that followed a noisy session of oral and manual play, there was a sheen of sweat on her chest.

“Trying to exorcise some demons?” I asked.

“Meaning?”

“You seemed hell-bent on wearing out our sports equipment. Almost furiously angry.”

“Maybe. The Walkers always make me feel ... I don’t know ... common.”

I told her about my conversation with Henry.

“Thanks Ian. But do you really feel that way about Frank and Clarisse?”

“Of course I do. They’re great people. Frank does construction, I do intellectual deconstruction of historical documents and writings. Both have a place and a value. You drive taxi. Clarisse manages a busy home. It’s all part of the mix. I hate snobbery.”

“Guess I’m glad. So is my you know what. I think I’m going to be sore in the morning. You were right I was ... exorcising a demon.”

“Glad to oblige. I had a rather good time.”

“So did I. And having you with me there today provided a buffer. They didn’t get at me nearly as much as I feared.”

## Roads

In retrospect, I realized Tanya had hardly ever had a chance to have a real holiday. Our trip to Margaret River and Albany, then back inland through Wagin – we had to see the Big Ram sculpture – was something she had never really done before as an adult. With Joe there had been a honeymoon week to Sydney, but the crumbs of information about that suggested it was largely spent in bed, though there seemed to be an overtone that Joe had got the lion’s share of the pleasure, and that he hadn’t been very interested in seeing the city. Anne had been born just over a year after the wedding ceremony, and then Philippa came, soon after which Joe started to go off the rails. Though he still worked, money was evaporating, so holidays were spent at home, the home that also took a lot of the family income. Until you get close to someone, it’s hard to understand the details and meaning of their history.

I drove several times, especially on the country sections as I was used to an automatic transmission, and the taxi was a manual. Actually, I found this made it more enjoyable. I could feel when the gradient of the road changed by the subtle adjustment of the engine. On an automatic, or at least those I’d driven, you could only note that when there was sufficient slope to force the engine to work or to hold the car back. I must admit, however, that for my first couple of tries behind the wheel I had to consciously think about clutching and changing gears.

There were only a couple of days after we got back before New Year’s Eve. Tanya had decided to work that night, but not on-demand. She talked to the dispatch office and said she would do pre-arranged trips, including after midnight, even though those were the ones she was apprehensive about. I offered to ride along for her security, and she said that would help, especially for the late trips.

A complication arose when Ed phoned to invite her out to a New Year’s dance. I was in the room when she answered his call. Given that she was driving that night, declining the invite was a foregone outcome. However, it was clear she didn’t want to close the door on a possibility.

“You may want to invite Ed to do something in the near future to preserve your options,” I said.

“Is that what you really want?” This said rather brusquely.

“Truthfully no. I want you to myself. I’d like to have at least the option of a way that we could look to some sort of future together. But either way – Canada or here – there’s no easy path. We’d spend the better part of a decade sorting ourselves out.”

“Yeah. I looked at all the steps to immigrate to Canada. And the fees and forms. And I’m not sure what I’d spend my time doing in Canada. Or how I’d

deal with being so far from family.”

“It wouldn’t be very fair to Anne and Philippa at their age now,” I said.

“Is our friendship also due to where you and I are situated personally, Ian. You know. Trying to recover from ... disaster.”

“Yes. At least partly. And I’ve got to say you’re the best thing in my life for quite a while. I’m immensely humbled and grateful.”

“Yes. Me too.”

There was a silence for a few minutes, then Tanya said “Do you think we really would get along together if we hadn’t both been ... er ... grieving a loss, I suppose?”

“Possibly not. It’s hard to sort out the bits and pieces of why we care about people and how we get along. I’m sure a lot of people looking at us – if we let them of course – would think it’s just for sex and companionship.”

“Sometimes I worry that’s the case. Then other times – like when you gave me the share-present USB drives – I know otherwise.”

“It might be wise to focus on the present. To almost but not quite accept our time as a damn good .... no, I’ll say a lot of fun and good times together.”

“Well, we have had a few good fucks. The best I’ve ever had, anyway.”

“I’ll get a swelled head. But same for me.”

“Better watch out something else isn’t swelling! I’ve got to go to work in a few minutes. But your advice to consider how to keep friends with Ed is probably right. Though right now I don’t want two boyfriends. Maybe I’ll suggest some sort of family outing together. Keep things social but not too cosy.

Clarisse reminded me on Christmas Day that she and Ed were in high school together.”

“Did she say much about him?”

“Not a great deal. She said they’d bumped into each other over the years out and about or at school events, though Rachel wasn’t in the same year as any of the Thomas kids. Frank’s company used his accounting services when their regular accountant had to be away for some reason. Seems they were happy with him, but had an obligation of loyalty to the regular man. Clarisse said she’d never heard anything negative about him. But then she joked that people rarely find accountants exciting unless they run off with someone’s money.”

“Then some sort of group outing would be a good idea so you can keep in touch. Look. I know I’ll not be thrilled if you realize that there’s a chance of a long-term partner in Ed. But I think you also know I care enough about you and the girls that I’ll stay out of the spotlight when and if the time comes.”

I got a kiss for that. We didn’t say more just then.

On December 31, I did ride along. We had appointments from 6 in the evening onwards, though there was a break from 10:30 to 12:30. The dispatcher sent texts for available cars during that time, but Tanya said “That’ll be people who’ve had a fight with their spouse or date, or else got drunk and is being sent home. No thanks!”

The outbound appointments were spaced out over town, and we ended at 10:30 far from home, and would have a pick up not too far away at 12:30 for the

first homeward clients. We knew this in advance, so planned a picnic together. No alcohol. In fact, it was forbidden to consume alcohol in taxis, but of course for Tanya it was a strict no-no as driver, and I couldn't see I needed it.

Cottesloe Beach was convenient enough to the appointments that Tanya drove there and found parking next to the Marine Park. There were some others around, but it wasn't crowded. We probably could have walked to find a picnic area, but wanted to avoid getting sand in the car. Given the midsummer heat, we opened all the windows and ate in the car. Tanya put the radio on to some music, but very softly. We nibbled at the picnic items, then we locked up and walked for a few minutes along some paths. We mainly wanted to stretch. There was enough light to walk from reflected street lamps. We didn't say much.

Tanya then drove a short way to where there was a public toilet. I felt royally foolish for overlooking that essential need when we were eating and drinking during what would be a nearly 10 hour shift.

We had half a dozen homeward appointments through the night pre-arranged. All were fixed price trips. The light on top of the car was never turned on. We weren't going to pick anyone up off the street. It seemed all the trips were pre-paid too.

None of the clients were a problem, though it was clear most had been enjoying toasting in the New Year. One couple – the second pick-up – were in the C B D for a party run in one of the premier hotels. They were in their 80s, but age does not always lead to wisdom, and both were very tipsy. Tanya and I escorted them one at a time to their front door, beyond which we had to hope they did not take a tumble.

While providing Tanya with company was important, and the help with the elderly couple was welcome, we hadn't had any customers where my presence might have been offered security. That is, until the last one. We'd taken a couple from an expensive apartment building near the C B D to a suburban restaurant where there was a private party in a function room. The man was in his late forties. The much younger woman was wearing, or almost wearing, a very skimpy dress. The jewellery – probably fake – dripping from various parts of her body might have covered more skin than the dress.

When we returned to pick them up, however, we had to get the staff of the restaurant to find our clients.

While we waited, I said "Hope you don't end up stiffed by the client as a start to the New Year."

"They paid in advance. Or rather his company or whoever invited him did. We got a credit card payment. Even a small tip."

Eventually the man came out, clearly the worse for drink, and got in the car.

"Is your companion coming, sir?" Tanya asked.

"She took off with a guy she met here, the bitch. Take me home."

The trip was silent, and when we arrived back at the apartment building, the man got out and went in.

"I'm glad to get rid of him," Tanya said.

"I didn't like him either. But he didn't cause any trouble."

“No. But he was likely expecting some fun when he got home. Disappointed guys can sometimes be bothersome, but you were here, so he didn’t try anything or say anything.”

“The dictionary will want to add a new definition to ‘bothersome’,” I suggested.

“You know what I mean, but I’m too tired to spar.”

“Yeah. Time to get home and cuddle up in bed.”

## On the beach

January 2 we were going to pick up Anne and Philippa. There had been some discussion that they could take the bus and then the Perth transit, but Tanya thought the long journey of over 5 hours was too long. We left home early, just after 7, and picked up the girls around 10. Thanking the Walkers seemed formal and quick, and we were on our way.

“We’re thinking of stopping for lunch in Bunbury,” Tanya said. “Then we thought we’d take a swim on the way home. I suggested Myalup beach, as none of us have been there.”

“Aunt Clarisse said she likes it the best of any beaches,” Philippa said.

“But there’s not much there but the beach,” Anne added. “We could also swim at Busselton and take a look at the jetty. We’ve never done that either, and there’s probably restaurants nearby, or on the pier.”

There was a murmur of agreement. Then talk turned to how the girls had enjoyed their week.

“Grandma Walker kept trying to get us to tell her what we thought of Ian, and was Mum sleeping with him, though of course she got her knickers in a twist because she can’t say the words,” Anne said.

I noticed Tanya stiffen, so I said “How did you answer her?” to forestall a more pointed enquiry.

“We told her Mum and Ian were always properly behaved when they were with us.”

“That seemed to give her a bad case of constipation,” Philippa said, causing laughter in the car.

“I hope she didn’t take out her frustration on you,” Tanya said.

“No, we were sweetness and light,” Anne said. “Grandma and Grandpa Walker are very sad about Dad, I think. And since he’s dead, he’s now a saint in their eyes. They weren’t around when he was sick. And somehow they seem to blame Mum, which isn’t fair. So we point out how well you’re looking after us, and keep quiet about the arguments so they don’t have anything they can grumble about that is from us.”

“I think you might have a career in the diplomatic service,” I said.

“Thank you, daughters,” Tanya said appreciatively.

We found a simple bistro near the very long Busselton Jetty for lunch. Things were busy so near the official holiday, but we were early enough to get a table. I wasn’t terribly interested in the highly touristic pier. It had been



started in the 1860s and continually extended into the shallow shelving sea to provide for loading of ships until it was converted to tourism, with a train ride to the end of the 6000 foot wooden structure. We got close enough to take a look and a few pictures, then sought a place to swim. The sandy beach was large and we didn't have to struggle to find a place to lay out beach mats.

There was a surprise when Anne stripped off her shorts and T shirt in the form of a new bikini.

"Grandma said my Speedo didn't give enough support and took me shopping."

Philippa said "I got a mask and snorkel and flippers."

Tanya said nothing, but I could see her mind going at 100 miles an hour. I hoped there'd not be any blow-up later. Truthfully, the bathing suit was far less extreme than others on the beach. The top was, as Anne implied, supportive, likely with some wire or other stiffening. At 14 going on 15, Anne had a well-defined bosom. Was her Mum suffering at least a few pangs of envy? For myself I found Tanya's tidy, firm breasts fascinating. Even though I had told her this, I suspected she treated the comment as flattery from a lover who enjoyed access to pleasures she could provide.

After swimming, we found showers and changing facilities, then some ice cream cones. Tanya had me drive us home. All the females in the car were asleep when I pulled into the driveway. I turned off the engine and waited probably fifteen seconds before Philippa woke, then Anne and finally Tanya.

"Oh. We're home. Why didn't you wake us?"

"You were all sleeping so peacefully. It seemed wrong to disturb you."

## Woylies

A couple of days into the new year, Tanya asked me if I'd be interested in a guided tour of the Karakamaia Wildlife Reserve. The only way to see this was a twilight guided tour, and this had to be booked in advance.

"I'm thinking of inviting Ed and Rachel, with each of us paying our own fee. Seems it's pretty special. Animals you can't see elsewhere because they're almost extinct, like the woylie."

"What's a woylie?" I asked.

"Something like a big rat, but it eats grubs and doesn't seem to cause humans any trouble."

It actually took over a month before we could go one evening to the reserve, about an hour north east of Perth. The reserve was surrounded by a high fence with wires an inch apart and electrified to keep out cats and foxes and other non-indigenous animals. The guides pointed out lots of animals that were strange to me. I found the half-metre high pademelons – small wallabies – cute beyond belief. We saw only a couple of woylies, and only briefly. The guide mentioned the troubles they were having keeping the population going, though there had been some success. Also tree-ring evidence in old grass tree plants – formerly known by the politically unacceptable name *blackboy* – showed fewer

bush fires when woylies were common. A researcher found each woylie turns over six tonnes of soil per year, burying bark and leaf litter to reduce fuel for fires and at the same time distributing seeds and providing nutrients for them. Though I paid my own entry – of course – Tanya did me a great favour in suggesting the visit.

At the same time, her friendship with Ed was being solidified. Afterwards, though it was quite late, we all went to a coffee shop for a drink and a treat. Three adults and three girls meant there was chatter. Tanya seemed relaxed and for that I was relieved.

Later she came to the studio – we now didn't bother to bolt the communicating door when all of us were home – and came into bed with me.

"Gonna' stay?"

"Probably. But more to talk for a few minutes. Then I'll want to sleep. Shift in the morning with a pre-arranged airport trip with a local pickup at 7:15."

"Alarm at 6:30."

"Yeah. But a regular customer. Can't forego reliable business."

"Thank you for suggesting Karakamaia. It was really special. I think the Morse's liked it too."

"Yes. That was clear."

"You seemed fairly comfortable."

"I did. That's sort of what's bothering me."

"Why does it bother you?" I asked.

"You're not upset?"

"We've talked through our situation. Getting upset could ruin the good parts and make the bad bits worse. I know you care about me, and I can assure you that you are much loved too."

"Thank you, Ian. Shall we roll over and sleep."

"There's a fee for the comforting words."

"How much?"

"A kiss."

## Australia Day

January 26 is Australia Day. This year it was very hot. Tanya and family planned to watch the fireworks from Sir James Mitchell Park on the south side of the Swan River. Frank and Clarisse were going to drive Jack and Angela, but Alan and Christine were going to cycle with Tanya, the girls and me. Parking would be awkward, and we had less than half an hour's ride.

Jacob wanted to come on a bike too, but the distance was probably too great. In any event, he didn't have lights for his bike, and they would be needed for the way back to Tanyas where Alan and Christine would sleep over. Sometime after 6 p.m. we made our way to the park. The fireworks would be launched somewhere in front of the C B D, so Mitchell Park was a prime viewing spot. Fortunately it had a long frontage on the river and was deep enough to accommodate a lot of people.

We had a picnic, joining probably thousands of others. Police were wandering around and confiscating bottles and asking the offenders to leave. Alcohol consumption was illegal in parks. We actually had some wine in a thermos to keep it cool. So did Frank.

Frank said “The coppers generally only bother obvious drinkers. We don’t have bottles and we don’t have wine glasses. Glass isn’t a good idea in the park anyway. It wouldn’t surprise me that the authorities really want to avoid broken glass more than the booze.”

That made sense. The presence of the police wasn’t oppressive and they were trading greetings and jokes with just about everyone. People had small Australian flags or were wearing appropriate T shirts or hats. It was another version of Canada Day. I’d been once in Ottawa to Parliament Hill on July 1st with Zelda. There was much less space, so more difficult to get there and get home after. Here there was no stage with entertainers. Possibly that happened in Canberra. Hmm. Wonder how to get to Canberra. I’d like to see the place. Didn’t really exist before 1930. A manufactured capital.

## Thesis defence

Katherine’s thesis defence was scheduled for the Monday following Australia Day, which had fallen mid-week this year. My report was fairly short. I said the research was competent and the exposition clear. I referred to minor errors I’d found with a filename and the location on a departmental file server. I recommended that the candidate be granted the doctorate.

Kevin’s report was rather similar. However Grigor Zaitsev felt the exposition failed to explore the technical and financial aspects of community growth and development. He still suggested that the candidate pass, but wanted revisions. I figured this was academic territoriality. When I saw Kevin in the hall before the defence convened, I said “Are we going to have trouble with Grigor over revisions?”

“I’ve been wondering about that too.”

“It occurs to me that he might accept that the summary have a sentence or paragraph pointing out that urban development takes a great deal of technical expertise, project management, financial input and infrastructure building, and that this investigation pursues the social and historical dimensions of community development.”

“Oh. Nice. Yes, that might do it. Acknowledges the viewpoint, but sticks to the role of a historian in looking at the topic. Thanks, Ian.”

Sometimes one had to play politics.

