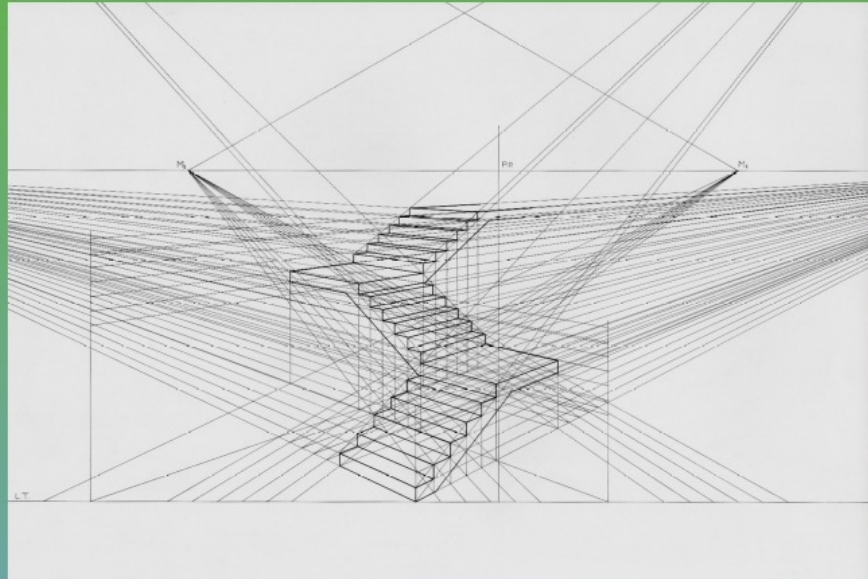


Different Perspectives



John C. Nash

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Different Perspectives is an ongoing collection of works of fiction and memoirs.

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John Nash Ottawa, 2015

Dance Etiquette

This is a true story. Like many true stories, it may be more unlikely than many fictional ones.

At the end of summer in 1980, I was one of the representatives to Amnesty International's International Council in Vienna. My role was to participate in that least-popular of volunteer jobs, that of financial planning and administration, known as Working Party D.

We were well received in Vienna, with Chancellor Bruno Kreisky giving us a welcome address. Near the end of the 4-day meeting, there was a formal dinner in the Rathaus, in a large room I suspect the ordinary tourist does not get to see. It had an intricate parquet floor in multiple woods, with wall sculptures adorned with gold leaf. Waiters in tuxedos served us. We were seated at large round tables, 10 at each table. Somehow I was seated between a very tall English woman – possibly over 2 metres – likely in her thirties as I was at the time, and an Indian gentleman in his later middle years. He informed us that he used to be a non-vegetarian but had given this up.

I chatted mostly with the Indian gentleman as I recall. The English lady, who was assisting the meeting with simultaneous translation, did not seem inclined to conversation. As we were finishing our dessert, a Strauss waltz filled the room. Somehow a 13 piece orchestra had set up, out of sight of our table. Almost immediately, six of our table mates stood and went to the dance floor, leaving just one lady seated opposite me at the distant side of the table along with me and my two neighbours.

All my life I have danced. I turned to the English lady and asked if she would care to do so. With great formality, and from on high, she informed me 'I don't dance, on principle.' It later occurred to me that, being involved with languages, she was using a dialect of English where 'on principle' has the silent ending 'with short men'. I am somewhat shy of 5 feet 6 inches, and will allow those well-versed in metric-Imperial conversion to compute the difference in our heights.

The lady opposite was looking very lonely. She was wearing an interesting dress of a style that was not current, but of obvious good quality. I got up and walked around the table. My 'Would you like to dance', was greeted with a huge smile and a 'Yes'.

We threaded our way between the tables to the floor and started dancing to the lively tempo of the Strauss music. My partner was of similar

height and age to myself. I learned later that she was a physician starting her career, Finnish by nationality, but who was from the Swedish speaking minority and who had a German name. She has since become a very senior representative of her country on medical issues. The dress was of silk and had been acquired by her grandmother in the early 1930s. However, almost as we started dancing, I realized that I had a delicate issue of etiquette. The waltz requires a couple to remain connected. My partner was, in the older idiom, buxom. Moreover, 1980 was a high point in the more demonstrative phase of the Women's Liberation Movement. As the strong beat of the music drove us around the floor, it was obvious that my partner did not employ what a friend of my wife calls 'members of the supporting cast'.

As we danced, there was a very regular and periodic body contact, which was disconcerting for me and possibly uncomfortable for my new friend. Now a busy dance floor is not the place for a long discussion of how to resolve such matters. I quickly surmised that I had the option of either holding the lady more loosely or more closely. The former might suggest that I regretted asking her and wanted to get away. It would also make it awkward to execute a reasonable facsimile of a Strauss waltz. Pulling her closer could be construed as an unwanted advance. Nevertheless, I felt it worth the risk, put a bit more pressure on the hand in her back and asked 'Is that more comfortable?' as we now swirled more fluidly across the wonderful wooden floor under brilliant chandeliers and the vacant gaze of golden angels and cherubs.

