

A Storied Future

John C. Nash

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A Storied Future is an ongoing collection of works of fiction and semi-fictitious memoirs. They are a subset of the author's short works that concern economic and technical themes, and generally are written looking back from the future. I hope you enjoy reading these short pieces and may, in some instances, find in them inspiration and hope.

John Nash Ottawa, 2020, 2021, 2022
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Patcher

I'm a Patcher. As a job, it's started to get a certain cachet of approval like firefighters or emergency doctors. Can't say that was what got me into it. I hadn't done great at school. My grades one and two were in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, and I missed out on a lot and never quite made it up. But I turned out to be good with my hands and could fix things. When I got out of high school, the desalination projects to provide agricultural water were just getting going. California agriculture was in a mess – there were pitched battles between the environmentalists and some of the farmers who still were pumping the aquifer. Several hundred deaths.

Then that big industrialist Jacob Mallory points out there's a huge mess of waste plastic in landfills, supposedly temporary depots for recycled pop bottles and other containers, and the Pacific gyre. With some robotics and some clever new processes, the people he funds found a way to make cheap pipes 50cm in diameter out of it. And another group he invests in got some ideas from some Scottish wave energy systems to pump seawater into pressure towers for reverse osmosis. And to make these mostly out of rubbish materials too, rather than expensive steel.

So now we have hundreds of small reverse osmosis plants by the sea, and the water they produce is desalinated enough to use for agriculture, especially if the crops are chosen to be salt-resistant, or they use salt liking plants that can be removed and processed somehow. The pipes of course are these standardized 50 cm. jobbies.

Apparently pipelines were a big no-no when I was a kid. But those were oil. When they broke, there was a nasty mess that poisoned a whole lot of things. But slightly salty water isn't nearly so much of a problem, and the pipes are cheap plastic. Teams of us patchers go out and fix them.

A big break will require us to shut down a section and replace a few lengths of pipe. Generally a pipeline has two or three pipes, so no big hassle for the farmers. But usually there's just a small hole where the cheap recycled plastic was weak. We have a big tool on the back of a small truck that we press over the hole and pressurize with air. Then a laser melts some plastic cord over the hole and the pipe's good to go. Some lengths out there have half a dozen patches in the space of a hundred metres. Big deal.

Now that the system is pretty much an off-the shelf commodity, it can be set up with the desalination towers – also in cheap material – and a hundred

or so kilometres of pipe in just a couple of months. Getting to be big in the former Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. If it weren't for a couple of thousand Saudi princes killing each other off, there might be a big use there too.

It's even got so there've been robots getting into fights for the Pacific gyre plastic. Who'd have thought that a floating rubbish heap would become a resource?

Of course, the volume of water now being moved into previously desert areas is making those areas non-deserts. With the trees and new plants, climate change, but not what it used to mean.

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Tribalism

“Nancy, There’s a big fuss over at the courthouse over that land titles case. Get over there and put together a five-minute segment for the national news feed.”

That’s my boss, Jeremy. Well, not my boss, actually, since I’m supposedly a freelance videographer. Of course, he acts like my boss, and things used to be pretty bad apparently, except the laws for freelancers have improved in the two decades since 2025. Employers now actually have to cover full insurance and benefits, and since news often covers conflict, a pretty sizeable hazard pay with an "unusual hours" rider. So I do all right financially. Supposedly I also decide what to cover, but the reality is that the news streaming channels and what’s left of TV and radio broadcasting tell us what they want most of the time. Unless we pick up on something unusual and they think their competitors might be onto the story, we’re wasting our breath most of the time with our own interests. I’ll tell you about a few another time.

In this case, I knew what the story was about. Since the big wave of attention in the early 20’s into indigenous history, there’ve been plenty of campaigns and court cases. A goodly proportion of these have been genuine, and governments and other organizations who behaved badly should have been brought to account. "Should have been" but haven’t. Most of the culprits are long dead now, and didn’t pay up before checking out. Hardly any of the true victims got more than a pittance.

Of course, there are plenty of others – and they do a hell of a lot of damage to the real cases – where someone decided to jump in and claim they’ve been wronged when it just isn’t true. And we in the media have done a really good job of making some words the brand of the devil. Take "residential school" for example. It became a synonym for evil. I’m sure no residential school for indigenous students was ever wonderful, but a couple of people from the later years told me they preferred being in the school to being on the land in the middle of winter. They were from north of 60, and an igloo or tent in the dark and cold for several months probably isn’t as attractive as 3 squares and central heating. And maybe they had school staff who were decent. There were plenty of examples of abuse and deprivation, and maybe even in the same places where my contacts were happy enough to live and they were lucky. I suppose I’m just underlining the old saw that

all generalizations are false, including that one.

I also feel sorry for some of the people who worked in those schools. Surely they can't all have been evil. I'd like to hear how some of them dealt with knowing that any system that pushes kids into an institution damages those kids. Think of the expensive boarding schools in the UK called public schools. A lot of kids from those had pretty crazy experiences. But it wouldn't surprise me to learn that a few of the people running the residential schools were doing their best in a losing battle. Asked my grandparents what they knew of the schools when they were young adults in the 1990s. They looked at me like I had two heads. Said it wasn't on their radar. Makes you wonder what we don't see that's right under our nose these days.

Anyway, I'll get over to the courthouse. Better buzz for a RoboUber.

I'll plan to get some seconds of video of each of the main angles on the story.

Number 1 is the plaintiff. That's nominally a first nation from about 100 km west of the city. They claim that just before Europeans arrived – and the current historical and archaeological record supports this – another first nation – the one that is acknowledged as not ceding the city territory at the start of public events – invaded their territory, murdered half of the occupying population and drove out the rest. The plaintiffs want recognition, with the silent suffix "and compensation".

Let's call them tribe A, and the so-called invaders tribe B. Tribe B is one of the named defendants, but there's also the city, the province, and the feds, along with two very large multinational corporations building luxury accommodation and entertainment either side of the main river in the city. The lawyers from one of these companies always arrive in stretch limos. Let's call them tribe limo. The other corporation has a single lawyer, and he arrives in a Maserati. From some old videos, they used to have a really cool sounding engine. The new ones have whiny electric motors, but they still count as pretty fancy. In any event, call the company tribe Maserati. Actually the guy is Arab-Canadian, and the money seems to be based in Mumbai, probably with a huge dash of Persian Gulf and Cayman Islands.

It's not really a very interesting story. More a pack of legal sharks fighting over some taxpayer funded slush funds. At least the tribes A and B are being represented by lawyers who claim to be members of their own groups. But really a big waste of time and effort when we could be doing more for the community rather than the parasites.

One of the new cities in Nunavut – where they had to copy the Dutch and make the foundation cellars as hulls that will float if the permafrost liquefies – seems to have done better. They set up a Heritage Institute to help all their residents record and maintain their heritage. With new Canadians, alias refugees from horror du jour, and natural biological tendencies, tandoori elk

is a hot choice in restaurants. Double entendre intended. The Institute was set up to ensure language dialects and personal histories were captured and stored safely, but through luck or foresight they included everyone in the community. That is, we're all us, so nobody is left to be them. This seems to have had the effect of building and strengthening that community, and they've pushed the Nunavut government to establish pretty comprehensive property title laws of a new style. After all, if the land turns to slop, where's your land now? But you should still have a place for your house that floats.

Ah well, here's the RoboUber. I've got my ProPhone recording camera charged and the mini drone is prepared and ready to automatically capture interviews from a good angle. It also has two cameras for recording the surroundings to provide some context shots. Shouldn't take too much effort to get Jeremy a segment. Might even pay me enough that I can get myself a new outfit.

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Stowaways

Some leaves blew round the steps as I came out of the office – well we called it that, but it was just an old ATCO trailer we'd managed to rehabilitate and insulate to serve as a place to house communication and other equipment at Station 125. Fall was here, and we'd soon have to watch the battery status on all our systems when the temperature dropped. Usually had to swap out a dozen every month. Part of the ongoing RoboTransport operations that humans still oversee.

Truthfully, we could often do the work remotely. All our equipment has plenty of cameras, and we have redundant fibre-optic communications along all our routes. Today, however, I had a job that required human intervention. Station 125 was the third 50km post from Fort Albany on James Bay. There was a bit of a panic up there because a couple of teenagers had gone missing. After a few hours, another kid admitted to hearing them talking about getting away. The cops – way down in Timmins, since they work mostly remotely too – were being cagey about the reasons. Could be simply cabin fever or wanting to go to a music club where some band or other was playing, but in the small communities you sometimes got nastier stuff related to alcohol or drugs that the kids were smart enough to want to escape. Police figured the kids might have stowed away in an empty container.

One of our Type 24's was just rolling into the station. It manoeuvred over to one of the charging docks and its charging probe connected with a nice clack. That's why the stations are here. In summer the robotic trucks can make it almost 200 km on a charge if they have new batteries, but in winter conditions, 50 km is a safe range. Each station now has a Type 78 charging wagon in case a freighter or other vehicle gets a flat battery unexpectedly and needs rescuing.

The Type 78 has the same layout of four wheels at the front that can be steered and 4 at the back that are fixed. All wheels have motors. The Type 24's were our second generation, but really there's been little change in appearance of the transport vehicles over the years. The real updates were in the batteries, circuitry and power train and, of course, continual tinkering with control and communications. All the freight goes in standardized boxes that are locked onto the main deck. We still use the 10, 20 or 40 foot sizes from the olden days. It was too much work to change the dimensions, but we now have some smaller boxes that can be put together to fit the standard

footprint.