The formalities started at 10:30. Kevin, mercifully, had reviewed the procedures and did the introductions, then gave the agenda, which would be that the candidate would present an overview of her dissertation, the examiners would then ask questions, then the candidate would withdraw while the examiners made their decision, after which the candidate would return to hear that decision. He added

“As a matter of efficiency, it would not make sense to continue to the presentation were any of the reports recommending a fail. I suppose that strictly in such a case we should carry through, but it would be wasting everyone’s time.”

Katherine was nervous, but soon settled down. She began “I’d like to thank each of you for serving on my examination committee. I know it takes a lot of work just to read a thesis, and such works are heavier than a novel.

Since you have all read the dissertation, I am not going to regurgitate the content. Rather I will provide some background to my enthusiasm and dedication to the project, and some motivations and aspirations for similar work in the future. Communities do develop, sometimes chaotically, sometimes with great planning and regularity. People should know how they arrived at their current state and organization.”

She was away, and gave a lively 20 minute rationale for community history projects.

Kevin said “Thank you, Miss Stormont, for an engaging presentation. We will now take questions. Prof. Zaitsev?”

Grigor asked a few questions, and it was obvious he was pushing the financial and technical side of things. Katherine didn’t let him bully her.

“I’m not sure if the examiners are aware that when I began my investigations, several years before joining U W A, I was one of two urban development officers with the community that is the subject of the thesis. I had access to some of the financial, regulatory and construction records. However, the archives material was mostly historical and social. Still, if you look at my endnotes to chapters 3, 4 and 5, you will see that I mention some of the issues that are certainly of interest in urban development studies. Moreover those notes make reference to a number – I believe more than a dozen – collections of records concerning those matters going back as far as the late 19th century.”

I had my laptop open, since it had my questions. As quietly as I could, I looked at the bibliography in the thesis. Hmm. I’d missed noting the documents she mentioned. Good for Katherine.

Grigor said “Thank you for your answers, Miss Stormont.”

Kevin then asked me if I had questions. In an examination, this is really a command to ask some. I had three, but they were fairly soft, though the third could be considered to open up a can of worms.

“In reading your dissertation, Miss Stormont, and in fact in reading any such dissertation, I’ve been left with a feeling that the story is told by the people who are considered to count in a community. When I visited Haarlem in the Netherlands and went to the Frans Hals museum, there were many pictures of formally dressed men and women who were directors of institutions, members of community organizations and so forth. The worthy members of the town, and my wife called them ‘Wall Worthies’ because they were now pictured on the walls of the museum.”

At this there was a chuckle in the room. Examinations could be too solemn. I continued “My question to you is if you have any ideas how the story could be told, or modified perhaps, with the viewpoint of the less fortunate, or less literate or less politically connected members of the community.”

Katherine was sharp. She answered “Your point is fair, and a version of history being told by the victors. Actually I have been interested in how other voices, or rather echoes of other voices, might be revealed. I’ll admit right now that such ideas are not part of the current dissertation. Just describing the methodology would push me over the 100,000 word limit. But the essence of what I’ve been thinking about is to get birth and death records, hospital admissions, police arrest records and gaol admissions with reasons. Also social service budgets, staffing, and numbers of cases. Communicable disease records from the state might be useful too. However, translating such data to useful information on community development isn’t direct.

As a tangent, there are some collections of letters from soldiers in the two world wars. They probably give some information about people’s lives and hopes, but I think that to get decent information for the present task would require that the letters be digitized and also tagged with information about the correspondents.”

Kevin said “You could make a career from following up that answer. Well said!”

Katherine smiled.

Kevin asked just one question, which was a technical one about how many hours Katherine estimated she spent with the archives to carry out the project. It was interesting that Katherine hadn’t made such an estimate, but she quickly responded

“I’ve not made such an estimate. However, for about two years before I decided to do the Ph.D. I was in the archives about twice a week for 1 to 3 hours. For that part of the research, if we say 40 weeks per year at 4 hours per week, we get 320 hours. But I did make photocopies for use here, and went back twice to make more. Overall during the project, probably 500 to 700 hours of delving. But sometimes, I must admit, I was being a bit nosey and following stories that didn’t have much to do with community development.”

“Thank you Miss Stormont. I’ll suggest you go get a coffee and come back in 10 minutes and wait outside.”

When Katherine was gone, Kevin asked “Verdict?”

I said “Pass, with repair of the typos.”

Grigor made a start at suggesting inclusion of some sections on the financial and technical stuff. After a couple of sentences, Kevin interrupted, saying “You know, that would mean we have to reconvene when she’s done the revisions. And Ian has to return to Canada in June. What if we asked for a modification of the summary abstract.”

I joined in “Indeed. It would be very inconvenient for me as there are other plans afoot. While you were asking your questions, Grigor, I had a similar thought about the summary. Here’s a form of words we could suggest.”

I increased the font size of the paragraph I’d composed. It needed a bit of polish, but had the elements I’d mentioned earlier to Kevin.

Grigor clearly wanted more, but recognized the inconvenience of coming back. And Katherine was not going to let her investment of time and money disappear. “Yes. That does at least address the concern. And my revisions

could push the length over the recommended 80,000 words, and possibly over the 100,000 word strict limit.”

We spent perhaps two minutes recognizing that the presentation and oral defence had been well done. Kevin filled in the form for the examiners decision. Time to tell the candidate.

Kevin went outside and invited Katherine back. “Congratulations Dr. Stormont. Well ‘almost doctor’ Stormont. We were impressed with your dissertation and your defence. The examiners have an addition to suggest to the summary to address the issue raised by Prof. Zaitsev concerning financial and technical matters, and we have lists – quite short ones actually compared to other theses – of minor errors that need to be fixed before you submit the dissertation to the repository.”

Katherine was clearly relieved, but not really smiling. Each of us shook hands with her. Kevin had his annotated dissertation on a USB key which he gave to me so I could add mine. Grigor had a copy of a paper list of corrections. It was only one sheet, which he gave her.

Kevin and Grigor each had to leave, I was left in the room with Katherine. She was putting away papers and the USB key, which I’d already updated since my laptop was running. I was shutting it down when I realized she was crying.

I went and closed the door.

“You OK?” I asked.

“Yes. Just a bit overwhelmed. I was so keyed up and afraid there’d be something that meant I didn’t get the degree.”

“Zaitsev actually wanted some major revisions, but Kevin and I figured it was just academic posturing. That shouldn’t fall on your shoulders. We figured out the addition to the summary would be a sensible compromise, then told Grigor he’d have to reread the thesis. I don’t think he’d thought of that, or else figured you’d abandon the degree. But I don’t think you would. You’re pretty committed.”

“But it would mess up all sorts of plans.”

“Yeah. And they’d have to get another external examiner. He’d be in the doghouse with department heads and administrators as well as earning a big hateball from you.”

Katherine giggled. “Hateball? Is that a word?”

“It is now. How about I take you to lunch? Somewhere fancy. Make a suggestion and we’ll phone for a reservation.”

“Oh. I’d love lunch. But you’ve put me on the spot and my brain’s mush after the examination.”

“Tanya was taken to Outback Jack’s by a friend she helped out.”

“OK. Fine.”

That’s where we went. It wasn’t supposed to be a date, but it felt like one once we were led to a table and given menus. There was now no reason I couldn’t socialize – fraternize – with Katherine. A niggling shadow of guilt that I might be being disloyal to Tanya was present in my mind, but did not prevent my enjoyment of Katherine’s company.

## Direct talk 1

Katherine's examination took place a week and a half before the excursion to Karakamaia. The Saturday following the outing Anne and Philippa cycled to their grandparents Thomas. Tanya was off-duty. Once the girls left we showered together and spent some time not getting out of bed, so to speak.

"Did you have a good lunch at Outback Jack's with Katherine?"

"Yes. Plenty of good choices on the menu. We had a nice table in the shade but outside. There was a mother Kookaburra trying to teach her offspring how to whack a small snake against a tree branch."

"They're always watchable. Once we were somewhere where one got a long French fry. Of course, it fell apart when he or she whacked it against the branch."

I said "Katherine was greatly relieved to get the exam behind her, which is understandable. Right after the exam the other two examiners left the room and she burst into tears. Not upset, just the reaction to all the stress being lifted I think."

"How long had she been working on the thesis?"

"Three and a half years since she came to U W A, but at least a couple of years before that doing research on the archives that prompted the project. She was digging in the archives more or less as a personal interest, then came home early one night to find her boyfriend in bed with her supposed best friend. She didn't figure she could stay in the same town as he was, so decided to start a Ph.D. here at the other side of the country."

"I think you mentioned she wants to go to Canada. Do you think you'll meet up there?"

"That's the old joke about people in England hearing that you're from Ottawa in Canada and saying 'my sister's in Vancouver. Do you ever run into her?'"

"I didn't quite mean that. Actually, I probably want to ask if you ever think of her ... er ... rather like we are now."

At this point, there were two naked people lying in each other's arms.

"Hmm. Since men commonly think 'I wonder what ...', I suppose the answer is yes. But that's kind of a given. And women do it too. Haven't you thought about Ed that way?"

"No. Of course not. Well. Maybe. Not like we are now."

"I find Katherine attractive. At first I hardly noticed her. I think that was how she wants to be. Unnoticed. Invisible. Makes it easier to get on and do her work. But she's a decent-looking woman. When she smiles, which is too infrequently, she lights up."

"Well. I'm glad you're honest. And I suppose if you weren't in my life, I'd be more ... receptive to Ed's interest."

"From the little chance I've had, I think he'd be decent to you, and that you could have a good life together."

"That's sort of what I think too, but I worry that maybe I'm seeking security and companionship if I take up with him. Not fair to either of us."

"Surely it's too early to presume that's all you'd find with him. And there's a lot to be said for a respectful and friendly partnership that brings security and companionship. Movies, books and TV really make us unhappy with perfectly good relationships that aren't all harps and violins."

"I seem to recall some harp music helped you get my knickers off."

"Guilty as charged!"

"Oh. It's all so messy."

"I take it you're not referring to our sports equipment just at the moment."

"No. About finding the right person to be with."

"Yes. I'm pretty sure both of us thought we'd found that person, then external factors crashed into our lives and left us high and dry."

"If it weren't for your having to go back to your life in Canada, do you think we'd have a chance, Ian?"

"Probably. We get along well, even if our backgrounds and interests are different, or more that we've not had chance to learn how much we could share of the things that are different in our interests."

"Somehow I worry how it'll be when we break up, either before you leave or then."

"Breaking up suggests antipathy and a dislike of the other person. I have a feeling we won't have a break up. More that the relationship will change to be a friendship without the benefits, but probably with an affection that isn't really expressed as openly as we'd like."

"If I were sure of that, I'd be a lot less ... uncertain," Tanya said.

## Direct talk 2

On the Tuesday following, I took my lunch outside as usual. Katherine joined me on a bench with her own sandwich.

"Did you get the corrections done?" I asked.

"Actually the evening of the examination, but I held back submitting for a couple of days."

"Will you go to the degree ceremony? Most people take it *in absentia*."

"If the dates work, I'll pick it up in person. It's sort of a milestone in life, particularly for an academic."

"When do you think you'll go to Wilfred Laurier?"

"Sometime in late June or July. That's when their academic year starts and ends, or rather ends and starts. Isn't that when you'll go back?"

"Yes. I'm hoping to arrange to travel so I get to see a bit of the rest of Australia. Never been to Sydney area, or Canberra, or Brisbane and the Queensland coast."

"I'll need to go there before Canada to see family."

"Wollongong wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"What will you do until you leave?"



"I've some grant money to cover writing up a paper or two, and you know I teach some classes. Grigor Zaitsev actually suggested a bit of a collaboration. Two papers, one focusing on historical aspects, the other on technical ones, of the community in my thesis. I'd get first author on one, he on the other. He figures a journal would like the joint submission."

"Will you have enough time to get them done?"

"Yes. I've done a lot of the historical one already, but he's got some useful ideas, and his experience may help get through journal refereeing quicker. I had enough material photocopied that relates to finance and construction to get him started. Maybe enough to do the paper if it doesn't get too detailed."

"Sounds like a plan. It's important now to get a few papers on the resumé."

"Somehow I'd actually like to play truant for a while. Is 'goof off' the American expression?"

"Maybe. Probably a bit out of date now."

"I hope to do a bit of tourist stuff too. I haven't had much chance. I've not been to Albany yet. And I want to see New Norcia, since that was established in the 1840s."

"Albany's interesting. I was surprised by the Brig Amity. Well, a replica. She was built in New Brunswick in 1816 – before Canada's Confederation. Then sailed all the way here. Only 148 tons, so pretty tiny to sail that distance."

"Gordon told me you'd managed to get there with Tanya."

There was a bit of an edge to her voice.

"I probably shouldn't have mentioned to Gordon that Tanya and I travelled together."

That was now an understatement, because it was clear Katherine thought Tanya and I were an item. Which, of course, we were. But .... well, the buts were the real problem.

"From what I gather, you both share somewhat parallel experiences with previous spouses, and you're both now unattached, so it's really not my ... not anyone's business."

There was a pause, then we both started to talk at the same time. Indeed we both said "Actually ..."

"Ladies first."

"I had thought of inviting you to come with me to New Norcia, but it might be taken the wrong way."

"Or the right way," I said. "I was about to say that if I hadn't been warned that I might be external examiner for you, I'd have wanted to ask you out. We have similar academic interests, aren't far different in age, and seem to enjoy each other's company. That doesn't, of course, guarantee things would develop."

"For Tanya and I, the elephant in the room is that I go back to Canada in a few months. With the girls and her family here, as well as the really glacial immigration procedures, it isn't on for her to come to Canada. And there's really no job for me in Australia, along with similar bureaucratic obstacles."

"You're thinking of breaking up with her? Might mean you're out of a place to stay."

"Can I speak in confidence? No leaks to Gordon or anyone else?"

Katherine nodded.

“Tanya and I got together from a place of emotional paralysis. I think we’ve been good for each other. I care for her deeply, and I think that is reciprocated. I don’t want to do anything to hurt her or Anne and Philippa. That said, Tanya and I have been talking. There’s a man she helped out a few months ago – I almost said last Fall, but it’s Spring here – when he had to have hernia surgery and his pre-teen daughter needed someone to look after her. Ed is widowed, hence the necessity for a temporary guardian. Later he asked Tanya out to dinner as thanks, and it’s clear he’s interested in more than just one dinner. And Tanya quite likes him, but is conflicted because I’m in her life. However, we all went to Karakamaia recently with the three girls. Tanya hasn’t told Ed about us. Perhaps won’t. For the moment the plan is to make sure the door isn’t shut. Awkward, but there you are.

“Anyway, I suspect Tanya and I will stay friends, even after I go back to Canada, but the relationship will obviously change.”

“What would Tanya think if you came to New Norcia with me?”

“She’d not say much, but I’m sure it would raise some insecurities.”

“I almost feel I should suggest a double date with Ed and Tanya,” Katherine quipped.

We were silent for perhaps 30 seconds.

“Perhaps that suggestion might be helpful. Unless I’m mistaken, all four of us are trying to find our way through the relationships jungle.”

“Why don’t you ask Tanya if she’s interested?” Katherine said. “Perhaps without the girls so the adults can get to know each other, on a weekday if Tanya and Ed can get off work.”

“Ed’s an accountant, and Tanya does trade shifts with other people, so I suspect it’s possible. I’ll let you know.”

## New Norcia

When I told Tanya of my conversation with Katherine that evening, she first looked annoyed, then said “It seems a crazy idea until you think about it for a few seconds. I’ll phone Ed and see what he says.”

She picked up her mobile and pressed one of the contacts – Ed was already registered there.

“Hi Ed, Tanya here. ... Doing great, thanks. Look, Ian and one of his colleagues – a woman who he was external examiner for recently and she’s now passed the defence as it’s called ... yeah, right. Anyway, they’re thinking of going to New Norcia soon, preferably on a weekday to avoid lots of visitors there. I said I’d not been there, and it seems a good chance to have a couple of historians to add some running commentary. I thought you might like to join in and make a foursome in the car, though we haven’t decided who’s driving yet.

... Yes. Sure. Let me repeat that back. Next Wednesday or Thursday or the following Tuesday or Wednesday. Ok. Talk to you soon. If it’s worktime I’ll text, but please text back to let me know you’ve got it. OK... Bye.”

“Yes, he’ll come. You heard the timing.”

“I’ll phone Katherine, then. Are all those days OK for you.”

“I’ve done some favours lately, so I’m just going to tell dispatch when I’m away, not ask if it’s all right with them. Though the more notice the better.”

Katherine and I didn’t have many timing obligations just now. The following Wednesday avoided a seminar I was giving on the Tuesday, so we set the date and Tanya phoned Ed and the taxi dispatch office.