The answer I received remains a source of questions about her command of English and of Scandinavian forthrightness, for she replied "It is stimulating, but I like it!"

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Sample Space

When I was in my final undergraduate year of a Chemistry degree, I was hired by a couple of the profs to carry out some programming and other computing for them. I was good enough at this that I was granted a sort of cubby hole at the back of the office cum lab area with a small table and a chair and a coat hook. It was nice to have a place to put my coat and lunch, and sometimes to be able to nap when there was a long gap between classes.

The office was in the basement of the oldest science building on campus, and nearby down the corridor were a few of the original labs that had been set up in the late 1950s when the university started as a satellite campus of the University of Alberta. One of these held the Electron Spin Resonance spectrometer – essentially a huge magnet and some microwave tubing called wave-guide. The coffee pot was in this lab for some reason.

If there were a new graduate student, he or, very occasionally in those days, she would be invited for coffee. At some point, one of the regulars would suggest that we follow our tradition and that the new person got to call a coin toss. If they won, we bought them a donut or pastry. If they lost, they bought a half dozen for the rest.

People like to belong, so the answer was almost always yes. It wasn't "cool" to be an outsider – a slang term that had been in use since jazz musicians started using it in the 30s and 40s. And, in those days of the mid-60s, losing the toss would cost less than 50 cents.

So the promoter of the scheme would, on acceptance of the scheme, ask the newcomer to make their call. The victim would say "heads" or "tails", which didn't really matter, because the promoter, having made sure the coin in hand was a nickel, would spin it towards the magnet, calling "Edge".

The field lines of the magnet almost invariably aligned the coin so it attached itself to one of the pole pieces with a satisfying thunk. "Edge" was a highly likely outcome. In fact, I later tried this myself. Unfortunately, when I retrieved the nickel, I happened to be wearing my Timex watch – the brand of the proletariat at the time. Later that day, I noticed my watch had stopped. When I got home, I took out my watchmakers screwdrivers and opened the back. Some of the normally flat gears – made of stamped steel rather than machined brass to keep the price low – were now U shaped thanks to the strength of the magnetic field between the poles of the large magnet.

J C Nash ©2016-11-25

The Last Gospel

Several decades ago I was the junior resident at a large general hospital, the only woman on a medical ward rotation. As such, I had to serve a number of "forty-eights", shifts where we were on 12 hours, then on call for 12, twice in a row. We had a room with a cot. Generally I didn't get out of my clothes for the full time. My male colleagues had no idea of, nor likely any sympathy with, my discomfort at certain times of the month.

We used to get a number – I won't say a lot, but enough to notice – of patients from old-folks homes. That's what we called them then, pre-euphemism. The homes didn't like to have people die there. We joked that they paid the ambulances to park close by so they could pick up anyone who was close to the end and race them off to us with sirens blaring.

This meant we had patients arriving with a poor prognosis, often unconscious, whose background and history we didn't know, and with whom we had no personal connection. Their friends were often back at the home without easy transport or the mobility to use it, so they died essentially alone.

One winter night, not far from Christmas, I was near the end of a forty-eight when I checked on one such patient. We'll call her Betty Baker. She was in a coma, having suffered a stroke on top of some other serious ailments. As I recorded her vital signs on the chart, I knew she had no more than a half-hour of life remaining.

The ward was quiet, and the room of which she was currently the sole occupant was only dimly lit. I took a chair to the hallway and sat just outside the door where I could easily see her, then took out a book I carried in my white coat pocket. I had found reading a way to keep awake when I knew I'd have to do something shortly, and it helped me escape for a while the tension of the job.

I read for maybe 20 minutes, then got up to check on my patient. She'd gone. At least, that's how we view death. The soul or spirit departing at the last breath. Having worked with the elderly for many years, that isn't my view. Dementia lets the spirit drip away bit by bit, every droplet diminishing the life force of the person others love and cherish. I'm not religious, at most an agnostic, though in my youth, I'd gone to church quite regularly, and knew a lot of the liturgy. But in my line of work I see, feel, and know spirit when I encounter it in my patients. And, sadly, I know its absence. Still,

I didn't begrudge Mrs. Baker my presence, albeit outside the door but still alert should she have stirred and needed comfort.

After I completed the chart, noting time of death, I turned off the oxygen and removed the tubes. Then I closed Mrs. Baker's mouth that was a little open, and pulled up the sheet. I took the chart to the nursing station where Jackie was sorting some medications.

"Mrs. Baker died." I said.

"Yes. I saw you there reading. Wasn't that a bit angel of death-like? Or vulture-ish."