The Type 78 has a humungous 40 foot box that's a battery. Most of the time it lives at the station, providing power for charging the robo-trucks along with one or more static batteries of the same size. There are small hydro, photovoltaic and wind generation plants all around. Station 25 also has a Type 102 service vehicle. A bit bigger than the old pickup trucks, but with a pair of tool-holder arms and a couple of small robots that can help maintain or upgrade the generator stations.

For the next few months there's a pair of Type 122 roadbuilder machines too. They use a lot of the same components as the trucks, but can clear trees, break rock and level ground. Since they're electric, they don't do this super-fast, but supervised and programmed from some building in Ottawa, they munch away and build a rough single lane road with passing places every kilometer, then robo-trucks bring in gravel or other materials to smooth things out and by the end of a couple of months you have a few tens of kilometers of new route. Not a super-highway, but suitable for the robo-trucks to toodle along at up to 40 clicks. No driver to get bored, and stuff gets moved. Some routes even have passenger modules. They have cots and washrooms and meal service. Most routes are at least 24 hours, but a hell of a lot cheaper than flying, especially now that carbon-based fuel for aircraft has been limited to the military, and even they only get to use it occasionally.

The Type 122s are building a cross-link to another route to give us some flexibility. Wouldn't surprise me if Station 125 becomes a hub for people and goods to move between remote communities. The first routes were all hub and spoke from larger places down South, but now some people want to move between places up here.

I climbed up to the freight platform on the Type 24 that had just come in. It had a couple of 10 by 4 by 8.5 high modules. Insulated ones. If the kids were in them, I hoped the vents were open – those were set from the outside. I had an inspection camera with me, and found the vent on the left hand container of the pair of modules on the deck. Damn it was hard to find something to hang onto, and the ledge at the edge was only a few centimeters. Note the irony that we still measure the containers in feet.

I could see the vent holes were open, and stretched the inspection camera goose-neck, then put a bend in the end so I could thread it in a vent hole above my head. Turned on the camera and its light. Yep. There they were.

I banged on the side of the container and yelled, "Hey in there. Are you all right. Lots of folk worried about you."

"Yeah, we're OK but Joey's been sick from the motion. Can you get us out?" came the muffled reply.

"Hang in there, I'll figure out what to do, but it'll take me a few minutes to get the equipment."

I ran back to the office, and communicated up and down the line that I'd found the kids. Also let Control know I'd be lifting some boxes off the freighter if I could get the Type 102 to do so. There was a 10 footer on the back end of the freighter that would have to come out to open the door. Otherwise, we'd have to try to lift the container with the kids. Probably less weight, but perhaps a bit of a risk if the Type 102 dropped them. The deck of the freighter was about 5 feet from the ground.

Control patched me in to a senior transport manager so I could talk to her and she could see what I was doing from the Type 102 cameras. I gave voice controls to the Type 102 and banged on the container and made sure the kids knew we were going to lift them off. Told them to lie on the floor on any padding they could.

Turned out the transport manager could authorize a latch override to free the container from the deck, and I was able to get the Type 102 to hook cables to the upper corners and then lift with both its arms. The Type 102 must be well programmed. Before it did the lift it repositioned so it had its long axis perpendicular to the load so it was less likely to topple. Its batteries then served as a counterweight, though with just 2 teenagers in the container, that may not have been critical.

I popped the door. God what an awful smell. Stowaways should take motion sickness bags with them. I didn't say much to the kids. They each had a small backpack which I prayed had spare clothing. Told them to get over to the office and go in the second door – it's actually another rehabilitated portable building bolted onto the office part and it has a shower, a small kitchen, some bunks and washer and dryer. Said when they were cleaned up and had their dirty clothes in the wash, to come into the office and we'd sort things out. Said they could find a frozen mini-pizza each and microwave it too. That got a pair of smiles.

Turned out Joey and Mike weren't escaping more than boredom of an isolated community. Given the interest they showed in our systems, it wouldn't surprise me if I see them working for us in a few years. They'll have to sleep tonight in the bunks – I always sleep in my personal Type 99 personnel transporter. Tomorrow someone will come in to relieve me so the kids can come with me down to Timmins. Probably get there more or less around the time the freighter gets there, since the Type 99 is authorized to travel at up to 100 km per hour if conditions are appropriate.

While the kids were showering, I put the container back on the deck and the transport manager reversed the lock override. She also flagged the container for a pressure wash, which I think should be standard after each round trip.

I'm kind of glad the kids stowed away. It can get a bit boring up here. We have great robots, but they're lousy conversationalists.

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Lexicography

New Year's Day 2079. For me, it should be a day of liberation. Befrijding, to use the term of my friend Ilsa from Alkmaar. She doesn't speak English, which is unusual for people who live there. Doesn't matter. We can Mind-Wave. Just put on our KopfKaps and we can think our conversation. I've no idea what she really looks like, attractive or ugly, since we can generate an avatar to match our mood, but the exchange is rewarding and mentally invigorating.

Hope MindWave doesn't get closed down. There's a high-profile divorce case that threatens to lead to new controls by CanCyberSec. The owner of PC – a consumer products and services company that started out a hundred years ago as a grocery – says his wife has been MindWaving with some guy in Majorca to the extent that it constitutes adultery. The news capsules are going bananas, to use an old-fashioned expression. Of course, they're making megabucks out of the juicy details. Well, any communications tools can be a vehicle for sexual expression if you try hard enough. And both the parties had been recording the sessions for later playback. Some hackers from Burkina Faso were selling copies of the recordings until a hired Kazak hit squad took them out. The authorities know who did the hiring, but it's a lot less work for them if the private sector does the cleanup first.

But back to 2079. It's the 200th anniversary of the beginning of work on the New English Dictionary, which became the Oxford English Dictionary. An enterprise that launched a paradise of words. And I'm going to launch a new artificial reality world to re-constitute the fascicles constructed for the Dictionary. I get to be James Murray, the first editor under the Oxford University Press regime. Earlier there had been several editors, but the project did not really move ahead until Murray took on the leadership with the backing of the Press, in particular Bartholomew Price, secretary to the Delegates. He was also Sedleian professor of natural philosophy, author of several books on calculus, and a clergyman to boot. Maybe I should adopt his character. Who gets to wear all those hats these days? Or the wonderful Oxford academic robes.

Based in Oxford's Jericho, with the production and paper mill for the profitable bibles in nearby Wolvercote, The Press became the largest university press in the world, and had one of the largest lists of any publisher. And run by 15 unpaid delegates. Mind you, Price had dining rights at Queen's,

where he was a fellow. The cellar there, like that at some other colleges, was unsurpassed in its stock of wines, port, and other beverages, and the Delegates were certain to lunch or dine after meetings. One of my technical employees has got our Re-All system to provide full sensation of meals. I'm looking forward to re-creations of some of the dinners, starting with the 7 o'clock sherry through the brandy and cigars after 10. Real cigars disappeared in 2062 as a public health and agricultural efficiency measure. Not before time, actually.

Ah. I'm looking forward to the waggish wit and nuciform epithets of dinner repartee. Samuel Johnson might have proposed that a lexicographer was "a harmless drudge" who "busies himself in tracing the original and detailing the signification of words." He was probably having a joke at his readers expense. What is humanity without philology? And it will be wonderful to experience the responsibilities of the Delegates signing off of each major step of publication of the flagship "Oxford At the Clarendon Press" books with their oval rather than shield-shaped logo.

Well. Almost launch time. I'd better select my wardrobe. My goodness, this wool is scratchy.

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Faked Memory

Worms and snails. They started the science that is the basis of our Institute for Memory Transfer.

Sometime back around 1960 an American scientist named McConnell did some experiments where he shone light on some flatworms and at the same time gave them an electric shock. That caused them to contract to get away from the electrode. Pretty soon he could get them to contract just by shining the light. They were cannibals, so he chopped up the trained worms and fed them to untrained worms. Then shone the light on the new worms. Voila. Contraction. He'd transferred the memory to the new worms.

Some decades later, other scientists in California used sea snails. Same trick. Well, same general experiment.

Now sometime around 2035, a decade ago, the New Freedom government here didn't like the fact that some folk remembered how they got started by using the same playbook as the Sturmabteilung or SA in post-World War I Germany. The SA essentially played bully-boys for Hitler. When the Weimar government didn't stand up strongly to the thugs and economic troubles made most politicians look weak, Hitler was able to seem like a saviour. Some saviour.

But the SA, also known as the Brownshirts, were a nuisance once Hitler got power. And, just as Hitler killed off the SA – literally I might add – the New Freedomites had to get rid of the so-called Truckers who they used to intimidate the population, especially anyone who wanted democratic discourse. And "getting rid of" wasn't pretty. A key plank of the 2022 protests was no vaccines. A small contract with the Wuhan labs of the good old People's Liberation Army got a really effective vaccine against a really quick and nasty new virus. Those with the shot got a couple of sneezes. Unvaccinated – well the New Freedomites don't want memories of the mass graves to stay around.

So they let us set up the Institute for Memory Transfer. Except they really wanted an Institute of Forgetfulness. The best we can do is add confusing memories to what people already remember. And we found we could do that really well, down to fairly fine grain control of perceived life events.