The next day at lunch, I worked out with Katherine that we’d use her car, I’d pay for a tank of gas ... petrol here. Assuming we went for lunch, each of us would pay our own, though on the day Ed said that since Katherine and I provided transport and Tanya had thought of him, he’d get the bill. We ate at the New Norcia hotel. It was respectably nice, old-fashioned, and prices weren’t out of line.

The core of New Norcia was the Benedictine mission to a group of aboriginal people started by two Spanish monks in 1846. Norcia was the birthplace of Saint Benedict in Italy. Apparently pronounced in a slightly different way to New Norcia, the latter with a softer ‘C’.

The original goals of working with aboriginal people morphed into serving to educate settler children, though there was a boarding school for boys of aboriginal origin. Shades of Canada’s residential schools, unfortunately.

We were mostly playing tourist. There were a number of impressive buildings relating to the educational institutions that grew up in the community as well as the Benedictines. Add to this the hotel and other secular buildings. Somehow we only noted the modern European Space Agency ground station from a distance as we drove by.

While we were at New Norcia, the ladies were walking together some distance ahead of Ed and I. Ed said “Tanya told me that your wife, like Joe, suffered from an addiction.”

“There are some differences in that I believe Zelda’s addiction came from a misguided painkiller prescription after a car accident in a blizzard. Joe seems to have had some pre-existing illness. Either way, we ended up without a partner. I gather your wife died of cancer.”

“Yes. Breast cancer. BRCA gene mutations. I’m trying to get up the courage to get Rachel tested.”

“Life can toss grenades sometimes.”

“Don’t I know it. It’s been the better part of three years since Dianne died, and I’m just now starting to try to find a normal life.”

“I came here on sabbatical as a way of getting away. I’ve found it helpful, and people have been kind, but that very kindness means I’ll have to say goodbye to some people I’ve enjoyed spending time with and come to care about.”

“Like Tanya?”

“Obviously. And the girls. I suspect we’ve spent more time with each other than we would if our circumstances were more ... balanced. I was going to say normal, but who knows what normal is.”

“I hear you, Ian. And I think Tanya will miss you too. She talks a lot about ... well not you, but things you do together, or with the girls. They’ve

mentioned how you and Katherine took them to see the Batavia. I've got to take Rachel. Hard to imagine it was more than a century before the First Fleet."

Here I was fairly certain that Tanya's exposition would be censored in some respects. I played it cool, of course, replying "I suspect Tanya wants to find someone to share time and experiences with, but will take things slowly to avoid as much as possible the chances she or the girls will get hurt."

"Can't blame her. Men are supposed to be tough, but I think that's cultural pressure for men to hide emotions."

"Tanya and I were talking one evening and we agreed that society pretends that once a partner has died or otherwise disappeared the person left behind somehow stops loving them."

"Bang on. People assume you're all set to start over, when you're still grieving."

"I don't think I'm betraying any confidences to say Tanya wants to get to know you. But you both have daughters who'll make it tricky to find the private time to work out the awkward details."

Ed laughed. "Yeah. 'Awkward details' is a good euphemism. And the girls always know more than they're supposed to."

I had some uncomfortable suspicions what the last comment meant.

We got home before 5. Ed's car was in Tanya's driveway, and Rachel had come home with Anne and Philippa. We had some tea and biscuits, and Katherine left, then Ed and Rachel. Tanya was going to do a partial shift, and given we'd had a good lunch, it was decided she'd have a bite to eat when she got in, or else get something on the road, while the girls would have beans on toast for dinner, then do homework and watch TV or read.

I decided to bike over to my office to check on correspondence – there were a couple of letters from Canada with some documents that would need my signature. I had a Skype call with mother. She talked about a man she'd met at the library computer courses. Albert had been a widower for ten years. I got the feeling mother was spending quite a bit of time with him. If that was what she wanted, I hoped it would work out for her. Since she mentioned that the courses had described romance scams, I trusted she would be careful. Rosalie came in at one point and said hello over mother's shoulder.

There were some emails to respond to. One was from our next seminar visitor from the University of Queensland who was coming out for family reasons and had got in touch with us. Offering some hospitality got us a seminar. I'd have to talk to Gordon and arrange with Louise to get him collected from the airport.

As I was leaving, I noticed light coming from the office shared by several of the grad students who did some teaching for the Department, so I walked down the hall to look in. Katherine was there.

"Hi. Working late?"

"Thought I'd get ahead on prep. Also checking up on a pair of students whose essays seemed a bit too good."

"Were they?"

"I put a couple of sentences of each into Google. Hits sent me to the Nebraska Historical Magazine and Illinois Retro Reporter."

"I assume there's no proper references."

"You assume correctly. Now I've got to write them up so they don't claim some cultural misunderstanding to weasel out of being cashiered." "Cultural misunderstanding" was professor-speak for claims of foreign students, and I guessed that was the source of the offending papers, that in their culture it was OK to copy. Financial administrators were inclined to accept such excuses to avoid upsetting their marketing partners who helped keep the foreign student fees coming in.

"What does your syllabus say about cheating? Or the instructions for the essay."

"There's the syllabus – see middle of page 2."

"Essays shall be your own work, though you may quote as much as you wish from properly referenced work of others. However, you must link such referenced work to the theme and argument of your own essay.' I'd say that's pretty clear."

Katherine said "I'm planning to give them zero, stating where I found the text and that no reference was given. Then a pointer to the syllabus."

"Yes. You're better to say very little, or they'll get a lawyer to find some objection to the position of the commas in your marking report."

"Good point."

Let me copy these references across to my report file in the right position, then I'll close down and walk out with you."

"That's your own laptop, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Do you leave it here?"

"Usually. With the door locked and in a drawer. Oh. I get your point. I should make sure my report file can't be tampered with, or my machine stolen. Do you think the students can get in here, and would do that?"

"I don't know, but Louise told me about a contract cleaner who made a whole lot of phone calls to Lebanon on a visiting professor's office phone."

"I'd just got here when that happened. But thanks for the reminder. I'll either lock my machine in the filing cabinet, which is where we keep the exams, or take it home."

We walked out together and I unlocked my bike and walked with her toward the edge of the campus.

"I enjoyed Norcia today," I said.

"So did I. Had a nice chat with Tanya."

"Anything significant?" I asked.

"She said you'd managed to bring her out of a state of emotional freeze, and it would be tough when you went back to Canada. She wants to get to know Ed better, as you've told me. I've got to say I found him pleasant."

"I'm trying to make sure I'm not an obstacle to them getting to know each other. Ed seems to have similar wishes. He's also coming out of grief for his wife who died of breast cancer."

Katherine said "I had a chance to talk to him when you went to the loo. Getting Rachel tested for BRCA is bothering him. Or perhaps how to handle

the situation if she's positive."

"Yes. Knowing leaves one with some very difficult decisions."

We were now at an intersection where I'd normally go one way and Katherine would go another. I knew generally where she lived, but not the address.

"Do you want me to walk with you home?" I asked.

"I'm used to doing it alone. But thanks for asking. Probably see you at lunch in the next day or so. Maybe we can talk about travel in Australia and Canada."

## Ruminations

The year was drifting through February. It was difficult to accept that this was early autumn here. Back home – well mother's home – there was still snow on the ground. This seasonal confusion added to the uncertainty I felt in how I fitted into the world.

On the night of the trip to Norcia when I got home after Katherine and I had each other goodnight and headed to our separate destinations, Tanya was just coming in, but was very tired, as indeed was I. We wished each other a good night and made for our own beds.

It was the weekend before we had a chance to talk. In the meantime I'd had lunch once with Katherine, but we talked about places we each liked in Australia (Katherine) and Canada (me). We each made lists. Perhaps I'll include them later, but they are primarily the stuff of travelogues.

Saturday morning and the girls went off to watch their school play a cricket match against another school. I'd texted Tanya about morning coffee, and earlier had gone to a bakery for a couple of pastries.

"These are good. And fresh," Tanya said, licking some custard off her finger. I'd got two types of pastries and we each had a half of each type.

"Things seem to taste better when you share."

"That's a good sentiment, Ian. I'll have to remember it."

"How're you doing? I've not had a chance to talk to you."

"Well. Fine. Shifts have been giving good money. Norcia was really nice. I had a good chat with Katherine."

"Yes. She said. We had lunch together. Brown bag at the Oval. Talked about places she liked in Australia and I liked in Canada."

There was a longish pause.

"How're you doing Ian?"

"Like you, I'm fine. Or rather, I can't think of a reason I'm not fine."

"Yeah. That's how I'm feeling. Like I really ought to feel fine, and I can't come up with a reason I'm not fine, but something's not quite right. It's a rattle in my personal engine."

"Do you think it's because we know that the comfortable sharing of time and pleasure together has this time limit?" I asked.

"Something of that. But also realizing that we're each just visitors in the other's world. And I'm not talking about you being here from Canada. You've

likely never lived with a taxi driver with kids. I've never known someone whose life is dredging through dusty old documents for the stories of people who went before."

"Tanya. I'm immensely richer than when I arrived thanks to that taxi driver and her daughters."

"And I'm really, really happy that I learned a bit about the world of thoughts and ideas and music, especially about a *Quarrel with the Landlady*."

"So how do we proceed?" I asked. "I don't think it's a tragedy if we can move on in our lives, cherishing both the memories and the people who helped make them. But it would be a catastrophe if we mess up the transitions we seem to have to make."

"Yes. With that I definitely agree. But that's the goal. It's how to get there that'll give us trouble."

"True."

I didn't get to tell you what Ed was talking to me about when we were in Norcia. He's worried about getting Rachel tested at some point for BRCA, and then what to do if the test shows she has the genes."

"Yes. He said much the same to me," Tanya said.

"I'm coming to the view that I should take a step back and give you a chance to find out if you and Ed could make a go of things. I'll miss the closeness and, well, the nice noises and wetness, but I think it would be selfish to be an obstacle to you."

"Do you think you and Katherine could find something together? If she's going to Canada, and I gather it won't be too far from where you teach, there's a better chance for a joint future."

"Are you saying I should explore that as a possibility?"

"I know I'll be grumpy about it, and the girls will probably be annoyed too, though they're well aware you're going home come June. But Katherine's OK. And you've more or less said you find her attractive. She talked to me as a friend. I sense she already is a friend. Other women in her line of work would sniff at a woman who drives taxi."

I reached over and took Tanya's hand. We stayed with hands joined for several minutes.

## Regime change

The next morning was Sunday, and Tanya did her usual shift then. I heard the girls go off to church. When they came back, I was reading on the front veranda. I'd do that from time to time, even if the Walkers were away and their part of the house closed. It allowed me to watch the road, but today I wanted a chance to tell Anne and Philippa that their mother and I would be looking to the future.

"Glad I caught you coming home," I said.

"Oh. Yes. Anne and I thought you might want to watch a movie, but you were out."

“Yes. Went to the pub to try not to have the worst darts score.” I’d met up with Gordon and a couple of others. Katherine was, I think, at a concert somewhere.

“Did you want to talk to us about something?” Anne said.

“Well, you know I have to go back to Canada relatively soon.”

“Yeah. We’ll miss you,” Philippa said. “But probably not nearly so much as Mum.”

“I’ll miss all of you, but especially her. However, both of you are keen observers. You’ll have seen that Ed Morse likes her company. I think he’s a decent man, too. I don’t think either he or your Mum have any definite hopes for each other at the moment, but I don’t want to get in the way if there is a worthwhile possibility.”

“Last night Mum said more or less the same. Downer!” Anne said.

“I only hope my being here has helped her reconnect with life as much as it has me,” I said.

“Yeah. She’s much brighter,” Philippa said.

“I’m not planning on turning into a puff of smoke, even when I go back to Canada. I’ll make sure you have my contact details, and I’ll hope for – expect even – regular reports.”

“At least it’s not like when people had to send letters by ship,” Philippa said. “It took at least 6 weeks from Europe to Australia.”

“Yeah. I Skype with my Mom,” I said.

“Can you show us how?” Anne asked. “Mum said you introduced her to your Mom on Skype, but we’ve never tried it.”

“Sure. But do you want some pancakes first? I made some batter and I’ve some maple syrup and bananas. But if you want there’s tomato and cheese to have first. Or I suppose after the sweet.”

## Delicate negotiations

That afternoon Katherine phoned.

“Hi Ian. I thought if you’re not busy we could get together and talk about travel wish lists. We could look into the best ways for each of us to get to the places we want to see. It’s so easy to chase around and waste a lot of time and money.”

“Sure. When and where?”

“You could come here. I’ve some salad stuff and dessert possibilities, and we could get some take-away. There’s a reasonable Chinese round the corner. Does 4 o’clock work and we’ll aim to eat around 6. I think we can order after 5:30.”

“Better give me the address. I don’t think I’ve been there.”

I cycled over at 4. Katherine had a small one-bedroom apartment upstairs in a modest two storey block.

“A little bigger than mine, but yours has a separate bedroom and a small kitchen.”



“Do you want to show me some pictures of the places in Canada I’ve listed and help think of some ideas on how I might get there?”

“Sure. Using your list, I put together some of my own images – I’ve been using a digital camera for the last decade and I bought a scanner to image the earlier ones.”

“I’ve a VGA cable to put the screen on my TV. It’s a 32 incher. Not the biggest, but easier for us both to watch.”

We set up my laptop and spent an hour looking at Canadian destinations. As with my Australian ones, they were spread out, and therefore it would be difficult to fit even a majority in a single trip. However I could think of some possible tours, but they were ill-advised as solo driving ones. For the moment I kept quiet about that and allowed our focus to be on the qualities and features of the destinations, at least of those with which I was familiar.

The time slid by easily, and I’d not noticed it was nearly 6 when Katherine asked “Shall we order some food?”

“Definitely. You mentioned Chinese. Do you have favourite choices?”

“Usually I get just one dish, and if it’s a noodle dish, I don’t get any rice on the side, though sometimes I’ll add an egg roll. But with two of us, two dishes should be about right and we can share. Unless you’ve a huge appetite, there’ll still be leftovers for tomorrow for one or both of us.”

“Go for it,” I said.

We ordered a Singapore noodles – spicy – and a chicken and cashew with mixed vegetables, and a single serving of rice. Katherine was right – we still had some left over. I’d brought along a couple of cans of cider. Strongbow, but made under license in Australia.

As we ate we compared backgrounds.

“Were you born in Wollongong, Katherine?”

“Yes. My parents and sister have been there all my life. It’s a nice-sized city. Not too far from Sydney, where I did my undergrad degree. Then I moved up the coast to a town not far from the Queensland border. I was there almost 6 years, then three and a half here so far.

You?”

“I was born in Toronto, but my parents moved to Stratford so my father could do some work with the Shakespeare Festival. He was what most people would call a roadie – one of the people who do setup, take down and all sorts of technical work in show business. And I think he liked the nomadic life, because he took off when I was about 7 with a woman who lived next door. Mom already had a job, fortunately, with the local government, and she was good at it. Mainly getting meetings organized so they ran smoothly. Or having the right words – the current expression is ‘talking points’ ready for release to the media. Gave her a modest but sufficient income as long as we were reasonable in our wants. She managed to buy the condo she’s in and pay it off. That’s my official address at the moment. With my divorce from Zelda the house got sold. But it does save a worry about tenants while I’m away, though I’ll have to find a place when I get back. I think I told you that the university I teach at is about 100 km away from Mom. Waterloo is about half way between the two.”

We talked for a while about the Australian places I wanted to see. Since I'd already managed Adelaide and Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane were the three large places, but I wanted to play tourist near Cairns. I figured Tasmania was off the table this visit.

"You might be able to rent a car in Sydney and see a bit of the Blue Mountains, Canberra and even Wollongong. The Pacific Highway to Brisbane is quite interesting, along with the Gold Coast south of Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast north, as well as the Glasshouse Mountains. A road trip to Cairns would be interesting, but you'd probably want to not drive back again."

Without putting my brain in gear, I said "A lot of the value of places is in sharing them with someone you can talk about them with intelligently."

It wasn't that the idea was silly. Just that it could be taken as being loaded with hope or, worse, desperation. I didn't feel the latter, but the wish for someone to share things with was strong. It was part of the joy of time shared with Tanya.

"Yeah. It's a pity Sean let me down. We had some nice times."

"How long were you together?" Possibly that was a nosey question, but I'd shared the story of my marriage to Zelda with Katherine in several of our conversations. Not all at once, but a fairly complete account had been rendered.