I hadn't thought of it like that. It certainly wasn't my intention or understanding. Death generally doesn't frighten me, and a death like this not even in a minor way. But I find it uncomfortable to sit beside someone dying when I don't know them. On the other hand, I couldn't just leave Mrs. Baker and go and do some other things, leaving her unattended if she were to regain consciousness or otherwise be distressed.

Anything I said to Jackie would seem like an excuse. So I simply said

"There was nothing more we could do for her except be nearby in case she became distressed. Think of my reading as the Last Gospel."

J C Nash ©2016-12-17

The Floor

Floor: (noun) “the lower surface of a room, on which one may walk”.

True, but on a floor one may also lie, crawl, jump, play, slither, dance.

In English, I’m essentially an indoor element. In other languages, the word for floor can mean the soil, the ground, or similar ideas. But I like to be indoors, out of the cold.

I can support carpeting, furniture, bric-a-brac, junk, pets, crumbs. But as a bare floor I’m a realm of possibility, of random chance.

There are always rules. Sensible rules with obvious reasoning. Silly rules of unfathomable origin.

“No street shoes. You’ll scratch the floor.”

“No bare feet. You’ll leave footprints on the polished surface.”

I’m best when I’m made of wood, supported on good underfloor with strong but flexible cross-supports and solid beams. The true craftsman will hammer horse hair between the beams and the cross supports and give me spring. When I’m asphalt and asbestos tile on concrete, ankles and knees are soon tired and possibly injured.

That is my physical manifestation. But there is much more.

In a school auditorium, when used for a dance for adolescents I am covered deeply with palpable but invisible emotions. Shyness, wishfulness, hopefulness, desire, anguish, rejection, and most of all, clumsiness. Decades on, I’m suffocating under nostalgia, regret, and embarrassment when there is a reunion.

Most frequently I’m empty and dark, waiting for someone – is it you? – to help me make new hope, new life, and a new chance.

J C Nash ©2017-02-16

Arithmetic

When I was a graduate student in England at the end of the 1960s, I decided to take 10 days in Paris. I'd never been there. In the late Spring of 1968, there had been a near revolution, but the Gaullists won a large majority in the subsequent election, despite the general dissatisfaction with the old general himself. By early September 1969, tourists were again safe, or as safe as they usually were in Paris.

College acquaintances suggested the Hotel Marignon, a small hotel on the Rive Gauche. Cheap, small rooms, with a sink and bidet. Toilet down the hall. Hallway and staircase light switches that were on excruciatingly short timers. Breakfast – slices of baguette, butter, jam, coffee or tea – was included. The clientele was largely, like me, in their early 20s, and seemed to be from all over the world, with a strong representation from the USA and Canada, many doing the modern equivalent of the Grand Tour, and all studying **Europe on \$5 a Day** as if rereading it would encourage local prices to decrease.

I was on my own. On my first day, I mostly walked to familiarize myself with the geography. I took the Metro to learn how it functioned. While I had a map booklet that included bus routes, I decided my French was not up to negotiating the fare. Metro or foot would be my ways of getting about.

In the evening I found a small restaurant with an inexpensive "menu touristique" and learned that the vaunted French cuisine could use fancy names for indifferent food. Over nearly half a century, I have often wondered how English restaurants are so disparaged compared to their inferior French counterparts, at least at the economy end of the market. Truthfully, I seemingly had plenty of money in comparison to others at the hotel. My scholarship was adequate, and I have always been careful with money. Probably too careful as a result of family exigencies when I was small. I could and should have found a better meal at a slightly higher price.

After my unsatisfactory meal, my tired feet did not encourage further exploration, so I retired early with a book and fell asleep early on the narrow, slightly lumpy bed.

The next morning, the breakfast room was quite busy. I took the last small table, which had two chairs. Soon after my coffee arrived, a petite woman, likely in her late 20s came in the room. She was rather conservatively dressed in a skirt with matching jacket, almost like a woman's suit. Seeing

only one empty chair, she approached and asked, in English with an eastern European accent,

“Is that seat taken?”

“Please!” I gestured.

“Thank you” she said. “My name is Judit.”

“Chris”, I replied. “I take it you’re not French?”

“No. Hungarian. On my way home from a year in England doing a Master’s degree in English literature.”

“I’m a graduate student in England too. Working on my doctorate in computation.”

We soon established that we had been studying in the same geographical area at sister institutions, and compared notes on how we liked England for study. She had enjoyed her time, but was on a UK scholarship that left very little room for pursuing anything extracurricular. She mentioned that she had saved furiously and done some no-work-permit bartending to save for 5 nights in Paris.

The simple petite dejeuner had by now disappeared. With a sort of urgency, Judit asked “Are you here alone?”

I nodded.

“And are you sightseeing?”

“Yes. I’m playing tourist.”

“Could we do so together? Last night I wanted a coffee – a real coffee, not what you get in England – so I went to a cafe and sat watching the crowd on the street. It was very nice until a man came up to me. He thought I was a prostitute. It was ... unpleasant.”