However, we don't trust some of the government types. Too much power and all that. We've managed to add a little – just a tiny little – bit to different stories the PM and his cabinet remember. Things like who had an

affair with which wives or husbands or both and little bits of accidentally coming in on someone doing nasty things with children. Things that never happened. Half the cabinet, including the PM, died in a big shootout last week. A quarter more when the security detail had to defend themselves because we put their images into some of the false memories.

How did we do it? Dragonfly drones. Large enough to carry the viral payload to a specific location and infect a bit of food but small enough to be difficult to spot.

Oh, and we've helped a lot of the rest of the population remember how the New Freedomites came to power, even if they didn't remember beforehand.

John C. Nash ©2022-02-14

The Gaudy

The junior common room - always referred to as the JCR - was noisy. More so as at least half of our company had hearing aids. The gaudy was for those of us who'd matriculated - "came up" in the Oxbridge parlance - 48 to 50 years before. Many of us were awkward on our feet. Some from disability. More from already having imbibed too much, even though we were still a quarter hour before going into Hall for dinner.

My dinner suit was tight - it wasn't the one I had when I was a student, but it had been acquired only a few years after. Except for a few of our number who had regular occasion to wear a dickie suit, most of us had outgrown the waistband of our suits. I'd not worn mine for 9 years, and even on that occasion it probably wasn't needed.

I was beginning to wonder why I'd signed up for this overpriced excess of nostalgia. Roughly sixty men - women were admitted 46 years ago - two years after the last of the current group. Sixty wasn't bad. There were about 250 of us admitted in those two years. Probably a quarter of those were already dead or mentally incompetent, and a similar number too distant to be able to get here.

For the College, it was essentially fundraising. They would likely do well. Several of our number had done very well in business, and others came from already well-heeled families. Then there were the rest of us. Those who were bright and, in the parlance of the time, "promising". We did end up with a better-than-average collection of high flyers in academia, business and politics. But also a few with big egos and some early luck before their essential absence of solid capability was apparent and they drifted into obscurity. But most of us were filling the ranks of the chorus.

At dinner I was seated between a fellow from a provincial town who had read politics, then became a Conservative alderman. He talked of his children who had rebelled against his efforts to, as he put it, "maintain standards". Listening, I got the feeling the children would say "avoiding social responsibility". No public housing initiatives or social programs while he and his like-minded colleagues were on the council.

On my other side sat a man I'd palled around with during my college years. He'd read English, then managed to publish a couple of well-respected novels in his late 20s. He told me he'd since turned his talents to technical writing and made a reasonable income and found personal happiness with a

congenial wife.

Did he miss creative writing?

Yes. Very much. But without inspiration, it would neither satisfy the soul nor pay to nourish the body.

Which brought me back to my own life choices. A scientist, but one who had chosen security in a government laboratory rather than take up the challenge of a risky but possibly paradigm shifting project. My life's work was solid. Respectable. I had trained several workers who were now contributing to education and research. My income had been sufficient for a comfortable and enjoyable life. But the big fish – the chase for that I'd eschewed for a basket full of sardines. Around me were many men who'd done the same. With wistfulness, we noted those of our contemporaries who had grasped the brass ring and were now lionized.

Yes. One wondered if one had chosen correctly. But there were surely some not here who had tried and failed. Some who risked greatly and ended up in a very bad situation. Even if they wanted to, they could not be here to cause discomfort by reminding us that great success is often the obverse of great failure.

Dessert was being served. A chocolate mousse frivolity. Good job it wasn't large. My pants are tight enough already.

John C. Nash ©2022-02-24

Indulgences

I don't know why, but the other night I found myself dreaming about indulgences. In particular, there I was, a man of a certain age sitting in a double school desk next to a snotty kid called Peter Flowers who was all of eight years old. So were all the other kids around. Except me. I was – well, my current age which is nine times that. I'm going to make you do arithmetic. You're not getting me to admit my age for free. And when I say Peter was a snotty kid, he was. Literally. Forever wiping his nose on anything around, like my sweater.

Anyway, I was dreaming of religion class with Sister Mary Margaret. There she was in her full black habit and wimple, trying to explain the concept of indulgences. I can't say that I've heard about them recently. Used to be considered an important part of Catholic tradition. The church version of Monopoly's "get out of jail free" card. Except it got you out of purgatory.

That's another concept that's gone by the board – not the Monopoly board, the board of life. Purgatory I mean. Who worries about purgatory now when we've got Putin and possibly another four years of Doug Ford and Justin Trudeau, with a side order of Pierre Poilievre.

Anyway in the dream, Sister MM as we called her is trying to tell us that we can do different things to get indulgences and avoid some years of purgatory. Hmm. Come to think of it, if you could sell folk cards that let them avoid Ford, Trudeau and Poilievre, there'd be a good market. Except the church tried that ploy and ended up pissing off Martin Luther and John Calvin and look where that led us.

The dream kind of fizzled a bit when it got down to the nitty gritty of how you earned indulgences, and I don't remember the details, except suddenly I'm sitting in a bar on a waterfront in a sunny climate like Honolulu, and I'm with five women I've known, you know, in the biblical sense. Despite the fact they're all there together, they seem comfortable with each other and happy I'm there too. And we have lots of really nice snacks and are drinking a really pleasant Rosé and the world is just fine.

So I'm thinking, how did I get from Sister MM and indulgences to this scenario where I'm — oh, indulging. The only problem is, how am I going to keep this dream going a while?

Gone Fishing

I was supposed to mow the lawn today.

Also had a report on our supply chain problems to write for the boss. He wanted it tomorrow. I was supposed to upload it tomorrow morning.

On the other hand, the weather was really pleasant. Warm but not too humid. And I knew where there was a place on the creek about a 10 minute bike ride away where I could probably finally get that two-pounder trout I'd been trying to hook for a while.

It didn't seem fair that I'd have to spend today first pushing the mower and then staring at my computer screen. A disastrous waste of a nice day. A day in my life that wouldn't come again.

With a great deal of grumpiness, I got the mower out of the garage. Damn. Had to put in gas. There was half a can. That was fortunate. It would probably get me round the lawn.

Started up the mower and pushed it round the perimeter. As I came near the sidewalk, I noticed that the cable company had been doing some work. There were wires lying around sloppily. Some of them were in the grass right in front where I wanted to mow.

Hmm. Wonder what happens if I keep mowing. Will the blade go over the wires. I was too annoyed to spend time moving the wires, so I simply kept on my path.

There was suddenly a big "whang" noise and bits of cable shot out the mower outlet. Then the motor coughed, spluttered and stopped.

Oh dear. The cable was cut and then wrapped itself round the blade hub. Well. I couldn't do any more mowing, so I wheeled the mower back into the garage. Decided that it would be dangerous to work on the mower while I was alone and the engine was still hot.

I checked the internet connection. Yep. Dead. Phone. That too.

Guess I'd better go fishing until things got fixed.

John C. Nash ©2022-03-17

Team Challenge

Richardson College challenged us – Kumquat Academy – to a cross country steeplechase. Our institutions have had a long-standing rivalry. We're the down-market, wrong-side-of-the-tracks Community College. Better at the "hot wire a car in less than 15 seconds" challenge than a javelin toss. A knife toss – maybe we'd win that.

Rich-Bitch – I mean Richardson – comes from the other end of town. Kids not delivered to school in at least a Beemer don't get invited to social events. You know how it is. And they have money to persuade the best sports guys to register.

Our phys. ed. – excuse me kinesiology – head is Miss Cranmer. If you know your English history, not a bad name. Is she sporty? Definitely not. Fifty-ish, greying and wrinkled, but I'd choose her first of anyone from school if I knew a street fight was brewing.

So Miss Cranmer calls a meeting of anyone willing to help with the challenge, and hints that there'll be a pretty good party afterwards, no matter what the outcome, but with a bonus if we win. The meeting is held down in the basement of the Sports Centre – a name that disguises the fact it's an old WW1 armoury, and the basement is really only at one end and used to be the ammunition storage.

Two tough guys are on the door, and they turn away a couple of students we know have cousins or siblings at Richardson. Then Miss Cranmer tells us she's agreed to the challenge but only if we set the course.

"Folks," Miss Cranmer says, "My spies tell me that Richardson plans on using their top football and basketball players. And they have the biggest average team size in both of those sports. So I want small, agile people on our team. And we'll insist on a time trial, with us going first so there's no chance of fights during the race."

"Won't we get creamed?" Archie Smith asked.

"Well, I think we may have a chance. Here's the map of the course I'm offering," Cranmer said.

The course looked pretty straightforward until you looked closely and realized it went through a couple of railway embankments. That is THROUGH culverts. Ah. Culverts that were only 21" in diameter. And over some chain link fences with barbed wire at the top. Easy if you brought a bit of matting to hang while you rolled over. And through some tight gaps between houses.

Houses where there were some really nasty dogs. Unless, of course, you had some sausages to offer them. Or you'd been round early to get to know them. With treats, naturally.

Well, we had a pretty good after-party. Richardson was really pissed that a team that was 80% small girls left their beefcakes stuck in pipes or hanging over fences or with dobermans hanging on their bum. The bonus beer and wine was pretty good too.