"Only a couple of years. I'd had a boyfriend, Kyle, in Uni for the last two and a half years. He went off backpacking in Europe on graduation. Wanted me to come along, but I was offered a job in the town I mentioned. I thought Kyle was going to be the man for me, and I wasn't going to prevent him from his grand tour. But he took my decision to go to work as some sort of betrayal. He threw out some pretty uncomplimentary epithets. That kept me off the dating market for about a year and a half. Sean worked in IT for the town with a local contracting firm. We found we got along. When my apartment lease ran out, it seemed sensible to combine households. In some ways it was really more comfort than partnership, but we had some good times together. Perhaps I should have expected it not to last. In retrospect Jenny – my friend who I caught him in bed with – was more suited to him than I was."

"Kyle and Sean may have limited your chances for a family." In saying this, I suppose I was probing.

"Possibly, if I ever felt maternal, which I don't. What about you? Is it not getting a bit late for children?"

"I suppose so. And I must admit to rather enjoying the company of Philippa and Anne. They're good kids. Well, Anne is a young woman. Did I tell you about the bikini?"

This led to a description of picking up the girls and swimming at Busselton.

"Oh. Good. The jetty's worth seeing from the perspective of how awkward this coast proved for shipping. A wooden pier over a mile long needed because there isn't a natural harbour."

"True. Australia has some of the best natural harbours but also a lot of coast that is poorly served," I said.

"Like people looking for a life partner. There are some excellent ones in certain places, but plenty of locations where one will end up shipwrecked."

“Great metaphor. Have to remember it.

When I was much younger, I had some ... er ... very clumsy relationships. Well, only two, but that is enough for a lifetime. Then Zelda, who was marvellous until the crash spoiled things. And this year, Tanya. Both she and the experience of her are worth a great deal to me, and I feel extremely uncomfortable that I might be a source of unhappiness for her. However, she’s shown me the importance of kindness and of courage.”

“From what we talked about at Norcia – and it was all very carefully expressed, so I’m relying more on her tone than the substance – I’d say she feels that she’s benefited too, and that you and the experience of you are important to her.”

“And now we start over,” I said, feeling a bit deflated.

“And Canada will be starting over too, even for you, Ian.”

“Can I be impertinent and ask if there’s been anyone since you came to U W A?”

“Yes. That’s impertinent. But the answer is essentially no. About a year into my research I went out one evening to the theatre with a fellow from English who was just about to defend his thesis. We both got a little drunk. We came back here, and I was willing if not very enthusiastic. I stopped taking the Pill when I left Sean, but I had bought some condoms from a vending machine to have a few on hand when I arrived here, thinking ahead just in case. And even tipsy I insisted on precautions. He didn’t stay for breakfast. Said sex didn’t feel right. I wasn’t sure if it was with a condom or with me.”

“The word ‘cad’ comes to mind,” I said.

Katherine laughed. “Thanks. I think you’re right.”

“Mind you, I’m not a great fan of condoms. A necessary evil, I suppose. And I would rate enthusiasm as the greatest aphrodisiac.”

“Can I be impertinent and ask what you do with Tanya?”

“You mean for contraception? She had a tubal ligation after Philippa.”

“Convenient for you both. Sometimes I think I should have done that, but the doctors are reluctant if you haven’t had kids, especially if you’re unmarried.”

“Would it have made a lot of difference in your ... I suppose behaviour is the word, but it doesn’t seem right?”

“You mean would I have been more sexually active? Possibly. Though there are STDs. I had a friend at Uni in Sydney who got a nasty infection that cost her an extra year for her degree. And the man was supposed to be respectable. Maybe condoms are more necessary than evil.”

“Good point. Especially if one is ... active.”

“From how you speak about sex, Ian, I’m pretty certain you aren’t so active in that way, even if you are, as some might say, bonking your landlady.”

“No. I like to have time to talk and laugh and share time both gently or enthusiastically. That can be with friends in general, but also with sex in the particular. In fact, I know I value friendship more than passion. I’ll take caring and affection over being in love.”

“Somehow you’ve expressed a form of romanticism that makes the traditional paperbacks and Hallmark movies seem cheap. I approve.”

“And though we’ve not discussed the topic, I suspect there’ll not be more ... bonking with Tanya. It would be confusing for us.”

“Ian. You’ve been clear you want me as a friend. So there’s no misunderstandings, can I be direct and ask if you have any interest in me as a woman? You mentioned ‘we’ starting over, and I think you meant you and Tanya, but perhaps you were including me.”

“Oh. Yes. I find you very attractive as a woman. Though friendship first. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to me. And thank you for the vote of confidence. But from what I’ve told you, I’m not very ... er ... practised at such things. Including judging when a man is interested. And I wasn’t suggesting we jump into bed. In any event, wrong time of the month. Except for me, it’s wrong time of the four to seven week random lottery. I was worried I’d be at the uncomfortable stage during my thesis exam, but it didn’t come until a few days later, and that one was mercifully light.

Sorry. Boring woman’s issues.”

“You’ve got to remember I had a close and loving marriage until the crash. I’d pick up tampons for Zelda. She’d say ‘Can you pick up some puss-plugs for me?’”

“Kyle and Sean were ... squeamish about menstruation. I can’t imagine either of them buying me pads or tampons. Both regarded it as a subject that they wished didn’t exist.”

“It’s one part of sharing life, but many men are pretty scared of women’s physiology. They want the sex, not the accompanying processes.”

“Do you think Canadian men are more open about it?”

“Doubt it. But it’s difficult to know. Zelda and I were open with each other, but apart from tampons in the shopping cart, I didn’t talk about it outside.”

“Yes. I can’t see asking for tampons under the slang expression you used.”

“Her term for pads was ‘man hole covers’.”

Katherine laughed, but flushed very pink. “That’s very crude.”

“It was couple talk – our private language.”

“Somehow Sean and Kyle – or perhaps it was me – never built up any private language.” Katherine looked a little wistful.

“It takes a while to develop. I’ve not got there with Tanya, but then we don’t really live together day to day.”

There was a pause for some seconds.

I said “Can I pose the question you asked? Is there a possibility you’re interested in me as a man?”

“I think my feelings are mixed. Around any colleagues, but especially those who could have an influence on getting the degree, I’ve been deliberately very careful, almost formal. Even among the graduate students. Didn’t want to get any social perturbation to mess up my progress. But I like being with you. I haven’t hidden that. Now the thesis is done, different options are open, but I don’t think that has quite registered yet. You’re not part of any wet dreams yet, but probably because up to now that would just be frustrating, so I’ve blocked out the possibility.”

I laughed “Thanks for that. Makes a lot of sense.”  
Katherine said “Coffee? I’ve some decaf as well as regular.”

## Marching on

During the next week I didn’t see Katherine or Tanya except at a distance. The visitor from Queensland came and gave a seminar, and Katherine was in the audience in a lecture room as the visitor’s topic covered ideas from several disciplines and we anticipated, and got, a good turnout. Given lunch at the University Club, I avoided having to plan dinner that day.

Friday I got a text from Katherine that she was sick with either the flu or some other bug that meant staying close to a toilet and a bed. That evening I went with Gordon to an intervarsity cricket event at Curtin. In Gordon’s car – I paid for his beer in the pub after we got back to Crawley – I asked him how his thesis was coming along.

“I’m hoping to submit sometime in June or July. Pity you won’t be around as external. The rumour is that you diplomatically engineered a way that Katherine didn’t have to do extensive revisions because of some academic fussiness.”

“I thought the deliberations of examiners were supposed to be confidential,” I countered, but with a laugh.

“I overheard Kevin Mercer talking to Prof. Johnson. He didn’t reveal much. Said you’d talked to him before the defence and suggested an addition to the summary. And Zaitsev’s known to be fixated on his own area of research. He’s done some good work from what people say, but sometimes it seems like his next paper will be ‘Urban planning determinants of comet orbits’.”

“That description does, unfortunately, seem almost plausible. Anyway, Katherine deserved the degree. Her work was good, and she defended well.”

“The rest of the grad. students were pleased. She’s well-liked. A bit too reserved or self-effacing, perhaps.”

“Since the exam she’s been talking to me about a post-doc – well, a partial post-doc because of funding issues – that she’s got at Wilfred Laurier in Canada. Some background things she talked about explain why she kept her head down since coming to U W A, and I’ll not repeat them in case she meant them just for my ears. But generally, it’s awkward to do more than superficial socializing when you’re going to be evaluated by the profs or have to collaborate with the grad. students. As a sabbatical prof., I’m kind of an outsider, which is an advantage socially.”

“Hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Have you any prospects for after you get the doctorate, Gordon?”

“Not many jobs in universities being advertised, and most of those are short-term. But there’s a couple of the private schools around who are always sniffing for teachers with a doctorate. The jobs aren’t necessarily advertised. They might be looking to develop a team of two or three teachers in history, with one or more having a doctorate so they can subtly hint how upper-crust they are. I’ve been developing a list of such schools and names of people to contact. Even

gone to see one headmaster locally. He was very non-committal, of course, but said to keep in touch.”

“Probably better salary and job-security, but all teaching.”

“I’ve seen the odd paper from people at such schools. But you’re right that research wouldn’t be part of the job, though publications, even of magazine contributions, would be welcome as good PR for the school.”

On our return to Crawley, we parked Gordon’s car at his digs. People here, as in Canada, were getting careful about drinking and driving. We walked – I pushed my bike – to a nearby bar-bistro. Outside were several people, more women than men, puffing on cigarettes, and we had to run the smokey gauntlet. Movies of the 1930s to 1950s always had the characters lighting up, but now it was rare to get a whiff of tobacco, for which I was glad.

## Frankness

Saturday morning I rode to Frank and Clarisse’ house. I hadn’t arranged this in advance, but I wanted a word with Frank to avoid questions to Tanya. When I got there, Frank was working in the yard.

“Hi ya, Ian. What brings you over this way.”

“Thought I’d ride to the sea, then down to Freemantle and back along the river. But I wanted a quiet word with you.”

“Oh. Problems.”

“No. Just that what we talked about before – that I would be going back to Canada – means I should be careful not to get in the way of Tanya and the girls getting on in life.”

“You mean with Ed? Clarisse got wind that they might be both testing the waters, so to speak.”

“Yeah. That’s about it. Tanya and I’ve talked about it. Rather uncomfortably, I might add. We don’t want to ruin a good friendship.”

“True. A bust up wouldn’t be good.”

“Well, since you essentially had already figured things out, I probably didn’t need to come by.”

“Nah. Good that you did. Avoids some foot in mouth disease, if you know what I mean. Why not come in and have a coffee to send you on your way.”

“Sure. You can tell me how Ivan’s doing in his new role.”

After leaving Claremont, I headed to Swanbourne. I was, probably for the wrong reasons, curious about the North Swanbourne beach. Wasn’t planning on a swim, but wondered about the dynamics of a clothing optional beach. I stayed on the pathways, and didn’t go on the beach proper. It was clear there were scattered people about. Some were swimming, some sunbaking as the Australians say. It was clear most people were naked or topless, with some in swimsuits. On the beach, as far as I could tell, lack of covering was being ignored; at least it did not look like anyone was paying special attention.

A less attractive phenomenon was the presence, at places not directly on the beach but where it could be viewed easily, of men with very large binoculars.

Sleazy perverts! How to stop such behaviour was surely problematic.

I then rode south into Freemantle – the route was a bit industrial nearing the bridge across the Swan – and toodled around to look at the streets near the port. I found a café for a bite of lunch – a meat pie with mushy peas and fries. Wouldn't need dinner tonight.

Finding I was tired, I made my way home without doing any sightseeing. Of course, I had to get back across to the north side of the Swan to avoid a long and round-about route home. It was about 3 o'clock when I got in. Took a shower and flopped on the bed, intending to read a bit, but fell asleep. When I woke it was almost dark. Fiddlesticks. I'd probably not sleep well tonight.

I was about to turn on the light when I heard a car door close and footsteps going to Tanya's front door. Ed's voice. "You look nice. Ready to go?"

The response was muffled. I could hear the girls greeting Rachel. Ah. The girls would do something like watch a movie while the adults went out. Well, that made sense. I didn't turn on a light until I heard Ed's car drive away. Then I put on the radio quietly and picked up the novel I was reading, one of a list of Australian ones I was working through.

## Filling in time

Sunday morning I went to the office and worked on various tasks after an 8:30 Skype with Mom.

"You caught me in the middle of getting ready to go to Niagara tomorrow with Albert. It's been years since I've been there, and Albert thinks the ice on and going over the Falls will be interesting."

I said "That's got to be two or more hours each way driving depending on the traffic. Hope Albert's careful."

Mom looked uncomfortable. Then she said "Well. Er .... I'm not sure ... Oh. I'd better tell you straight. We've booked a B and B for tomorrow night that a friend said was really nice. Run by a couple of gay men. I hope you'll not be upset."

"I'll only be upset if you don't have a good time, or Albert doesn't treat you well."

"Thank you, Ian."

Without thinking I said "What sort of getting ready do you need to do?"

Oops. Mom now really looked flustered so I said "Sorry. I should engage brain before opening mouth."

"Yes, you should. It's difficult for me after so many years alone. I was trying to choose a suitable nightie."

"Perhaps this isn't quite appropriate, but I remember a friend of Zelda saying that after having an expensive negligee torn and ruined she packed a functional nightie that was easily removed."

Mom laughed. "I'll take that under advisement, though I don't think Albert is that kind of man. .... Mind you, it might be flattering."

"Good attitude, Mom."

We talked a bit more about day to day things. Tax season was coming. The call lasted less than 10 minutes.

I waited until about 9:30 to call Katherine.

"I'm still a bit groggy, but the nausea and the other end has let up."

"Have you got food and liquids? Also medicine?" I asked.

"Running low on milk and bread if you're offering. I've a couple of tomatoes and plenty of eggs and cheese. Some bananas would be nice."

"I'll come around noon."

"In case I'm infectious, I'll not invite you in, Ian."

"Do you have any particular bread you like. I know I avoid soft, white stuff. You know, Wonderbread or imitators."

"Preferably something whole wheat and interesting. Get a receipt."

I stopped working near 11 and went to the supermarket. Bread offerings were rather limited on Sunday. I ended up getting a packaged multigrain loaf with various seeds. Probably not the greatest, but it looked to have some body to it. It was also sliced and could probably be toasted, which was always useful if the bread was a bit old.

Katherine insisted I leave the groceries by the door and let her take them in. She looked bleary-eyed and feverish, so I simply wished her well and went back to the office and did several hours more work. One of the papers I was working on was now at the proof-reading stage. Perhaps Katherine would review it before I sent it off. I attached it to an email, saying that comments were welcome but not required and 'Get well soon'.

A few minutes later I got an email back:

Glad to oblige. Probably reply sometime tomorrow or early Tuesday.

Packet of crisps and the chocolate bars much appreciated except for effect on waistline.

Cheers, K

The waistline comment regarding the extra items I'd added – not on the receipt – suggested Katherine was feeling a bit better.

By now I was feeling bored with academic work, so I rode a little bit down the Swan River towards Freemantle. This was the bit I'd essentially skipped the day before. At one point I stopped to look at some of the iconic black swans and take a picture with my phone camera. It didn't take good photos, but somehow I'd left my camera at the studio apartment. Bother.

Early this Sunday morning I'd had a couple of eggs for breakfast, then hadn't felt the need for lunch. Now I was starting to feel hungry and thirsty, but the scene in front of me with the water and the swans was too good to leave immediately. I thought about Mom's outing to Niagara. It sounded as though this was going to be a first time for her and Albert. I hoped it would go well for her. She deserved, as Frank put it, a bit of fun. Actually, though it's



embarrassing for children to think of parents sexually, a great deal of fun. And, more so, friendship and affection. Didn't we all.

The swans swam out of view, and I went off in search of a meal. It was certainly late enough in the afternoon to almost be beyond 'lunner'. I figured – correctly as it turned out – that the Varsity would be open. When I got there I found a couple of the grad students were watching the big screen, and I was able to join them. Somehow, I ended up staying until nearly 8:30. There was enough noise and distraction that I didn't need to engage in any serious conversation, or even say much at all. A couple of times I asked about some or other action on the screen where a whistle had been blown for some infraction that I didn't comprehend. On the whole, I was content to be able to avoid serious thinking for several hours.

Afterwards, I went home and read for a while. It wasn't often I took time off like this. Mind you, earlier in the day I'd talked to Mom, I'd done quite a bit of work, delivered groceries to a sick friend, essentially completed a paper, sent it to Katherine to review, done a bit of scenery watching, and had a pleasant interlude in the pub watching sports with the students.