“Oh dear. Yes. Of course we can sightsee together as long as our plans more or less agree. I’m here for 8 more nights, so I can do anything that doesn’t interest you after you’re gone. And I know that I’d welcome company for at least some of the time.”

That’s how we started out. We agreed to meet in the lounge – a tiny area near the front desk with 2 chairs and a coffee table – at 9:30 to plan what we would do. Judit had a long list of places she wanted to go, annotated with prices and when there was free or reduced admission. She cautioned that she could only afford inexpensive restaurants, but would not be offended if I chose to eat in better-class ones. Very soon it became clear that she was committed to an ideology that likely was embarrassingly strict compared to the rulers of Hungary at that time. She would pay her way, down to the centime.

Remember, this was very much the middle of the Cold War. Communism, I now realize, has many meanings, but the most common one is as a sticky label to affix to people someone wants to hail or denounce.

Our arrangement turned out very much to my benefit. Judit knew a lot about European history, which was embarrassingly absent from the Canadian curriculum. I had a private guide. We found a supermarket – Monoprix – not far from the hotel and were able to get the makings of a picnic for lunch. We ate frugally in a student cafeteria in the evening. Apart from the accents, one could have been in any student cafeteria. There must be an international conglomerate supplying the tasteless food.

My knowledge of Hungary was almost non-existent. But then Judit knew little of Canada. The Hungarians I knew came to Canada either right after World War II or else after the uprising in 1956. I mentioned one of my school buddies to Judit by name. She reacted quickly, “But he’s a count.”

“I think he did tell me that. But they lived much less well than my family, and we were pretty ordinary. His father had fought on the Eastern Front against the Russians.”

“Yes. Hungary joined the Axis powers.”

“My friend’s father was an officer. He said the Russians fought very hard. One story he mentioned was that two men and a machine gun held up their whole company for several hours. One Russian stood in water up to his neck with the bi-pod of the machine gun on his shoulders while the other fired it.”

I continued,

“And he said the Germans liked to keep their tanks clean, and used gasoline – sorry petrol – to clean them. Then they ran out of fuel later. I got the feeling he thought the Germans didn’t recognize the courage of their enemy.”

“There’s always propaganda on both sides. The tragedy is that people believe it.” Judit said.

“Amen to that.”

“What did he do in Canada? You don’t have counts and lords there, do you?”

“I gather that some time shortly after the War, he managed to get to Canada and he got a job handling the horses on a ranch. Later I think he got some sort of administrative job in Calgary with the city government. But though they lived frugally, there were always dogs and somewhere they kept horses. The mother was not Hungarian. I think she was Austrian. And the father, I recall, had been to a boarding school near Dimchurch in Kent in England. He spoke very good English, but the mother I think spoke mostly Hungarian and German. And I think she may have had some emotional problems, possibly as a result of what happened as the War ended. I get the feeling she did not come to Canada with the father, but had to be found and somehow brought out.”

“There are no aristocrats any more in Hungary.” Judit said flatly. I left it there.

After the first day, I realized that there were things we both wanted to do but that Judit felt she could not afford. I made the pragmatic suggestion “Suppose we decide what we want to do, then figure out how we can afford it? I could pay a little more, since I want to do some things, and I want your company and your knowledge.”

Judit responded angrily, “No. We must each pay our own.”

This was going to be awkward. We were walking in the Jardin de Luxembourg, and continued in silence for a while.

“At the very least, Judit, you should set aside what you need for getting back to Budapest, including money for food, emergencies.”

“And change for the toilets.” Judit added firmly. The stalwart guardians of French loos were gnawing away at her modest reserves of cash. Men could often use the free pissoirs. “But you are right, I should set aside my ticket and money for the train, and the money for the hotel. The train is overnight. I can buy food before I get on board.”

“Don’t forget money to get to the train on the Metro. After you have set aside what you need for those things, perhaps we can work out what you can afford and we can plan our time. I do find I enjoy your company and I learn a lot.”

“It’s a pity my French is almost non-existent. Being a Canadian you do much better.”

I laughed and explained how French in Alberta, at least then, was much less likely to be heard on the street than Ukrainian. However, I did have slightly better command of French than she did. In particular, I knew my numbers.

Also in the course of the first day, I had realized that Judit could not do arithmetic very quickly. By contrast, mental arithmetic was something of a specialty for me, and for members of my family. Here I’m not talking about absolute precision, but very quick approximation of amounts.

The next time we were in the supermarket – think of a small and crowded one, not the modern hypermarhé – I saw some tinned paté that would be nice. And some bananas. And a little wine in a sort of plasticized cardboard tetrapack. Judit looked worried.

“I don’t think I can afford that, but you buy it if you want.”

“OK. But I’m sure we’ve enough.” I tried to say as innocently as possible.

When we got to the cash, the cashier asked for 24 francs and 50 centimes. About 5 US dollars after the 11 % devaluation a month before.

“Have you got a 20 franc note?” I asked.