John C. Nash ©2022-03-24

Devil Spawn

Listen up, demons. The United States Supreme Court has just declared Roe vs. Wade void. We managed to get two of our agents on the Court, and, with the dozen of the southern stupids whose minds we control in the governors' mansions, we're set to get the most ever of our anti-God offspring born since the time of the Roman Empire. The Third Reich blip was a false start. This time we want a full on rebellion. The divergent political and legal mindsets are our new chance to defeat heaven.

Each bad-boy demon, get your assigned target. Then however you do it – seduction, quickie marriage, rape, or corrupt artificial insemination – get those women pregnant in the bible punching states. Then make sure you block any attempt at abortion, even if the ultrasound shows horns or an arrow-point tail.

Support demons: Get out there and tweak the sermons of those fundamentalist preachers so they inflate the Right to Life message. It's our satanic life we want protected. Pity the Democrats are often atheist or agnostic. So much easier to get a tide of devil spawn created in an atmosphere of wonderful Trump-Republican blind faith and superstition.

If we can, let's push the message that contraception is bad. We've a special team to get vandals to push pins in the condoms and substitute vitamins for the oral contraceptives.

Self-righteous brigade: push that rhythm method, but make sure you get the calendar calculators with the errors in them onto the shelves.

Lucifer's Lifeguards. Make sure our human devils get born.

John C. Nash ©2022-05-10

Home at last

She couldn't believe it. Was it really him? His clothes hung very loose on a now-skinny frame. He walked purposefully, but it was with a limp. He'd never limped before. The face was a gaunt version of what she remembered, and the hair was now grey. He was coming out of the immigration line and walking towards the exit of the baggage pickup of Customs. She was upstairs behind a glass wall. Oh! He probably wouldn't have any luggage. She'd need to rush to get to the exit to meet him. The reports on the TV said he'd drifted on a liferaft to an island that had been abandoned after a volcanic eruption, and had survived by making do with salvaged odds and ends.

As she ran towards the escalator, she recalled the last time she'd run for an escalator. It was the day he'd left, almost 5 years before. On that day, her car had suffered a computer glitch on the way to the airport when she was taking him to his flight. They'd let the engine cool, and then it started up as if nothing were wrong. In fact, she'd never found what happened, and still had the car. Go figure!

Of course, she had intended to take the car in for a check, but that somehow got permanently postponed by the terrible phone call had come in that night. His flight had gone down, as they said, "somewhere in the Caribbean". The next day, some wreckage was found. It wasn't a large airplane – 10 passengers, a pilot and a copilot. Eventually a recorder was found, and it indicated that the crash was at a low angle and at more or less landing speed, possibly survivable.

Only 5 bodies were recovered, along with bits and pieces of luggage. So the authorities – and deciding or accepting which authorities was a big debate – assumed everyone had perished. She'd accepted it and moved on in her life. That was now a big problem. She'd sold the house and moved to an apartment. For four years been a bit of a hermit, but in the last year had, as they say, "met someone".

What to do now? Besides run to meet him, that is.

From Challenge Night March 10, 2022

John C. Nash ©2022-05-26

A piece of heaven

The little boy's idea of heaven was unlike that of all the others in his Grade 3 class. Gregory had been born in Toronto, but his parents had owned a farm some distance away. Unfortunately, his father had misjudged the lip of a ditch and the tractor had rolled on him. Unable to manage the farm on her own, his mother had sold up and come to the city where her parents lived.

The topic of heaven had come up when a little girl whose parents were overly zealous members of a fundamentalist church had stood at the edge of the playground during recess and vehemently forecast that a boy who tied her pigtails together would never see heaven and would burn in hell for eternity, and never escape the smell of sulfur.

As a way to calm the class after the principal had brought everyone inside and called the police, Miss McMahon, the late-twenties teacher of Grade 3, said each student should take five minutes quiet time, then she would ask each of them to explain what heaven meant to them.

When the time for quiet was up, the first pupil, a boy, said "Dairy Queen all the time, and everything free."

A little girl said "The Doll Museum, and it's all mine."

Others gave similar capsule descriptions, all clearly springing from quite recent experiences of places they had enjoyed.

"Gregory?" Miss McMahon asked.

"Does it have to be a place, Miss?"

"No. A lot of people consider it to be like a place, but I can't see that it has to be?"

"Does it have to be things or people?" Gregory added.

"I guess not."

"'Cos for me, I think heaven is a feeling where I know the people I like are safe and smiling and don't have worries. And Miss, what does sulfur smell like?"

John C. Nash ©2022-04-14

Melba Toast

The angel who materialized next to St. Peter was his senior aide.

“A problem, Number 1.” The angel had been first lieutenant on HMCS Spikenard, a corvette that had been sunk by U 136 in 1942. St. Peter liked to provide a bit of nostalgia.

“Yes, Sir. The OIC – Officer In Charge – Purgatory has received complaints from the other place, who we now contract to run its operation, that they want to send back to us one Sylvia McGee, sometimes known as Melba. Seems she is creating too much trouble for them.”

“Remind me again, Number 1, of how this contracting out of purgatory works.”

“Well, Sir, we had to devote a lot of resources to running purgatory, and it was demoralizing for our staff, since it is, after all, a sort of punishment, albeit temporary, for modest sins. So a series of negotiations took place, and the Hell team now operates it for us.”

“At a price. As you well know.” St. Peter sighed.

“Yes. We had to let them have Internet Porn sites. But they likely hadn’t noticed those cartoons called *Grimbledon Down* by that rather eccentric Britisher, Bill Tidy. Couldn’t really draw people, but had lots of very pointed cartoon strips.”

St. Peter said “Yes, that cartoon was about a secret government weapons establishment. Supposed to poke fun at real chemical and biological weapons places. But Mr. Tidy suggested they’d research the use of excessive pornography as a contraceptive. And indeed, that does work to slow down the reproductive interests of some humans. Still, that’s off topic. Why is Ms. McGee causing so much trouble?”

“Here’s the file, Sir. It’s already incorporating the sins and blessings from St. Nicholas Naughty and Nice database. However, I’m afraid the OIC-Purgatory has rather stepped over the line in titling the file Melba Toast.”

“I rather like it, Number 1. Heaven can be an awfully serious place sometimes. Let’s see why she is annoying them.”

The two spectres briefly concentrated on the file and absorbed the several thousand pages of content.

St. Peter spoke first. “I see that the case is essentially one that Moses created, yet again.”

“Yes, Sir. The editing of *Thou shalt share and share alike* to *Honor thy father and thy mother* made the Boss pretty angry and he sent Moses to purgatory himself for a couple of millennia. Various, however, with the cultural fixation on family, the ‘honour thy parents’ bit became established as Commandment 4 or 5 depending on the publisher. The original commandment never really made it, except when the Son promulgated the *love thy neighbour as thyself* form of it, though Herod and the Romans weren’t persuaded, of course.”

“Let’s get down to specifics, Number 1. What is Ms. McGee doing that so upsets Satan’s staff?”

“Well, she was a Grade 8 teacher, so she is always expecting to be the main voice and the rule of law, no matter where nor when. That’s what got her into trouble with *share and share alike*. Even in her creative writing group, she’d have more to say than the others. But then in Purgatory, she tells the demons what to do and why they should do this and that, and they get all upset and ask for another assignment. Two even volunteered for service at the Kremlin, and that’s a place that makes Hell look like a holiday resort. How do you top the ideas of evil things to do that Putin and company think up?”

“And what about here? Won’t she upset the calm and contentment of heaven?”

“A very good question, Sir. I suppose it’s inappropriate to ask the Boss, or even one arm of the Trinity?”

“Probably not a good idea, Number 1. We’re expected to take care of these things. What do you think of creating a permanent virtual Grade 8 class? It needn’t have real souls. The humans have come up with digital avatars, after all.”

“That might work, Sir.”

“If it doesn’t, we must remember that the Boss has been known to decreate souls. You, I and a handful of others are permitted to remember that. All others lose the memory.”

“I doubt it will come to that. And besides, Melba Toast shows we gained a minor victory over Hell.”

“Indeed, Number 1. Carry on. You have the helm in this case.”

Written for Sylvia and with her permission to use it here.

John C. Nash ©2022-06-07

Getting out of the jam

She had made a poor job of hiding the damage. A chair placed awkwardly in front of the stain on the wall wasn't going to cover the record of throwing a whole pot of hot blueberry jam you were making at someone. And missing. Indeed, when I moved the chair to inspect the disaster, the chair was more or less stuck to the carpeted floor.

And the dark purply colour clashed with the sky blue of the walls and the neutral berber tones of the carpet. Ah. The joys of being an apartment superintendant.

My problem was that I wanted to get home in time for the face-off of game 7 of a hockey final. A game in which I had personal pride at stake, not to mention 500 bucks at even money.

The real story was husband coming home inebriated and well-marked with lipstick. Never a nice scene. But the jam tosser and her likely soon to be ex-spouse were tenants who had done a runner. Now I had to get things cleaned up quickly for a new rental.

Quick thinking was needed. I remembered years before that friends who lived in Jos, Nigeria, used to have difficulty with ants getting into the sugar. They'd put it in the freezer and then sift out the ants. Hmm. I'd just found a nest of ants in the back lawn. Ah. Yes.

I got a bucket and brought up a load of ants and put them to work. They swarmed all over the mess. On the way in tomorrow I'd bring insecticide and a shop vac. Have to hope the ants were real hungry.