## Catalpa rescue

The next Saturday, Katherine and I had decided to go to the Catalpa Escape Monument in Rockingham. This had a Canadian link in that it was a mission by Irish-American Republicans to free Fenians who had been arrested and convicted in the 1865-1867 raids on Canada and transported to Freemantle in 1868. There was a relatively new monument to this escapade, which involved a ship purposely bought in the USA and disguised as a whaler. A half-dozen Fenians managed to get away in a swashbuckling adventure involving the steamship *Georgette*, a 12 pounder cannon and a chase into international waters.

I'd read up the story and printed out some extracts before we went to the monument – Katherine's car was helpful as Rockingham is about 50 km from Crawley, or about 40 minutes drive. We spent some time looking at the monument, reading the plaques and comparing them with my notes, and taking some pictures. We even got someone to take one of the two of us in front of the monument with its wild geese sculptures.

Lunch was found in Rockingham in a small bistro. Katherine was feeling better, thankfully. Whatever had laid her low had left her listless for several days.

"Do you want to go straight back, Ian?"

"Only if you do. I'm enjoying being out with you very much."

"We could go down to Warnbro Beach and walk by the sea. I didn't bring a swimsuit, though. Should have thought of it."

"Nor did I."

"If you really want a swim, the Port Kennedy beach a bit further down is a nudist beach. But I would probably not join you. Never got into skinny dipping."

I said “I rode my bike last week to Swanbourne beach then down to Freemantle. Didn’t go on the beach. The thing I found uncomfortable was men with big binoculars – huge ones that are probably intended for naval or military use – above the beach staring at women who were sunbathing – sorry sunbaking. It’s creepy.”

“That’s the main reason I’m not into it. I once went to a beach near Wollongong when I was still an undergraduate. There was a group of us, over a dozen, roughly the same number of men and women. All the other women took their tops off, so I did too, and it was fine. But we had a bunch of men with us and were a fairly big group, and I think that kept the perverts at bay. For a few minutes some of the men in the group were a bit awkward. You know. Trying NOT to look at your boobs. But then we just got on with enjoying a swim and a picnic.”

“I’d like a walk on the beach. I’ve swum in the Indian Ocean at Binningup and Busselton, so I can say I’ve had the experience.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

If Katherine hadn’t been sick the week before, I’d probably have spent the evening with her too, but it was obvious that she was tired by the time we got back around 4:30. We’d dawdled on the beach, then found a place for some tea and scones. The sign outside advertised

Devonshire cream teas

with a price, and

Devonshire only

at another price. Apparently the English expression that referred to the type of clotted cream (Devonshire clotted cream) was transmuted in Australia to refer to the scones as Devonshires. At least, that was the interpretation I was forced to assume. Katherine didn’t seem sure. Perhaps it was a local usage – or abuse.

## Lake Thetis

We’d talked a bit about similarities between Perth – the Western Australian one – and Victoria – the British Columbia city not the Australian state. This had led to a decision to go to Lake Thetis, which was about a 2 hour drive north of Crawley. I offered to drive if needed, and Katherine agreed. She came by about 10 on Sunday. Tanya was gone. The girls waved hello.

There is a Thetis Lake north of Victoria. I hadn’t been there. The WA version was more interesting biologically. I’m not sure I could explain the details, but I captured several descriptions on my laptop and printed extracts on a double sided sheet of paper. Both Katherine and I had picnic food. More than enough as it turned out.

There was a walking trail around part of the lake and some expository plaques. The lake was saline and alkaline, with a unique microbial ecosystem. I could not conjure up any historical significance, though the tiny town of Cervantes, named for a ship that sank nearby that was named after the author of *Don Quixote*, might have offered some stories of the arrival of Europeans here. The single strip of nondescript shops stood on sandy ground looking rather forlorn on a Sunday afternoon.

I took the wheel around 2:30 for the return journey. Sometime soon after, I noticed Katherine was asleep. I surmised she was still not properly recovered, and I drove to her apartment and ensured she was safely inside before walking home. That she didn't fuss that I was going to leave right away was indicative of her fatigue, though she had not showed signs of this while we were at the lake.

## Anne's birthday and my present

Anne would be 15 the next Friday. I got a small envelope with an invitation in my mailbox for a party on Saturday. It asked for an R S V P, and I sent an email that I'd be there. Katherine got one too, but claimed a prior engagement.

It took me a bit of running around, or rather riding around, but I found a copy of Farley Mowat's *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float*, to which, as with Philippa, I added some chocolate. In any event, there was a noisy, friendly party. Ed was there, and Tanya seemed comfortable with him as he sat next to her to eat in a folding chair when the barbequed food was ready. I wasn't at all excluded. Frank and Clarisse were present, along with their kids and the Thomas grandparents, plus about a half dozen girls from Anne's school.

Frank organized a game of boules in the driveway. The adults conspired to let one of the teen-aged girls win, but we had to work at this as they were surprisingly clumsy with the metal balls.

Instead of birthday cake, Anne had asked for Lamingtons, those cubes of sponge cake dipped in chocolate sauce then rolled in grated coconut. I approved the choice. I don't like the traditional white cake, and hardly anyone will make a true fruitcake for a birthday. I do like chocolate cakes, but prefer no icing. Call me fussy. Or at least cake-fussy.

I stayed at the party until around 7:30, then went back to the studio to read and listen to some sports on radio, or rather to read and occasionally hear the current score.

Katherine had said to get in touch on Sunday, and I got an email early in the day to come for lunch and we'd think of something to do together. I was there soon after 12.

"How're you doing?" I asked.

"Much better. I was actually OK last weekend except for low energy. I lost about 2 kilos with the sickness."

"You're looking better. That outfit suits you." Katherine was wearing a sort of flowing peasant skirt with a matching top. The top was loose fitting

with sleeves but a neckline that left shoulders bare.

"I bought it yesterday. Had a shopping expedition arranged with Sheila from the office. Thought I deserved some new things."

I said "I was a bit concerned that you might feel that you didn't fit in the birthday party. All the kids and noise aren't really your thing as far as I can make out."

"I'll admit to a bit of that. Also that I wasn't sure if people might not take me for ... well, a sort of girlfriend."

"You mean my girlfriend?"

"Yes. At least Ed, and maybe other people there. I didn't want any ... confusion. And on top of lots of young people around. I do OK in small groups, but find a crowd of youngsters can be a challenge."

I said "They can be a challenge. And I can see that with me and Ed and Tanya there, there's ample opportunity for ... confusion."

"Our time together the last few weeks since the thesis defence has added to that, I'm afraid."

"I won't disagree. I've felt some measure of social awkwardness. It could be quite easy for you and I to be boyfriend and girlfriend. I'm not sure whether you want that. I know I'd like ... well ... the obvious pleasures on top of the sharing of different things like we've been doing."

"For what it's worth, I went to the health clinic as I was recovering from whatever knocked the wind out of me to ask if I should do anything special. They took stool and blood samples as apparently there was a campylobacter outbreak from something at one of the cafeterias. I did get a chicken sandwich one day not long before."

"Any result."

"Inconclusive. They thought probably, but it had already cleared. However, while I was there, I asked for a prescription for the Pill."

"Am I correct that this opens a conversation on what advantage we may both take of that?"

"Uh. Yes."

"Shall we have lunch?" I asked. "Or are you anxious to have what we might term 'dessert' first?"

Katherine laughed. Movement under the flowing top suggested no bra, or a very soft one. "I've a shrimp salad," she said.

"I brought some wine."

"Good. I could use a glass to get in the mood."

We ate without talking very much. What we did say was small talk of the most banal sort. Once our salad was eaten and the wine glasses empty, I said, "Do you want to share a bath or shower, or head straight for the bedroom?"

"Actually a bath would be nice. I'm feeling nervous, and it would let us ... er ... get used to each other."

"The movies often overlook how the characters undress. That outfit is too nice to go on the floor where it might get stepped on. Shall we be unconventional and hang things up?"

Laughing, Katherine said “Ian. That’s a wonderful suggestion, and I fully approve of what I’ll term ‘formally getting naked’.”

I ended up with the tap end in the tub, but we sat with legs each side of the other, which provided a good view of what had earlier been called the wobbly bits.

“You trimmed your bush,” I said.

“Sheila tried to persuade me to go for a full Brazilian wax, but you generally need an appointment.”

“Also money and a high pain tolerance,” I added.

“Ian. How am I supposed to have sex with you if you keep making me laugh?”

My mind went back to making Tanya laugh and popping out. No. That was not a story to tell now. I said “I don’t think sex should be taken too seriously. The consequences like pregnancy or illness, definitely. But the pleasure should be well seasoned with laughter. Can you think of anything more absurdist than the contortions humans go through to have orgasms or make babies?”

“I agree, for aliens from other planets, it would seem pretty odd.”

“Katherine. We’re behaving very strangely. Wobbly bits on display, and they’re probably soon to interact in marvellously interesting ways, and we’ve not even kissed yet.”

It took a little effort to lean in, but we managed a kiss, then another, then a really long one when we both slipped a hand under the warm water and explored the aforementioned wobbly bits.

## Adjusting

We ate out at the bistro where I’d had the steak pie and chips a couple of days after my arrival in Perth. With the approaching Autumn, Katherine didn’t wear the peasant outfit, but changed into slacks and a sweater.

“Katherine. Assuming we continue what we started today, it could be a lot easier to travel together.”

“I’d like to show you some of the Pacific coast. And there’s likely some places I’ve not been.”

“Same in Canada, but I’m not sure what the arrangements would be.”

After dinner, I walked her back to her apartment and we kissed goodnight. It had already been discussed that we’d see which way the wind was blowing with Tanya before I slept over. So I cycled home and put away the bike in the shed. It was already dark, but I knew the shed and yard well enough that though there was almost no light I could find my way to the steps of the door to the studio. However, before I got there, I saw a car stop across the driveway where Tanya’s taxi was parked. I moved against the house into darker shadows and in the light scattered from the street light could see two heads coming together. Kissing? Seems so. Then Tanya got out and went to the front door, there was some chatter and a delay of perhaps a minute and Rachel went to the car. The

passenger window of the car was lowered and two different hands gave a small wave. I waited until the car left before quietly going inside the studio.

Well. It appeared both Tanya and I were moving on. Perhaps I was further along that road than she, but who knew.

It was around 9. Not late. I undressed and took a quick shower. I wasn't dirty, but Katherine and I had been ... active and I was a little sweaty. In my pyjamas I settled into bed to read for a while.

I was still reading when there was a soft knock at the side door. I got up and let Tanya in.

"Anything wrong?" I asked.

"Um. ... I don't think so, but I wanted to see you."

"But I think I know you well enough to guess there's more."

"Yeesss. I suppose so," Tanya said.

"May I suggest that you're finding things are going quite well with Ed, and you are hoping that the girls and I will be ... er ... discreet."

"Yeah. That's about it. I think that from now on I won't be able to spend private time with you. Even tonight is ... awkward. I'd prefer Ed not find out."

"If he does, it better be from you telling him."

"Yes," Tanya said.

"I want you to find happiness. I'll not say anything."

"Ian. How are you getting along with Katherine?"

"We're doing well. I want to see some of the eastern part of Australia and she wants to see some of Canada as she arrives. The idea of travelling together so we could rent cars and share expenses has been floated, but no details yet."

"Shared hotel rooms?"

"I expect so if things progress favourably. I hope that isn't upsetting to you."

"No, no. Well, if Ed and I get along well, I can't really make a fuss, can I?"

"Some people want their cake and eat it too, but no, I don't think it would be fair in that case for you to make a fuss."

At this, I gave her a hug. We didn't say anything as I let her out and shut the door.

## Equinox

The autumn equinox fell mid-week following the special Sunday lunch Katherine and I had shared. For some reason we hadn't spent our evenings together, but did meet at lunch. I think we both weren't quite sure how to deal with being a couple, or even if we really were. But on that Wednesday we did decide to make dinner together. Katherine had the better kitchen. I took over some drink, biscuits and some hard Italian cheese similar to Parmesan. Pasta was on the menu.

"Did you get any quotes on health insurance yet?" I asked. The Ontario provincial health system made people wait three months before OHIP kicked in.

"I've got a couple. Part of the trouble is not yet knowing the date I'll be starting. It looks like the Canadian citizenship will get sorted out soon, but I'm working through the details of what counts as permanent residency in Ontario, since until I arrive, I'll not have an address."

"I could ask Mom if you can be 'care of' her address, but that may not count," I suggested.

"Laurier has sent me a document showing I've an 8 month contract. My hope is I can find work after that. You know 'gainful employment' and all that. But I think I should ask if correspondence can be sent to me there."

"I've emailed you using a U W A address. Do you have one that won't disappear when you leave here?"

"Good point. I should set up a gmail account or some other."

"We could do that tonight if you want. Then it's done."

"Gee. Would I prefer to set up an email account or ...." Katherine teased.

"I think we'll manage both," I answered. "But in some ways we've both been a bit ... would you say cautious? Even after Sunday's very pleasant afternoon."

"Cautious is about right. A sexual partnership doesn't necessarily mean we're going to end up together long term. But we started talking about sharing your final weeks in Australia and my early ones in Canada. And we won't be physically that far away from each other when I'm in Waterloo. We've opened a door, but at the moment we're both a few steps from going through it."

"That describes things pretty accurately. Probably why we've not been naked and sweaty together since Sunday."

Katherine half laughed, half smirked at this. I went on "It seems to me that the key question is whether we think there's a good chance that a year from now, 5 years, 10 years, we'll still be together. Not asking will we be together, but is there a good chance we will."

"Yeah. That hits the nail on the head. What's your assessment?" Katherine asked.

"I haven't been able to think of good reasons we couldn't work out well together. Since we've still got a lot to learn about each other and all those annoying things like which end to squeeze the toothpaste tube, I'm sure there's plenty of ways we could come adrift. But I already am aware that you're careful with money without being stingy, which is more or less how I try to be. Money's a big way couples crash and burn.

What's your estimate of our chances together?"

"What you said about not seeing why we couldn't work. It's a double negative. We haven't had enough time to be sure of the positives. What you said about money is a valid point. That will be important when we're travelling."

"You seem to be assuming that we will be travelling together. I've been finding I sort of expect that we will as well.

I'm afraid we're not giving Hollywood flowers and violins."

"Can't get across the Pacific Ocean on flowers and violins," Katherine said.

We were now finished our pasta. Katherine went into the bedroom and I followed. She started to undress, but said "Have you ever driven across Canada?"

I was undressing too, but answered "Not all the way. Parts. Like Australia, lots of 'between'. Halifax to Victoria is about 1.5 times Sydney to Perth. But perhaps a little easier to drive. Have you ever tried across Australia."

"No. The Nullarbor is pretty tough." This was said by a completely naked Katherine.

"Northern Ontario's difficult in Canada. People complain about the prairies, but I found them easy to drive." I was enjoying Katherine's rather nice breasts as I said this.

Somehow we continued this travel discussion while managing a sexual joining that was satisfactory to both parties concerning orgasms. Lying in each others' arms afterwards, we continued our plans.

I asked "Does it make sense to drive across to Sydney so we can use your car there and up the east coast?"

"You've been to Adelaide and Melbourne, so it's a big slog driving there. Probably better to rent a car or cars."

"I'm also thinking that it's a good idea to trim my wish list and make sure we don't just tick off destinations rather than learn about them," I suggested.

"That's good advice for me too," Katherine said.

"On a practical matter, you're sharing that little office with two or three others. I'm in a big office. Why not move in there? It will let you work on papers but when there's travel stuff to decide, we'll be more likely to be able to act right away. You know, things like hotels and flights."

"You don't have your flight home yet, Ian?"

"Technically, yes. But it is changeable. And seems that it will have to be changed. I'm supposed to return via Singapore and Amsterdam."

"That could be OK too. Ah. Too many choices! But, yes, I'll accept the invite to share Macdonald's office with you. There's a side table there as well as the desk."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Do you want to stay the night?"

"Want? Yes. Will? No. At the moment I am fairly sure Tanya – and also the girls – aren't really sure where things stand all round. We've settled that the physical side of things is suspended. With what's happening between you and I, and with my returning to Canada anyway, more than suspended, but that probably isn't clear to the girls. And Tanya might have got to that understanding intellectually but not emotionally. I didn't tell you about last Sunday night."

I related that I'd seen Tanya and Ed kissing on Sunday, and how Tanya had seemed when she came round.

"I did say one time that upsetting the landlady might mean no place to stay."

"Or I might expect to move in, and you might not be ready."

By the way, *Quarrel with the landlady* was more or less how Tanya and I got close."

"You had a fight, then make-up sex?"



“No. We were listening to music, and I played an O’Carolan harp tune that she liked, so I played another with that title. She found it moving and ... well ... I guess it set a mood.”