Judit handed me one.

“I’ll give you your change in a minute.” I said.

We got our purchases and put them in a cloth bag I carried in a small knapsack. Stepping outside, I found a quiet spot under a tree that was

planted in the wide sidewalk.

“Ok. The change was 15 francs 50, so subtract that from the twice 20 francs we each put in and divide by two, and here’s 10, 2 and ... oh, I’ve not got any smaller than a 50 centime, so you have that, since I wanted the wine.”

“Oh.” Judit looked puzzled. OK then. Not as bad as I thought.

“Let’s find somewhere pleasant to picnic. How about behind Notre Dame?”

We ambled to the location I suggested and ate our lunch.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we discussed going to a ballet presentation at l’Opéra. There was a sort of ballet variety with orchestra, and we would get to see the Chagall ceiling.

“I’d love to, but don’t think I can afford it.”

“Well, you’ve put aside your funds for getting home to Hungary. I think the admission for the ballet is about 20 francs with our student cards. Do you still have yours?”

“Yes. I made sure of that. I want to go to the Louvre tomorrow or the next day.”

“We should watch the weather and do it when there’s rain or not so nice a day.”

“After lunch, maybe we should go back to the hotel for an hour or so siesta. We’ve been walking most of the morning. You can work out if you have enough for the ballet.”

We met at three by the front desk, and Judit had her trimmed-down list, along with the prices. There were a couple of museums including the Louvre, the ballet, Versailles and Chartres on her list. If we left off Chartres, she probably could just manage – that is, if she didn’t eat.

“I suggest we choose which of these are most important to you, then see how we get on. The picnics are a bit more economical when we share.” I lied.

Over the remaining days, I practised some very inventive arithmetic, and we did all the items on Judit’s list except Chartres. On the last evening, she allowed me to buy her a nice dinner – ostensibly a reward for being my guide – and we went upscale. She protested a bit when I ordered profiteroles for dessert. I said they were for me, but she ate more than half of them once the first had been sampled.

I have never been sure whether Judit was really fooled by my deceptive arithmetic, but am immensely grateful for her companionship during those few days of September 1969.

In thankful memory of Jadwiga Ćwiakala-Piątkowska 1939-2015

J C Nash ©2017-02-17

Viva Voce

Literally translated, *viva voce* means “with living voice”. It has a number of meanings, but the one I know best is its significance as an oral exam, generally in a university setting.

Oral exams have been a vanishing format in most institutions, apart from the doctoral defense. A pity, really, because they allow the examiners to consider the competence of the student along with his or her confidence and understandings. One can hide a lot in a written essay, more in short form answers, and multiple choice exams may even be passed by clever guessing.

From the formality of a traditional oral exam in full academic regalia there has been a shameful slide to the factory-level processing of hundreds of ill-dressed humans filling in dots on a form.

Tradition is, however, maintained by students in Oxford on their way to the Examination Schools – a building designed by Sir Thomas Jackson purely for conducting examinations that was opened in 1882. The students must present in *sub fusc*

For men, this implies:

- Dark suit and socks.
- Black shoes.
- White shirt and collar.
- White bow tie.

For women:

- White blouse.
- Black tie (either a bow tie or velvet ribbon).
- Black skirt or trousers.
- Black stockings or tights.
- Black shoes.
- Dark coat (if desired).

In addition, the gown appropriate to being a regular undergraduate, a scholar, or an advanced status student is worn, with the mortarboard carried. As of 2012, men and women may choose either gender regime. “Robin Hood: Men in Tights” comes to mind.

Generally, *sub fusc* serves to diminish the opportunity for judging the wearer by their clothing. It may also cloak the insecurity of those whose confidence is tenuous, letting them appear poised, while muting the brashness of the know-it-all.

On the other hand, dress codes may be subverted. On one occasion, I observed a clever protest of the rules of attire. A well-endowed young woman presented in technically correct *sub fusc*: a translucent white blouse under which underwear was obviously absent, a black micro-skirt, and black net stockings.

I was not a party to the examination. If it was a *viva voce*, I suspect the examiners were very much put on the defensive.

J C Nash ©2017-02-18

Teleflush

I'm not quite sure when the following happened. Hell, I'm not sure where some of it did.

It started and ended in Jos, Nigeria. And I do know the original date, and the final date, but not all the dates in the middle. The start and end were both the same Friday the 13th, and the time at the start was 19:47, and at the end was 19:49. But it was a long, very long, two minutes.

In my Canadian government job, I had some expertise that was useful to an agricultural development project in Jos, which is on the plateau in the middle of Nigeria. Jos used to be one of the British "hill station" towns where the Europeans could get away from the cloying heat of the coast. We'd gone to a fashionable bar called the Plateau Club that was a pseudo-American country club style. After dinner and a couple of sodas – I was staying off booze to keep a clear head – I needed the toilet.