But now it was time to get home and warm up the TV.

From Challenge Night June 16, 2022

John C. Nash ©2022-06-16

Taming the Mob

MacKenzie asked me to join him for coffee at a popular local place that charged more than I felt was warranted. He wanted to catch up. We'd both retired a couple of years ago and had intended to keep better contact. Five years ago, he'd been one of the spooks who provided the smoking gun to get rid of the cabal trying to overthrow the American government. Always interesting if you could get him to talk.

"How's retirement?" I asked.

"I'm finding it hard to allow others to do the job I did," he answered.

"Me too, but my stuff wasn't as critical as yours."

"Well, it's not that I did anything really new," he said after sipping his latte.

"You mean there were other times?"

"All through history. I was in IT, but my passion has been history."

"Never realized that," I said.

"If you don't have a good understanding of what the political egos have done over the centuries, you can't see what's going on now."

"Meaning?" I said, hoping to egg him on.

"The Trump era and all that aren't really any different from Robespierre and company in the French Revolution. You know that the "right to bear arms" was a plank in the revolutionaries' campaign, though universal suffrage was only for men. Strictly sexist. Still, manipulating the mob has been the method of revolutionaries all along. France in the 1790s, Russia with the Bolsheviks, Germany in the early 30s with Hitler, Iran under Khomeini. And always with the same sorts of names – Revolutionary Guard, National this and that, and all that crap. Except it isn't crap for the people they kill, nor the chaos they cause. And usually some sort of charismatic image of the so-called leader or leaders for the captation of the simple-minded, or even the willingly misled."

"You're saying these guys all manipulate mobs?" I queried.

"Sure. Pamphlets and street orators in France to Face Book and Twitter for the alt-Right. And in the 19th century, the Brits had the answer, but they didn't know it."

"What do you mean?"

"British politics for a lot of the 19th century – well until Ireland and the Dreadnought arms race hijacked the agenda – was about making sure there

was no revolution in Britain. They were paranoid about it, but they needn't have been."

"Well, I can see why a monarchy with lots of aristocrats would be keeping an eye out for the guillotine brigade. But how come they needn't have worried?"

"The Poor Laws. In Britain you could only get welfare in the parish you came from, generally where you were born. So you didn't get the indigent masses moving to London or other cities when they were starving. They stayed in their regions, so a big mob was harder to assemble. In France when people lost jobs they drifted to the cities and then there were thousands to whip up and storm the Bastille, though that was actually quite a modest event in reality. The mob at the Tuilleries garden three years later was much bigger and there was more bloodshed too, but they were being whipped up by the National Assembly "influencers"."

"But surely the British had some unrest?"

"The biggest was probably what's become called the Peterloo massacre. And that was mainly working people, perhaps some middle class too, not an unemployed mob. It also had a lot of women. Possibly a spark of the women's suffrage movement. If there was a mob in St. Peter's Field, it was the cavalry whose commander decided a horse racing event was more important, so he wasn't there."

"So the Brits never had the kind of revolution that was so nasty elsewhere?" I asked.

"Yes. Even their 17th century Civil War left Parliament more or less theoretically intact. I'm sure there's others who'd dispute that."

"So are we going to see more of Trumpism?" I was curious now.

"Possibly. Probably? The fact the boards of the big social media companies accepted or were coerced into seeming to accept being treated as publishers has helped. Now they're liable in court for defamation or libel etc. Cut their share value by a factor of 10. Big sacrifice. Though enforcement hasn't been very much evident. Time will tell if we see a cooling of the misinformation and extremism."

"Are you optimistic?" I said, voicing a thought that perhaps I should have kept to myself.

"Well, the Peterloo Massacre was the motivation for the Manchester Guardian, a publication that has, over the years, provided a voice of sanity and a source of mostly very reliable information. I'm hoping something similar will soon appear in the Internet space. Something new yet principled. But maybe I'm wishful thinking."

John C. Nash ©2022-06-23

Memory Fog

Recently, I've been wondering if TV shows are getting more boring than usual, if galloping old-age is muddling my synapses, or my favourite chair is too damned comfortable. You see, I'll sit down to watch a half hour of some light entertainment and drift off to sleep and then wake up an hour and a half later. Except it's not quite that simple. There's a stage when I'm awake but not awake, both at the start and at the end.

When I had my recent checkup – now called a health and wellness assessment – I even asked the physician about it. Note the length of the names: "checkup" is seven letters and "health and wellness assessment" is 27 plus 3 spaces. Perhaps they get paid by the letter now. Anyway, in response to my questions about my falling asleep in the chair, Dr. Bhattajampuri was very eager to tell me about the hypnagogic and hypnopompic phases of sleeping where one was aware one was drifting into or out of sleep, but might already be dreaming.

Much as I might respect the good doctor's vocabulary, his exposition did not appear pertinent to my state of health. I wanted to know why I fell asleep, and if it were significant. The description did, however, remind me how annoying it was that I wanted to remember something from those transitional states. There was something important that I had to say or do, but always the ideas were like wisps of fog that slipped between my fingers. The elusiveness of these fragments of thought was annoying. That I could not grasp them created a painful anxiety.

My wife solved the problem in two ways. First, I came to bed one night after waking up an hour after our usual bedtime to a program that once caused me to threaten demolition of a television set in a bar if it were not turned off.

"Did you turn off the TV?" made me go back to do so. That was likely the missing idea.

Then, secondly, she has taken over The Chair. Now she falls asleep in her favourite programs, waking to accuse me of changing the channel.

"You've got the clicker," usually limits a pending harangue, though I've noticed an expression of suspicion that I have a second controller hidden somewhere. I can attest that I do not.

So we'll have to blame The Chair, if blame is the word when it works so well to grant a good nap.

John C. Nash ©2022-06-30

Hate Fest

I was visiting a friend in another city. I won't say which, but it is known as having a lively mix of cultures and skin colours, so that every resident is essentially part of several minorities. Sitting at the breakfast table, I happened to look out the window, which was at the front of the house and allowed a view of the roadway, including the street that joined in a T junction. Sleep must still have been clinging to my consciousness, because I was into my second piece of toast when I realized someone had spray painted a swastika on the garage door of the second house in the cross street.

Surprised, I pointed this out to my hostess. For several minutes we mused on whether we should do anything. Call police? Knock on the door of the house and inform them? Our disjointed self-questioning was interrupted by the arrival of a police car, so we returned to our breakfasts.

Later that day, the occupants of the house tried to remove the spray paint, then a while later overpainted the garage door.

The incident did not assume a large space in the day's moods, but that evening as I prepared to sleep, my thoughts returned to it. When I pictured the crudely drawn symbol, I realized the arms of the swastika were pointed so, if they were the exhaust of rockets, it would rotate clockwise. The Nazi and White-Supremacist version went counter-clockwise, and it was positioned so the central cross was at 45 degrees to the vertical and horizontal. This symbol was square to the frame.

So, was it a hate symbol? I suspected yes, intended to leave the occupants feeling threatened, recollecting the beblubbered families of those who perished in the concentration camps of the Third Reich. Nowadays even superficial resemblances to the Nazi symbols are considered enough. The symbols stay around and overtake the actions of their creation, so it is difficult to learn the intent of the wielder of the spray can.

Not that I'd want to confront even a teenage graffiti artist, let alone a beefy marcher with a Confederate Flag or Reichskriegsflagge. Hate is impersonal. It insists on putting people in boxes, in erasing their individual humanity, in rendering them smaller than the symbols of hate.

Such a pity that the more limited the intellect, the stronger the hate.

Based, sadly, on a real incident.

John C. Nash ©2022-07-14

Horse sense

“The horse came back alone?” the policeman asked me.

“Sure did,” I answered. But I’d already told him that three times already. He was clearly an urban kid. And he was pretty young. I suppose he figured horses were dumb animals. True, they don’t say much, but they do communicate if you take the time to watch, feel and listen. And they know where they get their food and water, where they get brushed and petted, where the odd apple or carrot will find its way under their nose.

This horse was called Caramel, mainly because of her colour. She was generally our favourite ride for handicapped kids or people who weren’t too agile. Always good natured, but that was perhaps because we always treated her well.

But last night there’d been a break-in. Someone who thought there was money kept somewhere. Real idiot. First, we don’t make a lot in our business. Second, almost all the finance is done electronically. Third, and last, we know not to leave cash on the premises.

Not finding money, the idiot looked for a way out. He somehow ignored or did not know about our cameras, which we have set up mainly so we can watch if the animals get anxious when we’re not around. So he took our computer. But it’s heavy, so he finds a pair of sacks and some rope, saddles Caramel and ties on the computer and screen, one each side.

Guess Caramel didn’t like him, and balked at leaving. He finds a riding crop and gives her some whacks, and with this persuasion he gets her out of the stable. The cameras don’t show the rest of his journey, but from what the cop says, he took the path round the flood relief pond. At one point the path is real close to the pond, so they’ve put in a railing. Apparently, a resident of one of the large houses that sell for a million plus round there heard a scream and a splash and called 911. Cops found the guy floating in the pond. He was a bit mangled round the mid-section. And dead. Caramel may just have leaned against him where the railing was, and kept it up until he went over.

Like I said, the horse came back alone.

John C. Nash ©2022-07-28

Shoes

“Wipe your feet!”