“I think you’re still a bit in love with her, Ian. It makes me a little annoyed, but also gives me some confidence that you don’t abandon your feelings easily.”

“Probably a good assessment. I’ve no wish to cause you upset either. In a sense I’m likely still on the rebound from Zelda, though the rawness of those feelings has abated since I’ve been here, and you and Tanya have been part of that.”

## April Fools

Palm Sunday was at the start of April, and Easter of course a week later.

Frank and Clarisse organized a cottage and camping weekend down the coast a ways, with Jack and Angela. They invited Anne and Philippa and extended a special invite to Rachel. The adults would have the cottage and the six younger members of the party would be in tents. I learned later that Ed had some equipment to lend, and the main issue turned out to be ensuring everyone travelling in the two cars they took had a seat belt. Things were a bit cramped, but the journey wasn’t that far apparently.

Tanya was staying in town to take some shifts. There were still flights coming and going. However, it would give her and Ed some private time. She did one shift on the morning of Good Friday and as she was coming in I was going off to the office to meet Katherine there to do a bit more planning before some touristy things around town.

“Hi there, Tanya. How’s it going?”

“Good. Did the girls tell you that they’re off for the weekend with Frank and Clarisse and my parents.”

“Philippa emailed me. Said Rachel was invited too.”

“Oh. Yes. I forget that people do email these days.”

“It’ll give you and Ed some time to yourselves.”

Tanya looked awkward. “Yeah. It will.”

“Sorry. Not working out as you’d hoped? If so, that’s a pity.”

“No. I’m acting clumsily because it actually is working out. And I feel ... mixed up talking to you. I ... er ... didn’t want you to get ... worried if I wasn’t here some night or other.”

“Don’t. I’ve been feeling a bit awkward too. I wanted to know if ... er .. well, the same thing.”

“Oh. ....” Tanya seemed speechless.

“Did you remember to take along the scoring numbers to hold up?” I asked.

Tanya splurged out a laugh. “Ian. You’re awful! But thanks for making me laugh.”

“Seems we’ve both found people we like to be with, at least for now, and hopefully for the future,” I said. “Do you want me to text you if I won’t be around overnight? You know, peace of mind?”

“It seems a bit ... parental. But it would set my mind at ease. I find it feels more secure knowing you’re there when I’m on shift in the evening. Or when I’m there, just me and the girls, and I hear noises in the street.”

I said “For me it would be knowing you’re OK and haven’t been in an accident. Anyway, if you like, when I’m going to be away overnight I’ll text the single word AWAY to you.”

“OK. I can do the same. Doesn’t say much to anyone else if they see it.”

## Chance encounter

Saturday we’d been out and about. Came back to Katherine’s and showered and fooled around a little, then dressed up a bit – I’d brought over a change of clothes as well as pyjamas. We’d made a reservation at one of the grill restaurants in the Burswood Casino. This was the only casino allowed to operate in W A. It was in a park that was reclaimed from a garbage dump and an industrial site. They’d done a nice job. I’m not a fan of what I think of as ‘industrial’ gambling. It preys on the irrational hopes of those who to external eyes are hopeless. However, casinos do often have decent restaurants, and this was no exception. Somewhere I’d read that it was being rebranded to the Crown Perth Casino and Hotel complex. The brand didn’t matter to me. I was wanting a decent, slightly upscale, restaurant.

There was, in fact, one restaurant that seemed to be chasing a Michelin star if one looked at the eye-watering prices. We chose a less-fancy option. I had on my dress pants and blazer and my one tie. Katherine was wearing her new peasant dress. This afternoon we’d also been out shopping for a strapless bra. That I was taken along was a statement of acceptance of my place in her life.

“Ian, It might be best for me to go alone into a lingerie store, so other women aren’t disturbed. But we can stay together in department stores, and we’ll check there first, as they’re usually less expensive, but the range may be less.”

“This might be an awkward question, but do you know your measurements exactly? I can imagine the fit for a strapless bra needs to be particularly well-chosen.”

“I keep forgetting you used to be married. But yes, I know my size, and I remeasured this morning so have the over and under numbers.”

“Zelda complained once that the makers don’t always take into account shape.”

“Shape?”

“Er. I suppose the range between pointy and a wide dome. Sorry, that must seem a little blunt.”

“Have you decided what I am? And whether I’m big enough?”

“You’re very nice. Not tiny. Not too big. Nicely rounded and firm without being hard. More than a handful’s a waste, and I rather pity women with what could be called melons. Got to be very awkward for posture and any vigorous activity unless they wear industrial supportive gear.”

"Ian. I really do have the strangest conversations with you. But it does at least let me know that you are aware of me."

We tried several stores. In the department stores I pointed out that the material of the bras was thick enough that it would show under the thin but opaque printed cloth of the blouse, which Katherine had with us in case she wanted to try any. When Katherine came out of a specialty lingerie store, she said "Same problem. The material will show. But the assistant in that shop mentioned an alternative that I'm wondering if I dare try."

"Pasties?" I suggested.

"Yes! How did you know?"

"I didn't, but I was about to ask if you'd feel comfortable with them. You didn't bother the other week with anything."

"That was when I was going to be at home, and had some other things on my mind.

But, yes, I think that would work. I'm mainly concerned about ... er ... showing if the evening is cool. I'm going to bring a woolen shawl that is not too bad a match in colour in case the restaurant is chilly."

She went back in the specialty shop and bought what were technically called nipple covers. They were slightly cheaper back in K-Mart, but the assistant had done the work of providing advice.

We took Katherine's car to the casino. Lots of parking, of course. I offered to drive home if she wished wine, but we decided to order just one glass and share. Nice. There was a rack of lamb on the menu and we both decided to have that. It's smelly and lots of work to cook at home, and restaurants generally do it better anyway.

Coming out of the restaurant and heading towards the parking, we almost bumped into Ed and Tanya, who had clearly been out for dinner too, but almost certainly in a different restaurant.

"Hi you two," Katherine said.

"Oh. Hi Ian, Katherine," Ed replied.

"What a lovely outfit," Tanya said, appraising Katherine's peasant skirt and blouse, with the shawl over her arm as it was still warm enough.

"But I like your dress too. I suspect you don't dress up in the taxi."

"That would be how to ruin good clothes, especially on days when it's raining and people want help putting stuff in the boot like wet bags."

Tanya was wearing a dress I hadn't seen before. It was like a foreshortened Empire line of the Jane Austen era. The gathering under the bust helped give her bosom more prominence, and the line camouflaged her cylindrical figure. Even so, while it looked very good on her, the dress would reveal chubbiness on a woman not as fit and trim. She also had on the low heeled shoes from before. Good choice.

In my appraisal, I'd missed the women exchanging questions on the origin of their outfits. Katherine had just named a shop I didn't recognize, but Tanya obviously did. Then Tanya said "Ian may remember that we all watched *Pride and Prejudice*. Anne said she wanted a dress for a school dance like some of those in the movie when my mother was around, and ... well, after some chat,

Anne and Mum found a pattern on the internet and gave it a try. When Anne was trying it on, my mother pointed out how it might work for me. I could never wear what Katherine has on. I'd look like a fancy-dress barrel."

"What you have on really suits you well. Very attractive," I said, and meant it.

"Yes. She does look nice, doesn't she," Ed said, clearly with affection, then added "Do you want to come by for tea or coffee? Tanya's mentioned you are planning some travels to get back to Canada, and for Katherine to go there. Be interesting to get some ideas for the future."

Awkward! I said "We'd better ask the ladies if it's OK with them and that they're not tired."

That was rather lame, but it did give either of them an out. They looked at each other. I think I saw an almost imperceptible nod pass between them, and then Tanya said "Good idea," and Katherine asked for directions.

Thus we ended up at Ed's house. Tanya said she needed the loo and disappeared down the corridor. I notice she closed a bedroom door. Ah. No doubt there were some of her things there, and it was almost certainly the master bedroom.

There were no minefields in our chat about where we hoped to go and the arrangements we'd managed so far. The conversation was friendly, and some of the questions Tanya and Ed asked were useful reminders of some of the things we had yet to sort out.

The biggest of these is that we hadn't settled on whether I would change my ticket so we could fly to Vancouver and then try to tour to Ontario by car. It would mean an awkward rental or else purchasing a car and arranging temporary licensing. The latter was probably easier. It could be a great trip. We could even do a quick visit to Victoria, which would be part of my research on community evolution, so it could go on grant-in-lieu expenses.

## Successes

Beyond Easter Saturday and meeting Ed and Tanya at the casino, Katherine and I continued to explore locally. At one location I saw the dual-gauge rails. Australia has been plagued by uncoordinated infrastructure. In particular, I think in Beaconsfield, there was a set of dual gauge junction points which must be a nightmare to build and maintain. Trans-Australian and heavy freight lines are all Stephenson 4 feet 8.5 inch (1435 mm) gauge, while local W A trains and trams use 3 feet 6 inches (1067 mm).

Easter Monday we went to Guildford and Woodbridge, which were developed from 1829. There were a lot of historical plaques in Guildford. There were enough, in fact, that I made Katherine laugh by saying "I think I'm getting perplexed." Dumb joke, but appropriate to the place and moment.

Through both days we tossed ideas around. My notebook got a lot of lists and annotations, and in the evenings we did some internet research on the

feasibility of ideas, ruling many out and adding a few new ones that floated up out of the mess of web pages and false links.

Eventually we decided that in Australia our explorations would cover Wollongong to the Sunshine Coast. Tasmania and Cairns, or rather northern Queensland, would have to wait. We thought two weeks would be about right.

In Canada, however, we decided it was worth the effort to cross from Victoria to Waterloo by car. Katherine started to look into dealerships in Vancouver who would sell to out-of-province residents. I was going to trust that Mom's address would be OK. We then needed an itinerary.

I figured 4 nights in Vancouver. 2 would be needed just for jet lag. Then 3 nights in Victoria – I hoped to meet someone there at the University of Victoria as well as try to establish a contact with the Provincial Archives to facilitate future work. This latter exercise was mainly because I'd found that it was much easier to get things done if there were names and faces. One got suggestions of how to work around obstacles or do more efficient searches.

We could probably get from Victoria to Kelowna in one day. Then Calgary for 2 nights, Edmonton the same. 2 in Saskatoon, 2 in Regina, 2 in Winnipeg, 1 in Thunder Bay, 1 in Sault Ste Marie, and possibly one more to avoid a big drive to Stratford. There'd be a few days with Mom which could be partly expensed, since I'd still be "returning". Altogether, that was almost 3 weeks. Not too bad.

Inverting my role as seminar organizer, I started to make a list of people at every reasonable institution that might welcome a speaker.

It was about 9 p.m. on the night of Easter Sunday when I was doing this.

"You seem to be concentrating on that computer screen," Katherine said.

I explained what I was doing. She asked "Should I prepare a seminar too? I doubt they'd want two."

"But they might like a joint one – we both have material on community development."

"Oh. It'd be really great to do one together – as long as you don't monopolize the microphone." This last snippet was said clearly with tongue in cheek.

"Yes. It would be nice to share the podium. Let's propose that."

Thus we each prepared a half-page summary of interests, with a joint abstract. At the moment this summary was very vague, but we had more than enough material for 20 to 25 minutes each plus questions. Good seminars were always a bit on the shorter side in my experience. Leave the audience wanting a bit more. Not, as one elderly participant at a conference criticized the paid after dinner talk, "An invited speaker should never exhaust the bladder capacity of the audience."

We were both excited and worked on our interests summary and abstract right away, then sat as I merged the pieces.

"You know, I'm supposed to give one more seminar. Why don't we do this one? Even if nobody takes the bait, it'll save one preparation. But I suspect that someone will want it, though in Canada it's out of term."

Eventually it would turn out that we presented in Brisbane at the University of Queensland, and in Wollongong, though the last was an informal presentation

combined with meeting the few members of the Humanities School whose field was History. In Victoria, we would present more or less formally, but other places were very much in vacation or summer school mode. We'd have to wait until we were resident in Ontario to give it at our home institutions.

As I was reading the paragraphs about interests, it suddenly struck me that Katherine should be able to use the title "Doctor".

"Katherine. Are you going to pick up your degree?"

"No. Can't. Well, not unless I hang about here. The ceremony's in July, and our plans mean we'll be long gone."

"So they'll mail you the certificate afterwards?"

"No. I already put in my request and all the documents. I almost missed the chance to submit to get it at the end of April, and would have then had to wait to the end of May – the deadline for that was Thursday I think. Louise came and lit a firework under me just in time. So I should be Dr. Stormont by the time we leave here."

## Lists again

I'd thought the number of lists I had coming to W A was bad. Leaving seemed worse. It crossed my mind that it was because I was teaming up with someone, then realized that the only way in which that was true was that we enlarged the scope of the return journey.

By the end of April I was sleeping about 3 nights a week at Katherine's. In some sense I didn't really need the studio. This thought was in my head one day when I happened to return home mid-day a few days before the end of the month. It wasn't super warm, but not unpleasant out, and Tanya was in the yard hanging laundry.

"Hi ya," she said.

"G'day there. Gotta practice my 'strine greeting."

"You'll never quite get the accent. How are things?"

"Good. You and Ed?"

"Also good. Though we're at an awkward stage in how we might go forward."

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Well. The girls know we don't play draughts when we're on our own together. So they all expect some sort of plan for what comes next. Probably neither Ed nor I are quite ready, but moving in together would be a lot more convenient than all the shuttling of people. And forgetting fresh underwear, of course."

"Which house would you use? Or would you look for another?"

"For now we'll each keep our own. If we bust up, it would be too tricky to sort everything out. But we're thinking of moving into one and renting the other in some way or other. Preferably with someone living there who is responsible and can keep an eye on things. Ed thinks there's likely a better return that way too. We'll look for someone like Gordon. Pity he's finishing from what he told me when I last saw him."

“Yes. He was complaining I’ll be gone when he needs an external examiner.”

“Yes. Do you know when you’re leaving?”

“Probably just before middle of June. But I’ll pay the month unless you’ve a tenant wanting in.”

“No. I had someone phone earlier today asking if I knew of any places. They were from some office at U W A that finds accommodation for visitors.”

“Did you get the number?”

“I did write it down by the phone. Why?”

“Would it help if I moved in with Katherine for the last while?”

“Oh. Possibly. Can you find out if she’ll have you?”

I pulled out my phone, though I already knew the answer. Katherine was becoming accustomed to warming her feet on mine. I pretended this was terrible, and she knew I was pretending. It meant I was welcome.

It turned out that Tanya was able to rent to a couple from the UK who were both post-docs in the sciences. She upped the rent a bit to cover the extra hot water, and having experience with me, negotiated a bit for linen and towels, which allowed for some new items for her and Ed. Then later, as I learned from letters, she had the couple be on-site supervisors as the rest of the house was rented to a trio of women graduate students.

It was perhaps that night after I’d talked to Tanya about moving in with Katherine, but certainly within 48 hours, that Katherine and I were in bed. It wasn’t late. We’d fallen into some routines and habits in a very short time. For example, Katherine always liked to be on the right hand side of the bed if you were lying on your back. So she’d be lying with my right arm round her neck. How such things happen always seemed interesting to me. I figured there would be researchers who had looked into which side of the bed members of couples chose. I had a strong feeling that a lot of couples would have a stable choice.

Neither of us were ready for sleep. I didn’t feel horny, and Katherine wasn’t indicating she was either. It likely wasn’t the first time that we were in such a mood. A time of quiet talk, possibly ephemeral, possibly serious. It’s become a part of our dynamic as a couple.

Katherine said “I got an email today that my degree is in the post. But it only has to go across campus, so I hope I see it soon.”

“Yes. It’s important to have the document. Plenty of people claiming to have qualifications don’t. We should make sure we have photocopies or digital scans.”

“Ian. Did U W A ask to see your doctorate certificate?”

“Actually no, but they did require a letter from my home institution attesting that I was genuinely employed by them and duly qualified. And I don’t think my own university asked to see it when I was hired. They did, I know, contact my references. However, I’m sure that it wouldn’t be too hard to put phone numbers and emails in a C V or a letter of application that let fake references be provided. Though likely there’s enough sloppiness that some academic staff are imposters.

But as a matter of common sense, it’s still worth making sure you can produce the proof if needed.

Want to discuss anything else,” I concluded.

“We could indulge ourselves.”

“Is ‘indulge’ the latest euphemism?”

“Do you care what word is used?”

“Absolutely not, Dr. Stormont.”

## Dr. Stormont

When the other grad students found out Katherine had the degree – they’d known she had passed – one of them suggested a pub night to celebrate. I had some thoughts that many other events would have served to celebrate too, but did not voice them. As it turned out, the evening revealed that Katherine was liked and respected by her colleagues.