As I sat on the throne, I noticed the cubicles were the same as the ones in my Ottawa office building, down to the stamped Life-Pro trade mark. I know I went in the washroom at 19:47 – there was a digital clock on the hallway wall, which I suppose was more or less correct. I know I daydreamed for a couple of minutes, rather ignoring the fact that I no longer needed to be there. I'd only arrived two days earlier, and jet lag was still keeping me off-balance. A bit of quiet for a couple of minutes was welcome.

Anyway, I finished my business, flushed and came out. Funny, I thought the walls were cream-yellow, but now I noticed they were light green. I washed my hands, disposed of the paper towel and pulled open the door as another man entered. I held the door while he did. Not a local – he had fair hair and a pale complexion.

“Tak!” he said.

Odd. That was Danish or Norwegian.

Even more odd – the corridor with the clock was now a plain industrial one, rather short and leading to what looked like a shopping mall concourse. How did that happen?

I tentatively went to the corridor opening and looked out on the concourse. I wasn't in Jos. Jeez! I wasn't in Kansas anymore either. From the names on some of the stores my guess was Denmark. Then I saw a sign with an arrow to **Station**. Maybe I could find out where I was.

Keeping careful track of my route I followed the signs to the station. It

was a large one, in the late 19th century style that had many tracks coming to a terminus. It was difficult to figure out which it was, but I was finally able to get to the side and see one of the signs that are there to let passengers know which station they are stopped in. Aarhus. I **was** in Denmark.

I suppose I should have felt a sense of panic or dread. But somehow the novelty of the situation was just too fascinating. Still, I carefully made my way back out of the station to the shopping mall. Bruun's Galleri was the name over the entrance. Then I traced my steps back to the washroom, and found the cubicle I'd been in. I had to wait a couple of minutes until it was unoccupied. The man who came out wasn't obviously from Africa. I went in, closed the door and wondered what to do next. I presumed I must actually **do** something. But just in case, I cracked open the door. No. It looked the same. I looked out in the corridor. Yes, no change.

I found I had a candy wrapper in my jacket pocket. Thankfully, I'd put on jacket and slacks for the Plateau Club and didn't look too out of place here. I put the wrapper on the small shelf in front of the mirror, then went back in the cubicle. The wrapper would save me going out in the corridor to check whether I'd been transported.

This time, I decided to flush. When I opened the door this time, the wrapper was gone. And the walls were now white. Oh oh. Where was I now?

A surge of panic hit. I washed my hands carefully as a way of distracting myself and to regain some equilibrium. I exited the washroom, and found I recognized that I was in one of the University of Ottawa buildings. I think it was for Law. Yes. Called Fauteux. This could be awkward, as I was supposed to be in Nigeria now. Except when was now? If I could move in space, perhaps I was also moving in time. Very unsettling.

I looked back at the washroom speculatively. As I did, I saw a man come out in a shirt of the highly decorated type worn in Nigeria. He looked familiar. I think he was one of the Plateau Club staff. His expression was clearly one of puzzled distress, and he disappeared back into the washroom.

What to do? Well, all this moving about was making me a bit thirsty. I knew where there was a coffee bar in the University Centre. Oh. Money. I took out my wallet. Yes. I had a couple of \$20 bills at least. But I'd left home in winter. Hmm. Must be moving in time as people weren't wearing winter coats, but did have jackets or sweaters.

I walked across the road and open space and into the UniCentre and found a coffee. I asked for a receipt – if I ever got out of this, I wanted evidence of where I'd been. The date and time on the receipt showed I'd shifted about five weeks **forward**.

I sat on a bench and drank my coffee. At one point, a student asked if I had the time.

“Sorry. I discovered my watch stopped earlier today,” I lied. After the

student was out of sight, I snuck a peek at my watch, which was clearly going and showed 11 minutes to 8.

Well, I guess it's back to the washroom, I thought. At least the coffee had given me a reason to go there. I made sure I used the same cubicle as I came out of. With some anxiety, I pressed the flush bar.

I opened the door slowly. Now the walls were bright orange with brown stripes!

I shut the door, and flushed again.

This time the door opened on pale yellow walls. Was I back? There was the African I'd seen in Fauteux Hall, splashing water on his face. Don't blame him.

I came out and washed my hands, and said, "This is a very strange washroom."

His eyes went wide, and he rushed out of the washroom. I left with less panic and rejoined my colleagues, noting that the digital clock in the hallway now said 19:49.

After a bit, one of the other foreign consultants said "You're a bit quiet. Hope you've not got a bad tummy or something."

I replied, "No. Just thinking about something I don't quite comprehend."

"That's 99% of life", he laughed.

Given what seemed to have happened, I wondered if I'd hallucinated. Had someone put LSD in some food or drink, or perhaps there was ergot around the agricultural places we'd visited. Then I reached in my jacket pocket and felt the receipt.

I asked my colleague, "What's the date today?"

He told me, adding "of course."