That used to be a common cry when I was a kid. But it really meant that we should make sure our shoes were clean before coming in the house. I was a kid in a time and place where shoes were worn indoors because floors were cold and stoop and scoop had yet to acquire significance. Dogs did their business wherever. Usually somewhere that you would end up stepping in it.

I know of nobody who mourns the passing of the "dogs can poop anywhere" era, though you sometimes see folk who are being deliberately blind to their dog's activities. Interestingly, shoe-shine operators disappeared too. Haven't seen one for years. And shoe polishing tools and supplies are getting tough to find as well. Outside military-like environments, does anyone actually shine shoes?

Of course, you'd be hard-pressed to figure out how to actually polish some of those fancy sports shoes with multiple materials of different surface textures and maybe flashing lights on them. Ah, reminds me of the time I was in Istanbul in 1966. An American tourist wearing Hush Puppies – those iconic suede shoes with the lovely tan-coloured matte finish – wanted to ask a shoe-shine boy for directions. Miscommunication led to a spirited attempt to render the shoes in high-gloss brown.

That was actually a bit after Boeing and Douglas had a particularly awkward issue with the stilletos worn by the strictly Playboy imaged stewardesses of early jet aviation. Turns out the aluminum sheet metal floors weren't up to the stresses of 120 lb. women with heels at least 3 inches high but only 1/4 inch on each side of the contact face. That's 1920 psi. A 3 ton elephant only presses 150 psi, but might be difficult to get through the door of the 707.

Hmm. How did they wipe their feet when wearing stiletto's after ... ? Well, you get the idea.

Me. I'm for comfortable shoes. Trouble is, I get to like a pair and wear them into various stages of oblivion. In the process I've discovered Clark's actually came up with a really interesting material for soles in the late 1960s. In around 1970 I bought a pair of lace-up black loafers for regular wear. The sole was fairly thin synthetic material. The shoes were nice when weather was fair, but they were too thin for cold weather and didn't get much wear until the 1980s, when I found they were just right for folk dance. Enough

support, but light. Over 40 years later, the sole looks brand new. The upper has been rebuilt once, and restained three times. It is unsurprising that the seemingly indestructible soles no longer seem to be made. A great pity.

John C. Nash ©2022-08-11

Challenge220818

Burning Bridges

Valerie hadn't been in the job very long. She'd finished her degree the year before and had needed to spend a couple of months of search and application before she got this one. It was supposed to be in her field – analytical chemistry. However, it seemed to be more a matter of recording what parcels came in and carrying them down to the lab, or else keeping an inventory of the outgoing reports and occasionally parcels.

When she asked about the samples, she was told simply “Mike takes care of all that. You just take down the parcels.”

The pay was quite good, but the job was mind numbing. Until, one day, a parcel came in with a tear in the side and a bit of white powder showing. She found an envelope and carefully put a small bit of the powder in it, then taped up the tear carefully as if the shippers had done so.

At home – still her parents' home – she had her old high school chemistry equipment. A bright chemist, she found the powder was fentanyl, having suspected that or cocaine. Well, the job would just have to be chalked up to experience. No way was she going to be part of a drug ring.

A few days later, several official vehicles showed up at the office. Three plain clothes and 5 uniforms. They'd warned her they'd be coming, but she had phoned to let them know when the boss was in his office and Mike was in the lab. One of the plain clothes and three uniforms went quietly down to the lab. There were no other employees to warn anyone. Then Valerie knocked on the boss's door.

“Yes!”

She took a deep breath and said to her boss “The police are here to see you.”

John C. Nash ©2022-08-18

Out of the archive

They say everyone who looks into their family history will find a secret sooner or later. Except, if you find it, is it a secret?

In the beginning of 2019 the Library and Archives Canada released the war records of Canadian servicemen of World War 1. My maternal grandfather and three of his brothers, plus one cousin, all volunteered. The cousin fell off the back of a bus in London and was discharged before he got to the fighting. Lucky Harry. The eldest brother, Charlie, did not survive the latter part of the Battle of the Somme, being killed in the late summer of 1916. Jack and Sam were both injured by poison gas, but made it home. I remember both as friendly, gregarious Westerners, one a farmer, the other a hotel operator.

My grandfather was the sober one. A distant cousin, George Roberts, was a child at the time of WW1. His father died in the fighting, and he said later it affected him greatly. As a kid, he carried my great-grandfather's mason's tools to build the cairn for the Jubilee of Treaty Seven. It's still there on the prairie near Gleichen Alberta, but it has been vandalized and the plaque is gone, or was last time I saw it.

My grandfather George is described in the Gleichen Call of the 1910s as a cheerful, active young man who played soccer, ran the beer warehouse, and liked to party. But George Roberts, the young tool carrier, called him a sourpuss.

The reason may be in the war records. We'd already got 4 pages and thought that was it. In early 2019, we found a total of 48 pages. And we found that he'd spent a good deal of his time in France in hospital. The first big issue was trench fever, a lovely little infection that almost never killed anyone but made them wish they were dead. Fevers, called PYO or Pyorrhea of Unknown Origin, and excruciating leg pains. Near the end of the war, it was determined that trench fever was due to a bacterium from the stomach of body lice. Lovely.

Then after some time in the Convalescent Hospital at Etaples, he suddenly got transferred to the General Hospital in Rouen. Diagnosis, VDG, that is, the clap. And he suffered the financial pain of hospital stoppage for 68 days of no pay, as this was considered a self-inflicted disease. He may even have deliberately sought out the infection to avoid a return to the trenches, because George was probably the most correct and righteous man I've ever

known, without, however, being stuffy about it. He got out of hospital in time for the battle of Moreuil Wood, where he got a gunshot wound to the chest. Then 2 periods in hospital for influenza, and finally an assignment to Camp Kimmel in Wales, which he fortunately missed because the Canadian men there mutinied on account of bad food and no coal for heat, with 5 deaths in the riots.

So in searching family history, I guess I dug up a bunch of things I didn't know. But were they really secrets, or just things we'd not taken the time and trouble to ask about?

John C. Nash ©2022-05-10

Uppity immigrants

A few years ago I got an invite to the centenary of my old high school. It was one of the first to start operating in the prairie city I grew up in, and in the 1960s a sizeable proportion of the students were immigrants. After World War II, and particularly when the Suez crisis reminded folk of that conflict, there were lots of Europeans who decided to try life in Canada, and particularly in the West. The Dutch, Hungarians and Italians made up noticeable groups, but there were lots of Brits too. Having plenty of family already there, I was neither fish nor fowl, falling in the cracks between genuine Canadian and bona-fide immigrant, though I think the true locals took me for a newcomer.

Given the connections as well as a father who was perpetually entrepreneurial, we were probably better off than most other newcomers. Still, there was no escape from the strong and unequivocal message that it was important to do well at school. The reason for the message, if one was needed, was that Dad had missed university because he had to serve in the RAF. The message was absorbed day by day like some emollient used to keep skin from cracking due to the dry air and blackboard chalk. My brother and I did well because the alternative was unimaginable. We ended up with doctorates in mathematical subjects at Stanford and Oxford respectively.

Similarly, there was a kid I'll call Lazlo. His parents had lost everything, including the family castle. They lived in a very modest house, and when I went to do homework with Lazlo, I was shocked that the living room had only two pieces of furniture. But between the two of us, we took the top marks in nearly all the subjects. He got a doctorate from Harvard.

At the high school reunion, I met up with a number of my cronies from the years I was there. Most had done moderately well. One or two had not. For example, I learned of a former debating partner, very bright but volatile, who got enamoured of the hippy culture in Vancouver. Under the influence of LSD he thought he could fly off the top of a building. I hoped that one or two others who had drifted into obscurity merely chose to drop their connections to the past.

On the other hand, one man who was, I recall, less than stellar academically had become a society physician. Somehow the relatively straightforward teenager I recalled had evolved the smooth and polished mannerisms that would sooth the most anxious oil-baron's wife into a little expensive

plastic surgery.

I was seated next to the sister of a fellow with whom I'd spent many teenage hours flying control-line model airplanes. She was in a long flowing gown which seemed to totally clash with her professed trade of heavy equipment operator. We caught up on lives lived – my former friend could not come to the reunion for some reason – but somehow never have got in touch despite the information exchanged.

As I was about to leave the event, I nearly collided with a solidly built lady of about my own middle years. She noticed my name tag and read it out as if it had multiple exclamation marks following my name. I read hers, and realized we had been in the same school for the last six years before university. She had been a quite solidly built girl, but had filled out even more with the years. A friend says it isn't middle-aged spread, it's just middle spread. I tried not to take too much notice.

“Where are you now?”

“What are you up to these days?”

Each of us gave an abbreviated account of our lives. Then she said “We used think you and Lazlo were real geniuses getting the top marks you did. But in the last few years I've been back upgrading my qualifications, and now I know it was just sheer bloody hard work and sticking to it.”

Yes. That was it, and it was good to know that the reality had been recognized. The success of immigrants generally has been noted. The source and processes of that success much less so.

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Just Ice

Mr. Grootekopf liked being the boss. It gave him a sense of importance to be able to tell somebody to do something and have it done. Being bossy was, in fact, his only link, and as very weak link at that, to the hierarchy of human society. Probably he would have been shown the door long before but he was the stepson of the owner who wanted a quiet home life, even if he did his business no favour.