We were lying in bed afterwards and I felt wet on my shoulder.

“Tears? Did someone say something to upset you at the pub?”

“Sort of the opposite. Everyone was really nice. I’d thought I was just ... you know ... paint on the wall. But I guess that they noticed me in other ways.”

“When I first met you I felt that the way you dressed and ... the old-fashioned expression would be comported yourself ... suggested you wanted to be invisible.”

“I probably did. Don’t much like the limelight. Especially following the Sean and Jenny episode.”

“But one of the men – Michael I think – said that he liked working with you because, if there was shared work, you’d say ‘I’ll do this if you do that’ and he could be absolutely sure it would be done and done well and on time. Apparently there are a few who chronically miss deadlines or screw up somehow.”

“Yeah. I’ve been let down a couple of times. It really makes for a lot of extra work and aggravation, especially if it means a rush to get marking done. One or two of the part-time lecturers are really bad that way, but they’ve been around for a long time and have some sort of seniority. In one case we even had a meeting to plan how to assign work and get a written plan and schedule that we all had to sign. He still managed to skive off by claiming he had to take his wife to Albany to look after her sick mother. Jerome was furious. He thought of hiring an investigator to find out if it were true, because we figure it wasn’t, but the family would cover for him. Eventually Jerome settled for insisting on a signed letter of excuse, which he filed. Louise is now maintaining a dossier, watching for some mistake that we can use to drop him. It’s an awful way to have to deal with a lazy or incompetent staffer.”

“Academia has more than its share of such freeloaders. One man I knew said his father had been a bricklayer. Said it was a pity the work of academics wasn’t like brick walls where getting things wrong was so absolutely obvious in the lines being crooked or walls falling down.”

“That’s a great analogy. Have to remember it. But, yes, if someone has the right tone and structure and a few references, any rubbish can be difficult to



dismiss without quite a lot of work. No crooked rows of bricks to point to for everyone to see.”

“And sometimes ‘borrowed’ from others, like those students you flunked. Was there any come-back on that?”

“There was some upset from the recruiter who’d arranged for them to come here. The usual ‘cultural differences’ spiel. Jerome sent them the syllabus and suggested the recruiter ask those students for copies of their work, since we can’t send that out, of course. Recruiter talked of resigning, but I think it’s too lucrative. They may, of course, be working for several universities, and not just in Australia, so we may lose some students.”

“Would that be a bad thing? I know all the Western colleges and universities are chasing foreign students for money because we’re chronically underfunded. However, I wonder if we wouldn’t do better to figure out how to run a leaner operation focused on quality and perhaps selling research capability. Historians can offer useful background to current policy issues. Look at all the truth and reconciliation activities related to indigenous peoples, or various arguments over colonialism.”

“Yes. We’re starting to get a big industry in peddling guilt,” Katherine said. “That isn’t to say there aren’t loads of things that were bad – evil even – but I think it’s important to figure out who made the decisions and who was just trying to keep body and soul together. The Irish potato famine has an absolute kitten with a ball of wool tangle of policies and reactions that led to a huge migration, and the migrants landed on top of indigenous communities, and so on and so forth. And not all the decisions were evil ones, but even choices made with the very best of moral intentions can come back to haunt us.”

“That’s a big speech before going to sleep.”

## Mergers

We’d decided to fly from Sydney to Vancouver – 14 and a half hours non-stop – on June 28. We’d take off at about half-past 9 in the morning, and arrive at just before 7 on the same morning! Such is the reality of the International Date Line.

To get two weeks in eastern Australia, we’d leave Perth on the 13th of June. Good job we’d worked this out in April – at least the date to leave Perth. Katherine had needed to give notice on her apartment. She’d probably have to cover the last two weeks of June unless a new tenant were found. That wasn’t totally unlikely, as her unit was a nice one at a fair price. I didn’t quite get the ownership arrangements, but somehow it seemed to be managed in association with U W A.

Booking flights was slightly complicated. My ticket home was from Perth. But aligning Katherine’s flights and mine, and particularly seats together, needed caution. It was important to us to be on the same flight, though of course it would not be disastrous to be apart for a few hours. It seemed probable that I’d waste the last leg of my ticket back to Toronto from Vancouver if we drove.

Can't have everything. I had to pay a change of booking fee as well.

We got our flights booked and a car rental arranged in Sydney – on my credit card and Canadian driving license but with Katherine as second driver. This had been done probably the day before the pub night to fête Katherine. On the following Saturday morning I went online to check my monthly bank and other statements. Everything appeared to be in order, but looking at the files pushed a mental button.

“Katherine, I just realized I didn't ask how you were set for money for travel.”

“Not to worry. I've enough.”

“We've been rushing around planning, and it's clear we're going to spend a lot of money travelling, and likely also when we get to Canada. But if we're doing so together, and I hope we will, should we ... er ... discuss some arrangements?”

“Meaning who pays what? How to make sure we have money of the right currency in the right places?” Katherine responded with questions.

“Yeah. We've been ... distracted. In the nicest possible way, of course.”

We both chuckled at this.

“It makes sense, Ian. I'll get my bank book and we can make some notes. I see you've just downloaded your statements.”

“That doesn't include my Australian stuff. And I've still a \$6000 Canadian draft, which I'll deposit in the bank in Vancouver so I can use it. The banks have branches across Canada, so we won't need to carry as much cash.

I managed to use my credit card quite a bit here. That got paid out of my Canadian bank account and saved transfers, though I got dinged on exchange, of course.”

Katherine said “Well. We'll need to arrange that I have cash or access to some.

Oh, I've also a couple of term deposits. One of them comes out in May, so I'd better give instructions that it's to go in my savings account otherwise they'll renew and lock me in again. One of the consumer cautions that the media publish from time to time. The other one comes out in December. That could be a nuisance to get cashed and then transferred to me in Canada if I'm planning to stay.... Don't worry! I am. ... Anyway, I'll talk to the bank manager this week.”

“I still have an investment account in Canada with Edward Jones. I'm in touch by email with my advisor who is an OK guy, but I had to liquidate some of it, actually a lot of it, with the divorce, though I paid Zelda with the house money to avoid touching some of the better holdings. I've never had big-time amounts anyway. Probably about \$85,000 on a good day recently. Mostly in blue-chip stocks. It was really my rainy-day fund.”

“And the rain came with the divorce,” Katherine commented. “My term deposits are about \$80,000 Australian. I was careful when I was working, and also here. So I think I'll have enough with half of that coming out soon.”

At this I nodded agreement.

“How do you think we should – you know – do the spending? Do you want to have a common pot, or do payments in turn. As I think I've told you, I need

to keep records for my grant-in-lieu, which saves quite a bit on income tax.”

Katherine said “I had a bit of unpleasantness with Sean when we split up. Fortunately not a big amount of money. When I left, he’d just paid the rent, and our arrangement was that I’d pay half. He lived hand-to-mouth and really wanted the several hundred dollars for my half. But I was really mad, so I told him to get Jenny to pay it. Probably not my finest hour.”

“You weren’t getting the benefit of the rent, but I suppose if you’d been sub-letting it would be a legal obligation. I doubt he could sue for it though.”

“No. The last communication was when I told him I wasn’t paying by email. Of course, I had to go out and find accommodation. And later on I realized I’d left a few things behind that I’d have liked to keep. Fortunately nothing truly personal or irreplaceable.”

“Katherine, I really, really hope we never go there.”

“Me too. Once in a lifetime is enough. I’m sure for you too with Zelda.”

“Yes. Even with Tanya, there’ve been some sad feelings, but I’m glad things seem to be working out for everyone. Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned Tanya.”

“I’d rather be part of your feelings, even though I’m not sure what emotions I have, or even should have.”

“Anyway, to return to the question at hand, have you any ideas?”

“You keep your spreadsheet with all your expenses, and I saw the other day that there’s a part for personal expenses too.”

“Yes. The accountant didn’t explicitly tell me to, but I figured that some nosey taxman might ask what proportion of my total outlay the research charges were. If everything I spent was charged to the grant money, I think a pretty good argument could be made that some of the expenses weren’t for research.”

“If you put in my expenses as another sheet, and make sure all our joint expenses are in the personal one, we’ll have a record of the outlay. And we can then add a sheet to record what we each pay. There’ll be some duplication, and hopefully not too many mistakes. We’ll avoid setting up a separate pot and having to keep tabs on it. But it shouldn’t be too hard for one or other of us to contribute when appropriate to keep things balanced.”

“Since I have to claim things, why don’t we try to have me pay for just about everything and we’ll always ask for receipts and record stuff. Make notes for things with no receipt – they add up I realized when I was coming here. Then we’ll settle up as and when it’s reasonable.”

“That’s close to what I was thinking. Yes. It’ll work.

By the way, Ian, do you have enough Australian until we leave Sydney?” Katherine asked.

“Depends how much we spend touring. I can use my credit card.”

“Didn’t you say the spread on exchange was pretty wide?”

“I think an Aussie dollar cost me about 91 cents Canadian, but the Australian dollar only gets me 83 Canadian cents. And of course it varies up and down, and some places have a fee or extra percentage.”

“Would you buy Aussie dollars from me at 87 cents for your needs here in Australia, Ian? In fact, start to use cash now. That way both of us get a good

rate.”

“What a good idea. I’d better think about marrying you before some other guy sees what a clever lady you are.”

“Flattery, flattery.

Oh. I had a thought today about when we go to Wollongong,” Katherine said, with a slight tinge of concern in her voice.

“It had occurred to me that your parents may be ... er ... sensitive to sleeping arrangements,” I said.

“Though they surely will add 2 and 2 to get 4 that we’re travelling together, so the sensitivity will be more that it’s obvious rather than far away. But I think more than that, they’ll wonder what we plan for the future.”

I said “You mean do I intend to make an honest woman of you?”

“Yes. And don’t think I’m putting you on the spot. It’s too early for that.”

“Katherine. From where I am emotionally and practically, it’s not too early to say that if our partnership continues to unfold as it has up to now, I foresee that we will be sharing our lives. I’m happy to tell your family just that, more or less in those words, pointing out that we’ve only spent time together since February, so we need a while longer to work out the details.”

I got a smoochy kiss on the cheek. We were sitting side by side looking at my spreadsheet.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence. I feel that way too, Ian.”

## Acquisitions

A few days later we were in the office. It was probably more cramped than either of us anticipated because of Macdonald’s boxes. ‘Cramped’ was not really the right word. The boxes were in inconvenient places for us.

“Ian, Do you think we could rearrange the boxes to get better use of the space in here?”

“I’d started to think about that. Do you have ideas?”

Katherine did, and we spent about 10 minutes carefully moving boxes to a corner and stacking them higher. That allowed movement around the desk easier. Ah. That was why the boxes were inconvenient. I’d sometimes ask Katherine to look at my screen when I came up with some information or other about travels or accommodation.

“I guess Macdonald also locked some stuff in the filing cabinet,” Katherine said.

“No. That’s me.” Whispering, I said “Shut the door and I’ll open it.”

Once the door was shut, I unlocked the filing cabinet. It really didn’t have a lot in it. What it did have was my moneybelt with Canadian and U S cash, the remaining bank draft and my passport and Ontario health card.

Katherine said “I should lock up my passport too. And when we’re travelling, a pouch like that to wear under clothes makes sense.”

“I’m adding that to one of my many lists now,” I said. We both laughed. My lists were becoming part of our shared way of working through the things

we had to do.

"I think I need another suitcase, Ian. I've just one old one. It does have wheels, but my sister Sue had it when she went to Europe a few years ago, then more or less gave it to me when I came here. But since then, I've acquired more stuff."

"Ah. Stuff! The nemesis of the migrant academic," I said.

"Too true. But what are we going to do?"

"Shall I give a peroration on the subject of 'stuff'?" I said pompously.

"Do your worst!"

"Well, I will suggest that you need at least 1 new suitcase. We should look at the ones we have and make sure they are fit for purpose. I'll try to fix any problems, but my experience is that it's cheaper to buy new rather than go to a repair shop unless you're planning to travel with Luis Vuitton. In that case, you'd probably have ditched me for some multi-millionaire already."

Katherine laughed.

I went on "I came with one suitcase and a backpack that is sized for the overhead bin. It holds quite a bit. Some people I know travelled for about a month with just one of them and one bag for a computer each, but of course the computer bags had bits and bobs beyond their machines. If I toss out one or two things, I can probably get my clobber down to the luggage I came with, but we're allowed 2 cases each to Vancouver. I probably get 2 to Sydney because of my fare. We should check your ticket too. We'll need to find out to avoid nasty surprises."

"Actually, I thought of that when booking and I get two."

"But you don't have two suitcases yet, as far as I know."

"True. And the backpack I have is scruffy and kind of small. I was rather admiring yours – the big one not the day pack – the other day."

"I got the day pack here. It works better than my computer bag when I'm on the bike."

"Maybe keep both. I use my scruffy backpack for my computer. Your day-pack one is nicer."

"Cost you a kiss."

"Cheap at ten times the price."

We laughed and had a quick kiss.

"Ian. Why don't we go over to Good Sammy's out past Claremont and see what they have. Seems we need two suitcases. We'll worry about more after we check the two we have. And we need an appropriate backpack. May have to buy new. And we'll want to put a lot of insecticide in any used ones in case of bedbugs."

"Eeugh. I hadn't thought of that. Put it on the list."

I asked "Do you have the luggage allowance on file. It should have maximum dimensions. And we'd better take along a tape measure. I've got a simple cloth one in my tool pouch."

"Sometimes living with a fusspot can have its rewards," Katherine said.

Before we went to Good Sammy (a shortening of Good Samaritan), which was a shop providing opportunities for disabled persons, we picked up the tape

measure and took a quick look at the two suitcases. Both were scuffed. There was a crack in the plastic housing around one wheel on Katherine's. I added epoxy glue to the list to fix that, as the glue in my toolkit was simple fix-all cement. Both suitcases were on the larger side.

"Do you think we can manage with a couple a bit smaller?" I asked.

"You're thinking of being able to move them, and fit them in a car?"

"Yes. I actually decided on just one coming here because I wasn't sure I could manage two by myself. But in retrospect I might have chosen two mediums over 1 large."

"We can put only light stuff in the big ones," Katherine suggested.

"That helps a bit, but surprisingly less than one might expect. I'm glad you've a bathroom scale so we can weigh things."

"Probably won't work. I tried it once and couldn't get the case to stay put."

"Ah. Well, we weigh Katherine, then we weigh Katherine and suitcase and tell her she's not overweight."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. You might lose your pussy privileges for that."

"But you'd lose yours at the same time unless you've a man hiding in the closet," I said.

"I'll check on him later. Let's go see if Good Sammy has anything, else go over to Westfield to see what new stuff is available."

"Since we won't know new prices, let's do the opposite. If we're happy enough with the new prices, we can avoid insecticide and worry about damage."

"OK," Katherine agreed.

## Containers

The second Saturday in May we'd decided to do a trial pack. We weren't actually going to pack, but to put out what we planned to take and set aside what was going to be disposed of. However, we would try a cursory check of whether what was going would fit in our luggage, and start to plan where things would go.

We'd found a pair of suitcases – actually a matched set – one large and one modest one. The large was smaller than the two we had. The modest one was perhaps a bit smaller than I'd have liked, but it was boxy so could be flexibly packed.

We saw several backpacks that were close, but none really was right, so we decided to keep looking. The money belt was also tricky, but then we saw a suitable pouch, though not on a belt. And we found a simple lightweight woven strap with a flat buckle the strap could be pulled through. Katherine knew she could sew the pouch to the strap. I had some strong nylon thread I carried that was perfect for this purpose.

As we were starting to lay out our stuff on the bed, Katherine asked "Ian, Are you planning to carry our luggage around eastern Australia?"

"You have another idea?"

“Well, we could leave some suitcases with my sister Sue. But we’d need to separate out stuff we needed from things for later.”

“There used to be big sticky labels for steamer trunks ‘Not Wanted On Board’.”

“Yeah. Precisely.”

Oh. I forgot to tell you that I got an email from Sue yesterday morning. Jane and Kenneth are going to stay with my parents and we’ll be staying with Sue and Alan. She said it would avoid Mum and Dad getting all upset over what she called ‘fraternization’. We’re offered either separate rooms or share, though the latter will be a camp cot in one of the kid’s rooms for the second person.”

“Unless it’s important to you to be in the same room, it’s probably more comfortable to take existing beds. But it is important to me to be able to have some private time. That will be a lot easier with your sister, I suspect.”

“Yeah. I agree. I’ll tell her that, and make sure I mention how we appreciate that we’ll be able to have some private time, as much to be able to work out plans for ourselves as for ... other stuff.”