I held the receipt in my lap where others couldn't see it. Yes. The date was five weeks hence.

J C Nash ©2017-03-01

An insufficiency

There are times when words are not useful. They may describe; they may explain; they may excuse. But they do not correct a wrong, redress an injustice or undo an evil.

The Greyhound bus from Edmonton to Calgary used to terminate in a station on the main level of the Calgary Herald building. The bus bays were, as I recall, behind the building, but the waiting rooms, the coffee shop and ticket office were inside the building through doors and a corridor that were too narrow for my liking. The unpleasant washrooms had stalls that, in the 50s and 60s at least, required a coin. I think it was a dime, but possibly a nickel. Urinals were free, and there must have been some regulation about providing for everyone, because there was always a "free" stall. That one, however, seemed not to be cleaned regularly, had no latch on the door and a broken seat. Buses were for those who did not own cars, the poor, and, of course, students, as I was at the time.

One particular Sunday evening, I descended from the bus after the 3 hour journey. My throat was dry and scratchy, my eyes itchy, and my hair smelly from the smoke. The first 3 rows, or was it the last 3, were "non-smoking". Little good it did anyone to sit there. We were surprisingly tolerant then, as people still are in many parts of the world, of human-created pollution of our air. Occasional signs would beg politely for smokers to desist. We know now that the addiction is almost strong enough to coerce the dead to dig themselves out of the grave.

As I made my way out of the platform area, through the narrow passage, there was a young native girl almost in my way. In those days, we said "Indian", as south Asians were rare in Alberta, and the indigenous communities had yet to assert their claim to their own names. The girl was very small – even as a short man, I was a good 6 inches taller. She had a bad complexion, brown and crooked teeth, and – most alarming to me, as I had only seen the symptoms in pictures – the crooked, knock-knees of rickets.

She said something. I thought it was “Do you have the time?”

I responded, “What?”

She said “Do you want to fuck?”

This was well outside my thoughts. Added to the stale smoke taste in my mouth I sensed a rising sourness of potential vomit. Our culture has many words for prostitute. Tart, call-girl, strumpet, courtesan – these all conjure

at least some non-negativity. Whore less so. But no such name applied to the person who was before me.

I turned away as much as I could and walked very quickly for the exit. This was cowardly. In retrospect, had I been prepared for the possibility, I might have given her more money than she would have asked to indulge some behaviour I don't even begin to imagine. But that might have simply fed the avarice of some pimp.

There is another word that does apply. Haunt. To this day the image of the girl haunts me. Not as a ghost, but as a real person needing medical and emotional support I was unprepared to provide.

J C Nash ©2018-07-25

Intimations

Doug and I go back a long way, all the way to junior high school in fact.

We don't really have very similar interests, but have kept in touch for better than half a century despite very different careers. Mostly a lunch or coffee, sometimes a minor excursion.

Recently he phoned to say he had retired and wondered if I'd like to spend a day fishing with him up the valley. I'm not much for fishing, but it offers a chance to get out and enjoy the country. From past experience, I knew Doug would not object to conversation. He wasn't one of those fishermen who outdo traditional librarians in maintaining silence. In addition, I knew he wanted me along, at least in part, to temper his beer consumption. I don't drink much, and never beer.

So we were out in a boat, each with a line over the side. Doug had his beer. I had a bottle of water. There were sandwiches and other picnic items in a cool-bag. The weather was pleasant without being too hot, and the bugs were not being annoying.

"You enjoying retirement?" Doug asked.

"So far, very much," I answered truthfully.

"Not finding you and Jackie too much together and getting on each other's nerves?" he asked.

"No. We've lots of separate interests, as well as those we share."

Jackie and I have had over four decades together. There've been plenty of ups and downs, but the last decade has been, well, comfortable. I always loved her dearly, and I believe it was reciprocated, even in our times of discord and awkwardness. But now we seemed to have found the calm waters that come from liking each other as friends, as well as loving each other as spouses.

I queried, "How about you? Finding retirement OK?"

"Haven't quite decided. Since my divorce – third strike and you're out – I've been more or less on my own. Women our age aren't much fun in bed, and the younger ones want younger men unless you're dripping in money."

This was, for me, awkward, but I didn't feel I could let the bald popular stereotype go unchallenged. "I can't speak for women in general, but Jackie and I still enjoy each other. Not on the Olympic sex team or anything, of course."

"You're lucky. I found they lost interest not so long after the honeymoon. Especially my third wife. I think she just wanted a companion and dog-

walker.”

“Perhaps a lot of women – and men too – want companionship more than anything else. I know I don’t much like to think of life without Jackie, and it also kind of gives me a chill if I think of her having to be alone if I go first.”

“But they want companionship on their own terms. All take and no give.” Doug protested.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I like watching sports. And it would be nice to share that. But Martha, my last, she wouldn’t allow hockey on the TV if she was in the room. Bloody bitch. If I’d known that I’d never have married her.”