Being bossy does not, of course, mean you are any good at being a boss. One very effective manager I once heard of led a team of software engineers that had a critical deadline to meet but suffered a bad wave of flu. The manager, a rather unassuming woman of middle years, made chicken soup and brought it to one of her best programmers who was working at home while trying to recuperate. The programmer commented “The boss doesn’t usually bring soup to the worker.”

The manager replied, “The manager’s job is to do anything necessary to make it possible for the workers to get the job done efficiently and effectively.”

Smart lady.

Unlike, of course, our Mr. G. One of his particularly annoying habits was to pester his secretary for cold drinks. Actually his secretaries – plural – because they resigned rather frequently.

“There’s not enough ice!”

“This is almost lukewarm. Bring me a cold one.”

And so on.

Then a new gal was sent to work for him from the pool. She’d been round the block a few times and dealt with guys like Mr. G. By day 3 of her tenure she had all the cold drinks stored in the freezer. When Mr. G. asked for a cold drink, she brought one out.

Mr G. blew up. “Mrs Steel, this is solid. It’s just ice.”

“Yes, sir. You wanted it cold. You have a reputation for wanting very cold drinks, so I made sure that they are all very cold. I’ve taken the liberty of making a sign for the refrigerator to remind staff of this. The only problem I’m having is that the spell-checker keeps taking the space out from between Just and Ice.”

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A Road from Wigan Pier

It's been seven years since that weird conversation with my sister about dealing with homelessness. I'd been with my wife in Victoria for February to get away from icy sidewalks in most of the rest of Canada. While there, there'd been a rash of window breakings downtown. We were staying not far from the Public Library, which had about seven large panes smashed – 5 foot by 7 ones. One range that was two stories high had three in a row smashed.

The police said they knew who was doing it, but didn't seem to be able to stop them. A lot of homeless people didn't care if they got a warm cell for the night, and many were mentally ill, on drugs, or both.

We also noticed many properties with big For Lease signs. Before I retired, I did a lot of optimization work – operational research. My thoughts kept wandering to calculations of how many 6 foot by 8 cubicles could be fitted in each property. They already had toilets. Could a kit form of showers be created that could be set up easily and taken down again for reuse? Same reuse setup for the cubicles?

Other activities and concerns intervened, including flying home in a time when flight cancellations and lost luggage were much in the news. My youngest sister lives near a big prairie city. A few days after we got home, I phoned to catch up, and mentioned the glass breaking in Victoria. She said “Look at all the For Lease signs. It's got to be cheaper to set up partitions and create shelter for the homeless so they have an address.”

It was like we were playing Snap as kids. We laughed a bit about the coincidence, talked about our ageing Mom, made informal arrangements to video call with our other siblings, and so on. Regarding kits to create pop-up shelter, I didn't do more than daydream a little, and gave the conversation no serious thought until about three years after.

At that point there was a news item. Turned out baby sister had a friend in the trailer and RV business. With climate change on the agenda, big RVs that did a mile per gallon and attracted \$120 per night parking fees were a declining industry, but a lot of the manufacturing infrastructure for kit shelter was the same.

The TV reporters were busy showing off the 2-day transformation of a big box store that failed in trying to sell \$500 sweaters into a 75 person residence. The calculations were that this would save the city three times its cost in police and ambulance services. That was a shade rosy, at least in

direct dollar costs – some of the homeless were awkward customers. You can't really expect the insane to be nice neighbours in a high capacity residence.

On the other hand, the model really did help, in particular a lot of single-mom and three kids cases. When pop-up residences for them got started, the residents formed kitchen teams and figured ways to pool resources so they ate better. They created coop daycare, of course getting into all sorts of fights with the do-gooders who wanted them to hire accredited early education specialists. A constitutional lawyer sued the daycare regulators on about fifty different constitutional, discrimination, racism, sexism and probably sartorial issues. That led the regulators to withdraw their objections, and nothing ever got to court. The coop daycare, which was of course just parents sharing the task as they have done from time immemorial, was left alone.

We're now seeing variants of this model in assorted places. I've set up a website to let people estimate the costs and break-even point. Seems that less than a 9-month lease is too short. The fixed costs of setup, takedown and runaround mean you need at least that duration to get some payback. There's also the unseen costs in all the address changes for the residents. In fact, I've seen analysis that it is having an address that gives the formerly homeless a huge step up in getting their lives back in order. Without the address, they can't get benefits, nor treatment for illnesses, particularly substance abuse. Hell, they can't get rid of fleas and lice as well as dirt and smell.

The title above, you ask? Well it's getting close to a hundred years since George Orwell published *The Road to Wigan Pier*. It happened that I was walking by one of the pop-up residences the other week and a guy was sitting on a bench out front reading a tattered copy of it.

"Interesting choice," I commented.

"My abode is the road away from Wigan Pier," the man replied, with an air of quiet dignity.

John C. Nash ©2023-03-23



Retro Fake

Every age looks back on some other with fond nostalgia. It's generally good for business, as long as a tudor themed restaurant doesn't include lice, fleas and their rodent transports.

I tend to run away when I see signs with words having supposedly antiquated spellings like "olde" and "shoppe" with extra letters and a final E. Were those words ever genuinely used? Rough hewn beams for ceilings definitely were real in their day, but the artificial ones today are easier to obtain than real ones, even if you could afford them.

Historically themed festivals are big business. Supposedly they recapture a period – medieval chivalry, Elizabethan drama, or Regency splendor – but when staff recite lines containing "yon charging outlet" it spoils the effect. Festival visitors don't really want to obtain a faithful experience of another age, of course. They want the fantasy of the glamour and excitement of an imagined world that they've read of in romance novels or watched in Hollywood bodice-rippers. The stories they consume avidly, of course, are as genuine as a three-dollar bill.

Thus it was with some trepidation that I allowed myself to be dragged along to the conference dinner of a computational symposium where I was an invited speaker, since it was being held in a large restaurant with a renaissance theme. How do you establish a renaissance theme? Well, it seems buxom waitresses in low cut costumes are one essential element. A lute-playing minstrel singing awkward ballads with faux-Shakesperian lyrics is another. These employees often do double duty pretending to be theatrical players, a meta role in playing actors.

Most of the furniture will be overly heavy or overly rustic. The renaissance had skilled craftsmen, but emulating their work would be far too costly for a catering enterprise to consider. The washrooms are, of course, anachronistic. The renaissance did not have them.

The food at the conference dinner was excellent, but of course it wasn't renaissance. Then the upper classes would have eaten lots of meat of types awkward to obtain, as well as fish, some varieties of which are still available, others not. But the preparation would have been different. More boiled stuff, which we don't much like today. And potatoes were still to arrive as a commodity. No "Would your majesty be desirous of fries with that?" And of course the gruel and pottage of the lower classes is going to be a risky

offering for folk used to the rubber chicken circuit. And our modern chickens have been re-engineered to have lots of white meat. We don't see the tired egg-layers, our pets get them out of a can.

So my cynicism was set to maximum as we were ushered into the simulated dining hall of the pretend renaissance mansion-house. I was late entering the room, having decided that a visit to a modern washroom is a sensible prologue to any meal. There were not many seats free and I saw one at the end of a 12-person table where there were six stools to a side. My neighbour was a woman of middle years, possibly half a decade or so younger than myself. We traded names, as it was not easy to read our tags since we were sitting side by side.

"No portraits of Christopher Wren or Admiral Blake to give the place some authenticity," she said, with an air that showed she shared my skepticism.

"The dining hall of Wadham?" I responded.

"Indeed. You know it?"

"Sir Christopher once had potato and gravy varnish during a food fight."

"Ah. I must have missed that occasion or one like it." She gave a span of 4 years that did not overlap my own sojourn there.

From then on, we enjoyed modern food, decent wine, and conversed about places where there were genuine renaissance artifacts. Where, to distort the title of a book about the surroundings, the ruins are inhabited. Except that they are not ruins, but well-maintained working infrastructure of a modern institution living in an ancient shell. A young and vigorous hermit crab in an old tin can.

That evening, despite the cheap, gaudy frippery, two people shared a love affair with a real renaissance festival that has been going for several centuries.

John C. Nash ©2023-03-29

Artificial Social Intelligence

It's only been two decades, but kids today have no real understanding that we used to spend a lot of our lives with what was called *social media*.

Actually, it wasn't social – generally it was nasty and criminal. Rumours spread about politicians and businesses, or else false glowing reviews. Restaurants hired companies to puff up their image. So did the renovation racketeers. Pay us a deposit and we'll show you how quickly we can disappear. All that sort of stuff.

And even the innocuous stuff was pretty unpleasant. People commenting on their boring lives, sending overly personal messages to so-called, likely imaginary, friends then hanging onto their phone or tablet hoping for a meaningful reply.

“Press F1 to have your bank account emptied artistically.”

Well, perhaps that's an exaggeration.

Then along came the AI revolution. Artificial Intelligence. Or maybe not so artificial. ChatGBT got folk excited. Then the big social media players realized AI-bots could be used to poison the services their rivals offered. And do it really, really well. Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and a whole bunch of others set up a net-war. There were AI attack bots to go after each others' platforms. Then to confuse the issues fake attack bots to get the defences to react. Then fake-fake-bots etc.

Interestingly, because AI was on powerful computers, the whole war – the big battle, that is – lasted just 3 hours 11 minutes and 23 seconds. There was a stock market panic, of course, and a few suicides. Elon Musk had to get a job in his own SpaceX plant to have money to buy groceries.