“There’ll be opportunity enough I hope in the hotels,” I said.

We worked off and on that Saturday, though we took a break mid morning until after lunchtime to go looking for the elusive backpack. In Claremont we went to a sporting goods store. There the packs were designed to be carried through the bush. We wanted ones that were very light and boxy to make the most of the carry-on size. A bit of a drive over to Cannington, but not to Westfield, found us in a big luggage shop on the Albany Highway. They had several what they termed “travel backpacks”. We ended up with a Samsonite one that was pricey but would suit well.

“Make sure I get the receipt,” I said.

“But it’s for me, so I should get it.”

“Well, if I give you mine, which was purchased about 4 years ago, this one can be an expense for returning my research materials to Canada. I probably can’t claim the suitcases, though I’ll ask the accountant if I can also do a partial charge. But I can certainly claim this one, even if you carry it with your bras and knickers in it.” I got a punch in the arm for that. I added “Aren’t we doing joint work in the form of the seminar, for which we’d better make sure to get copies of the announcements.”

“You mean the expense is needed to allow me to collaborate with you?”

“Yes. Is the expense unreasonable in that light? But one thing I try to do is always judge an item on whether I’d buy it anyway, with or without the grant. I figure if I wouldn’t buy it for myself, I probably shouldn’t.”

By five o’clock, we were pleased that we’d managed to select a number of things that we wanted to take with us but wouldn’t want at hand until we got to Ontario. Katherine entered these into a spreadsheet as I packed them into the two older suitcases. By default we were thinking of these as Ian’s or Katherine’s, but I didn’t have all that much that was not in use regularly, while Katherine had her full set of possessions in the apartment. That, plus some issues of size and shape meant a mixture of our things in each suitcase. Still, it was good

to get a lot out the way. The cases were reasonably full, with perhaps space for a few more soft items – towels and linen came to mind. They were both at around 15 kilos when we did a weighing, so well under the 23 kg max.

Katherine saved off the spreadsheet and backed it up to a USB key. Yes, it would be a nuisance to have to re-enter, since we'd have to unpack. There was still stuff all over the bed, the floor, and a couple of chairs. Carefully fitting the two cases we dubbed 'CLOSED' in the back of the closet gave us some space.

"Let's go out and get some dinner before we face this mess, Ian."

"Agreed with alacrity."

## Disposals

We walked over to Broadway and found an Italian restaurant that would suit.

"Wine?" I asked.

"I think we need it, both after all the work and to help face what remains."

"It's not too bad. Just all over the bed, which is a nuisance if I want to ravish you."

"How do you know it's you who'll be doing the ravishing?" came back the swift rejoinder.

"I'll take all the ravishing I can get if you're the lady doing it."

"Smooth, Ian. Very smooth. Better order before we scandalize the patrons by doing something provocative on the restaurant table."

We made our selections – both of us chose a pasta dish – and I ordered a half litre of wine. I'd discovered neither of us were big drinkers. Katherine's tale of an unsatisfactory date with a cad must reflect a time when she was acutely unhappy.

"Katherine, do you own all the furniture and household items?"

"Yes. Though the furniture and microwave were there. I gave the previous tenant \$500 for the lot. I've told the rental agent I'm prepared to do that, otherwise I think its Good Sammy or the dump."

"What about the dishes, pots and cutlery?" I asked.

"That's stuff I picked up in discount places or that my folks were going to throw out. I like my appliances, but I don't think those'll work in Canada."

"No. Three strikes against them are plugs, voltage and frequency. We should think about your laptop though. Do you think the Dick Smith store will have a plug adapter?"

"They're probably the best bet to find one easily."

"We'd better get one. Probably when we get to Vancouver there'll be a chance to get a power supply for North America so you don't mess with adapters. I think such things are marginally cheaper in Canada, and Vancouver, or rather Richmond to the south of it, is a hub of importers of such things. I've ordered stuff from there in the past."

"Then do I need an adapter?"

"Safest if we need a day or two to find the right place. Gives us options. There's a couple of places I've bought stuff out West. Alberta doesn't have sales



tax. Saves about 8%.”

“There’s lots to learn. But I’ll guess it was the same for you coming here.”

“Yeah. But now it’ll seem odd going back.

To return to household stuff, is there anything that you want to take along?”

“I’ve a couple of nice kitchen knives. Better put those in the CLOSED bags. A few tea towels. Two favourite mugs.”

“Yes. I must remember mine from the office.”

“Your Wait Awhile one. Yes, mustn’t leave that behind.

Ian. What stuff do you have back in Canada? And will there be enough for both of us if we need to set up two places?”

“I did some looking at maps online to verify what I remembered. Campus to campus is just about 50 km. Not close, but not so far, depending on where we find to live and transportation options. I’ll presume we’ll arrive with one car.

A key question may be if we want to live together.”

A flash of anger crossed Katherine’s face. “You’re going to spring that on me now?”

“No! No! Of course not. I just want to be sure you’re comfortable with us staying together in one household. It’s not been that long, and perhaps – even if we care about each other and want to be a couple – you might prefer to have your own place.”

In a subdued voice, Katherine said “Not at all. If anything I can’t wait to make it official.”

“I feel the same. I suppose we could do the arrangements to get married before we leave Australia, I presume in Wollongong.”

“Too much work and too much stress. What we have to do before we get to Waterloo – I’ll use that as our destination to save extra words – will test how well we get along and let us know we can make it together.”

“Good thinking,” I said.

Our dinners came. We ate without much talk. Then we headed back to the apartment and faced the array of stuff on bed and sofa and table.

“Is there anything we can get rid of?” I asked.

“You didn’t come with all that much to Australia, Ian.”

“True. And we’ve packed some of that already. There is that one shirt I decided to toss. I’ve set that aside to wear for grubby, or else as rags.

Have you anything to toss or use as rags?”

“We packed most of my dresses, since I figure I’ll use slacks and jacket for our presentations. In fact, I’m not planning to pack a skirt for our travels, though you saw a couple in the CLOSED cases. That means I probably won’t need stockings, so let me get some out and put them in that cardboard box which I’ll mark as ‘closed +’. Though I am going to pack my peasant skirt and blouse for special occasions. Oh. Better include the shawl and the ... you-know whats. But I don’t think stockings work with that outfit.”

Looking through her stockings, Katherine found two pairs that had runs or holes. Toss!

"I almost want to ask you to look the other way, Ian. This drawer has my old underwear, and some of it should go."

"You decide what stays or goes, but hold up undecided items and I'll give thumb up or down."

Surprisingly, about half of the items were for the rag bag. Underwear didn't get recycled. There was a two piece bathing suit. A very modest bikini. That would be with us. Might get to swim in the hot springs in Banff. Did we allow a day for that. I wonder what the National Park charges are. Be a nuisance to have to pay for a full season just for 1 day. And we likely wouldn't be able to stay there. Generally fully booked months in advance.

"We packed some sweaters, but I had you hold back on one decent one for the mountains. What about a windbreaker?"

"I've really only got my coat. I did have a cool-weather raincoat, but it was getting shabby, and out here it doesn't get too, too cold. My anorak is enough."

Katherine was referring to a water-resistant jacket with a hood that folded up into the collar. It had a lining.

"We're allowed coats. And it'll be mid-winter in Sydney. That should do. But coats are allowed on the plane. I've a nylon bag – it's my laundry bag at the moment – that I put my coat and stuff in."

"I've one of those somewhere. Oh. Here it is."

"Put it in the pocket of your coat. Do you have gloves, scarf and hat."

Some digging produced some of these items, but one pair of gloves was pretty much gone. Another was too fancy for everyday so into the "closed +". Two scarves were lightweight, so one to the box, one for travel. And there was a nice wooly one that was put with the coat. A beret was the only hat Katherine had of the winter type. She had a couple of sun hats and we chose one for travels, one for 'closed +'. Details were tiring!

Katherine decided to ditch one nightie and one pair of dilapidated pyjamas. Also a pair of slacks and several tops she claimed not to wear any more. Those went to a box for donations.

"I didn't see any boots when we packed the CLOSED cases," I said.

"Don't have any. Suppose I'll need them in Canada."

"Yeah. Not going to survive long without boots in Winter, even in Waterloo, which is relatively benign."

In fact, Katherine didn't have a lot of shoes. I wouldn't be calling her Imelda. We'd packed two pairs of slightly dressy shoes already.

"What shoes are you planning to take?" I asked.

"My good walking shoes, a pair of decent sandals – the ones I wear with the peasant outfit – a pair of dress flats to wear with a pantsuit or slacks and jacket, and some slippers."

While there were still a few items scattered around that might be for disposal, we put everything else back in drawers. I hadn't yet really been assigned a drawer. I just had a shelf and some hangers in the closet. Well, as we'd noted, I didn't come with much.

It was a little after 9:15 when we finished putting away. We'd not had dessert at the restaurant, so I put on a kettle to make some tea. There were a couple of

chocolate bars in the fridge and we had bananas – Cavendish. Here one could get several varieties, so the shops labelled them by variety.

While the kettle boiled, I opened cupboards and drawers and looked through.

“Ian. What are you looking for?”

“Seeing what you have that we might want to take with us. The small plastic cutting board is light, and you have that knife that’s got a sheath and is a bit larger than a paring knife. Add the can opener and the corkscrew and we’ve got picnic gear.”

“Yes. Good thinking. In the second drawer there’s a knife-fork-spoon. Put those things together on the table. What about a plastic mug. I’m willing to share, but not having one is a nuisance if there’s a spring or one has a carton.”

We gathered those things. I was rummaging in the lower cupboards when the kettle switched itself off after boiling.

“Do you want your teapot?” I asked.

“No. The top falls off if you don’t hold it on. Nuisance.”

“Under the counter it’s all stuff for house cleaning or major cooking.”

“I’ve never used the cooking stuff. On your own you don’t roast or do canning.”

“I’ve got that sort of thing stored at my mother’s in her basement.”

“She has a basement?”

“Most Canadian houses do. A danger is water in springtime during the thaw. I made some racks out of cheap wood so my boxes are up at least a foot off the floor. And I’ve dishes and pots and brooms and bucket and things like that. And a vacuum cleaner.”

“Bother. I just bought mine last year. Fortunately not too pricey.”

“Why don’t we make a list of stuff like that? You know ‘Going to Canada. Make me an offer’ and your email, and post it by the coffee pot. Maybe there are other bulletin boards. I know at my university, you have to get things approved before posting.”

“Well, there are web sites to sell second-hand stuff,” Katherine said.

“True. I just thought it’s more likely that with grad students or international visitors we’d be willing to let them have stuff for quite a bit less than the going rate if they allowed us to have things until the very end.”

“There’s nothing to stop us trying both, is there?” Katherine suggested.

I clicked on the TV to see if there was anything worth watching. At the same moment, we both said “TV!” and Katherine went and added it to the list of items for sale.

## Slipping away

My last month in Perth had a subtly artificial quality. Both Katherine and I were busy. We’d got all our travel plans confirmed as far as they could be. We even had set up appointments with two car dealerships in Vancouver that said they handled out-of-province buyers. Tickets, money – apart from final closing of my Australian account – and hotels were all booked. Travel documents were

in order as far as we knew, and our packing was advanced to the stage where we were starting to almost want to get things out of the CLOSED bags.

Katherine and I presented our joint seminar to the largest audience I'd seen. Moreover, we proved to be a very slick team, transitioning seamlessly one to the other.

Katherine and Grigor had managed to get their two papers beyond the second draft. In fact it seemed likely they'd submit before we left Australia. Good job Katherine now had a gmail address.

My own work on Perth and Victoria was well-along. In fact, it was probably essentially ready to submit, but given we planned to go to Victoria, I might as well wait in case some important new subject arose. I did start to outline some new work, and also to prepare a new course I'd received a request to teach in the Fall term. Fall! Northern Hemisphere Fall, that is. I also reviewed my other two courses, standard offerings of which I'd teach two sections each during the year. Total of 5 half courses, down from 6 pre-tenure. Not too bad a load. And I'd been assigned to chair the academic integrity committee – the cheating court of our department. It covered offences by profs as well, like plagiarism or failing to give credit to colleagues. But we hadn't had that for a while, so most likely essays not written by the student, or suspiciously equivalent answers by two students sitting near each other during an exam. Sigh. I could only hope there'd be very few and those would be properly documented.

I sent back my acceptance of my academic workload. I hadn't heard of anyone refusing, though we were asked to suggest what we wanted to the secretary to our department head. She was pretty good at giving us mostly what we asked for. I suppose if someone had a real gripe, they'd go talk to her or the department head and see what could be arranged. My load was what I knew was a fair share of the burden.

Socially, the last month was busy. Frank and Clarisse threw a Sunday lunch to which Katherine and I were added. A few days before our departure, Ed and Tanya had us over to their joint household for dinner with the three girls. Both Katherine and I were a bit apprehensive, but it was fine, except for a few tears at the goodbyes.

The list of stuff to unload had gone up in a few places and on one website. It had mostly disappeared. Gordon wanted the TV, as his room-mate owned the one they had and it moved away with the room-mate. There was no outright negotiation, but he mentioned that he could offer a lift to the airport, and used TV's were often awkward to shift, so the price got a little lower and we got a ride. Getting all the luggage in the car took some care. We had our backpacks on our knees for the journey. We could, of course, have called Tanya, but somehow .... Well, you can understand

We were fortunate that putting the car on the list got a message from the brother of one of the office staff. Avoiding a dealer and letting us keep the car until the day before we left gave the buyer a good deal.

We left Katherine's two days before our departure. There had to be an inspection to get the security deposit, and we didn't want to be negotiating from a distance. We got a hotel room in West Perth. Katherine had the luggage

in the car and picked me up from Tanya's where I had locked up the bike to a fence post as had been arranged when we last saw Tanya and Ed.

## Three Australian women go to a bar

Katherine and I were on the plane at Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport waiting for the engines to start to take us to Vancouver. We were strapped in. I was holding her hand. We'd been fortunate or careful enough to get a two seat set by a window. I'd had to pay a slight premium but it would be worth it for the long flight.

Our car journey up and down the Pacific coast, with a detour to Canberra, had been a great success and an important experience for me, and I think for Katherine. Our seminars were well-received. They had a different feel from the version we gave in Perth, likely due to the rather intimate gathering in Wollongong and the presence of undergraduates who had been invited in Queensland. We enjoyed both.

In Wollongong any initial nerves evaporated quite quickly. George Stormont, Katherine's father, had retired from a technical job at the steel plant involving analysis of the alloys and working with a quality control statistician. He asked sensible questions about academic life and about Katherine's chances for a good life in Canada. I was able to tell him honestly how being Katherine's external examiner had delayed my opportunities to get to know her, but that I anticipated we would end up marrying.

"Good to know. Conny'll sleep better. She worries, especially after the bust-up with Sean. He came here once. Didn't seem to want to talk to me. You're different, and I like how Katherine lights up when she's with you."

"Thanks. She lights up my life too."

Driving back to Sydney, we arrived on the 25th. We dropped off the car. We'd picked it up at the airport but didn't need it in the city, so used a central office which was quite close to the hotel we'd booked into.

Katherine had talked to Sue and reserved a table for the two of us at a very nice Japanese restaurant. Afterwards I was treated to an exceptionally special bedtime treat. Katherine said it was a late birthday present. I'd passed my 41st ten days before.

Two days in Sydney probably wasn't enough, but we made a good try at being tourists. That this was the end of my sabbatical in Australia gave a somewhat subdued feeling to those days, however.

The jet engines started up.

"Ian. How does it feel flying out compared to when you came last year?"

"I have a much nicer seat neighbour."

"Meaning?"

I explained my annoying Englishman, his non-stop talking and Aussie joke.

"Which of the many Aussie jokes was that?" Katherine asked.

I told her. She gave a small laugh and said "That's one of the better ones. It's only mildly deprecating to Australians, nor really to the English and Americans,

only to their sensitivities. And it captures the fly problem.”

“But rarely do the jokes have women,” I commented.

Katherine said “I heard one at a party a couple of years ago.

Three Australian women go to a bar one night and they pick up an Englishman, an American and a Canadian who are visiting for a conference. They pair off, agreeing to meet on the beach next day. The woman who’d spent the night with the Canadian asked the other two how it had gone.

’That American kept boasting how great he was in bed and it so obvious he was insecure, I had to fake an orgasm.’

The second woman said ’The English guy was polite and gentle, and got me off, but then he rolled over and went to sleep. What about your Canadian?’

’Oh nice, Except he kept on apologizing every time I made a lot of noise climaxing before he made me come again.”’