The biggest hit was on pension plans, and eventually governments took those over and offered folk 50 percent or a tribunal to evaluate their right to more, but the tribunal got 2 staffers and one part-time adjudicator in Canada. Of course, there was a lot of dislocation, but once the dust settled, folk realized that farms still could grow crops and support livestock. And prices went back to mid-1960s levels. Real stuff still worked.

Private internet communications resumed after a few months, but in the meantime, people got used to using landline phones again. There was a big run on getting those reconnected, and some people made a good deal of money by setting up a kiosk on their front porch and charging a buck a call. Five minutes tops. That didn't last too long. New protocols that avoided

riding on the same ones social media had used were introduced and things gradually settled, but more like the old time dial-up phones.

The big winner? The post office. People went back to actually writing stuff down and sending it in envelopes. A friend of mine became rich because he had been running a small speciality business in fountain pens. He had a contact in Taiwan that was still making them, along with a huge collection his wife was agitating for him to ship to the dump.

Go figure.

What happened to AI? Well, someone set up a compute-farm to seek and destroy AI centers. A few fires in those funny windowless buildings you used to see. During the attacks, the bots even turned off the sprinklers in some of the compute farms – the sprinklers that some fool made digital rather than the old "melt the plug" type. Saved cities the job of demolition orders. The sites became new public housing communities.

Maybe that's the social legacy of social media.

John C. Nash ©2023-04-15

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Cosmology

It was starting to end after what seemed most of eternity to me. Well, perhaps that was backwards. It would seem most of eternity to the people I'd left behind on earth.

What "it" was, of course, was not clear to any observer, either sentient or robotic. However, the consensus was that "it" was a physical process that transmuted neutrons into a spectrum of objects having a variety of properties. This consensus was collected by the oracle, a rather large artificial intelligence computer system situated near the mean spatial and temporal coordinates,

The process was ending because the blob of neutrons that had been ejected in the near collision of no less than three black holes was now almost exhausted. The shower of objects resulting – they used to be called elementary particles – were now well distributed across the universe. Some were even tachyons – faster than light particles.

Of course, "now" is a slippery concept too. The black holes had managed to slingshot my space vehicle to within a few billionths of c , the speed of light, so I thought I was 69 years old, having left earth on May 31, 2081. However, the relativistic slowdown for me meant all calendars on earth had expired when I passed what I considered my 60th birthday. I knew this, but it had no reality for me.

Moreover, even if I could appreciate projective transformations, my mind still worked with affine ones. That is, all movements in my mind preserved parallel lines and angles. Amazing that one could work with concepts and compute with them, use them to predict what would happen, but still not consider them real.

It seemed that the consensus had an acceptable model of the process. Pity there was such a limited opportunity to share the knowledge. Oh, well, it had been interesting learning about it. And along the way we'd caught a glimpse of a collision of two tachyons, resulting in a time stasis. Literally time standing still. Just like at the beginning. The moment of the big bang, a moment for which there is no "before", only times "after".

John C. Nash ©2023-04-27

chal230518

Present

"Present" was the only accepted response to the teacher's recitation of the attendance register when I was in elementary school. That was in the UK. I was likely 6 or 7. Attendance didn't seem to be taken by role call in the first couple of years.

This ritual each morning was neither upsetting nor truly comfortable. Initially I did not understand that "present" did not mean something you got as a gift at Christmas or on your birthday. The temptation was to say "here" or "yes", but a couple of strongly worded statements that "present" was the ONLY acceptable response other than silence soon stifled those obvious choices.

It did not occur to me until years later that the option of silence could have been extremely interesting. What was the school policy on a choice to NOT respond? I suspected that it would be unpleasant. In that era, the cane was still extant as a means of punishment, no longer on the buttocks but still across the hands.

Another meaning of present – the current instant in time – was likely not known to me at the age I first encountered the role call. However, when you are young, time exists as a flow in which you swim, not as a concept or a dimension. So I dutifully responded "present" whenever my name was called. Fortunately, I was the only person in the class with my surname. Others would get "Smith, J" rather than "Smith, V". Later we had twins in the class, Martin and Michael. The teacher then had to actually call out their given names. That almost seemed like a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions for the teacher.

Surprisingly, I remember very little of the three years when I attended a school with this form of role call apart from that ritual and its associations. For their sins of imposition, the teachers did have to suffer the vocal gymnastics of Czech and Polish refugees from the encroaching communist wave. Nominally the attendance went to the school office and unexcused absence led to investigation by that nemesis of slackers, the Truant Officer. This official was well-known by reputation, but otherwise had never been seen. Nobody had heard his voice, though few private residences had telephones, so that would not have been a mode of action to bring wayward pupils – not students then – to obedience to the strict requirement of being in the

classroom when their name was called.

So nominally I was "present" for those years, possibly missing only a few days due to the many illnesses that afflicted children then before vaccines for measles, mumps, rubella and a few other nasties were common.

My lack of memory of the classes speaks, in contrast, to the probability that my mind was, of course, far from present.

John C. Nash ©2022-08-18

chal230608

Spider threads caught at her face, a sign that no-one had been there yet. She said “Joe. With all these spider threads, there’s been nobody here for at least two decades.”

“Yeah. Really thick. And I hate ’em. They get in my hair and eyebrows.”

“Well. We’ll just see if we can find Catchpole’s gold and get out of here.”

“You’ve got the diagram,” Joe said. “I printed it for you with a thick blue line at the top so you can orient yourself in this chamber.”

“Yes, I’m holding it so that’s at the top, and facing the direction we came in. The niche with the casket of gold should be about 3 metres in front of us.”

“What’d you say your name was?” Joe asked.

“Diamanta. My parents loved all things luxury. But I’ve had to become a treasure hunter to keep up with their expectations.”

She pushed through another curtain of sticky threads, wiping the blob of silky gum onto a nearby projection from the wall.

“Eugh. I hate getting my hands dirty. And having to get kitted out without jewellery so it doesn’t catch on things.”

Joe didn’t answer. He knew that it was only a matter of time until Diamanta discovered the gold.

“I found it,” she yelled.

There was a click. Almost unheard. Then a voice said “Thanks Joe. This one’s fatter than the last. Should hold me for about 8 months.”

“Send me an email when you’re hungry, Spider.” Joe said. “And don’t forget my e-transfer. In US dollars, please.”

Evocation

The seminar was titled "Evocative Writing". Since I had rarely viewed my own writings as trying to be evocative, the title had a magnetism, though I was unsure how the seminar leader, Amanda, would carry the subject forward. In the event, this uncertainty was blown away by a cyclone of strong but friendly reactions of the audience.

The aftermath of a cyclone is always a period of sweeping up the debris, mopping up the floods, and putting things back in order. But, of course, not everything can ever be put back quite as it was. Cyclones uncover what was previously covered, and bury what may have been obvious.

Rattling about in the back of mind like a guitar riff from a long discarded vinyl '45, a strange memory emerged. Some memories begin a cycle, an iteration, spiralling fragments of recollection back to some center, some conclusion or resolution. Iteration is the core of many computer algorithms, and one hopes that they have a point of convergence. The particular memory that jumped up from considering the word "evocative", however, was a quick jump to the middle of the 20th century. It was like a computer program that made a control transfer into a part of storage it should not have and stopped on a termination condition. Algorithms converge, programs stop.

Thinking of "evocative" triggered recall of a momentary smell, sensed on the platform of Tonbridge Railway Station in 2010. Somewhere, on the cool English Spring day, someone near the railway had a coal fire. Coal smoke, particularly from anthracite, has its own odour, not as dry and rasping as the wood smoke of a log or forest fire. In my own mind, a smell that should be but is not sweet. Flooding back came images, smells and sounds that had not been part of British railway stations for fifty years. The termination condition of that headlong process was the limit of earliest memories. You don't step backward in time in smaller and smaller steps. You jump around until there's the void of pre-existence.

The coal smoke in the air had jumped me back to a point in time before which I have no memories, because I associate coal smoke with steam locomotives and household heating. Trains – especially what I knew as engines – were an obsession before I reached the age of three. My mother spent more thru'penny bits on platform tickets than she likely should have, simply as an expedient to avoid whatever uproar denial would have instigated.

Frightening and fascinating, the engines were black and sooty monsters

noisy with the roar of the firebox and prone to sudden pops and swooshes of steam when a pressure valve released. Better still was when the guard waved his green flag and blew his whistle. At the time the guards were universally male with the post-war banishment of the "for the duration" female replacements. The last open doors would bang shut. Then there would be a sound of steam in pipes, a slow, almost imperceptible at first, motion of the connecting rods, and then the whoosh of the steam blast up the funnel as the train started its departure. As carriages passed, the essential clickety clack of the wheels on rail joints would begin, now unheard with welded rails except when junction points or expansion fittings are encountered. No doubt that would be a chance for my mother to pull me away and onward to our day's contingencies, of which I have no recollections.

Spinning out of these thoughts came the wondering about the fascination of seemingly all small boys for trains. A woman my age once admitted she had requested and received a train set as a present when a child, later recognizing her distance from the gender norms of her era. Moreover, she did not experience that quiet, lifelong addiction to watching trains, the furtive detours to be where they will pass, the choice of vantage point where they will come into view.

All this from a whiff of smoke.

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