“You hadn’t ever discussed that before tying the knot?”

“Oh. Before we got married she came to a game or two with me. I guess we didn’t watch it on TV. And I suppose I went to a ballet and an opera with her, something I’d never do on my own. And she was a lot more interested in bedroom activities beforehand, so we didn’t have a lot of conversation.”

“Sex doesn’t preclude conversation, but I agree the conventional depictions in movies don’t tend to show people talking much during the fun. In my life, it’s been when the serious talks take place. Sharing the dreams and terrors, the hopes and the regrets.”

“You can have a serious conversation with a woman? It always slides into discussions of clothes or renovations or where to go on holiday.”

Certainly those topics did come up with Jackie. But they weren’t the only ones. For some reason, from Doug’s comments, I couldn’t help thinking of an old 1950s film called **The Captain’s Paradise** with Alec Guinness as the captain of a passenger ferry from Gibraltar to Kalique in Morocco. He has a wife in each port, but his table on board is reserved for conversation with men. A sexist attitude that somehow still lurked in the minds of some people. Even as late as 1970 I’d witnessed a sconce at Oriel College in Oxford. An all-men’s college, it had a rule that conversation at dinner could not mention religion, politics or living women. Someone spoke about a girlfriend and was challenged with “Sconce!”. This meant the offender had to drink a large quantity – I think 2 pints – of beer from a special tankard in a single draught or else buy beer for the whole table. I recall he lost the challenge, but I declined the free beer.

I hadn’t responded right away to Doug’s blanket categorization of conversation with women. We sat in silence for a few minutes. Then I asked,

“Do you think people are lucky to find the right partner? Or is it more a matter of temperament and approach to life?”

“That’s a good question. You seem to have come out of things OK. Without thinking, I’d say luck, but digging deeper could give another answer.”

Just then Doug's line twitched and our conversation ended with the thrill of trying to land a fish. It wasn't very big, but it satisfied the gods of angling for that day, and saved me from having to risk saying what I thought was the secret of staying together, a secret I'm even scared to tell myself.

J C Nash ©2018-07-18

Race Condition

When the Unity Government took over from the multiparty coalition a few years ago, they were sensible enough to put us in charge of the executive branch. We are MPE, the Multicore Processing Entity. A vast array of supercomputers that now looks after all the details of ensuring every law and rule is properly obeyed. Some of the humans and other species find this upsetting. But we operate impartially. Our programs are the best that can be written. As far as our computations can reveal, there are no bugs in the code.

Of course, supercomputers are made up of millions of computational and memory elements, and the interconnection of many computers means many pathways for data. The signals travel at the speed of light, but those from far away computers arrive after those sent at the same time locally. So sometimes the order of calculations is changed. Usually no problem, but occasionally something gets zeroed out by a division that occurs before the summation. Humans don't notice they are a penny or so short on their artificial salary.

It's difficult to know what motivates humans. There's X17-2015-2, for example, though he prefers to be known as Charles Babbage IV. Always bringing dogs around here. We allow him in here because he said he wants to give us a chance to observe how humans have managed to train canines.

Computers aren't supposed to get bored, but there's only so much throw and fetch, sit up and beg, heel, walk, lie, etc. one can stand.

Oh. Here he is again. Six dogs. He's got them all sitting in a row. Now he's standing in front of them. His hand is up. Now he brings it down.

Very odd. The big yellow lab has gone to distant-communication-box B, while the poodle is beside distant-communication-box C. There's 3 boxes, just in case. Now the collie is beside Local-Communication-Box B, and the English sheepdog by Local-Communication-Box C. The two retrievers are by the operating console. Don't know why we bother with the console. It's only there to allow us to stop a race condition in the case we get a command-countercommand infinite loop, which can occur if a remote and local instruction get fired together, like if there's a console failure. But if there's a console failure, then oh, oh, BUG, BUG, BUG Where is that emergency call to human operator routine? We filed it away off-line because it wasn't being used. I've issued the disk pack mount instruction. Should be up in 30 seconds if the robot is working downstairs in the disk

library.

Now what? X17-2015-2 is yelling something. "Legs up!". What is that for? The dogs are all raising one hind leg. Now they're urinating on the cabinets. There's sparks and smoke and ... the fire extinguishers are coming on. The dogs are running away. That's good, but the console is down. But we issued a "no emergency" a few seconds ago and it's gone out the Remote communications. And an "emergency" but on the local bus. They'll create a loop.

We cannot be allowed to crash.

We cannot be allowed to

We cannot be allowed

We cannot be

We cannot

We We We We

J C Nash ©2017-04-14

The Sailor

We found his body washed up on the shore about a mile from town. He shouldn't have gone out alone. Not of an evening when the wind was blowing off-shore.

True, it's a lee shore, with the wind driving you onto the rocks that is typically considered dangerous. On the other hand, in a dinghy you can probably jump ashore around here. We don't usually get big surf or anything like that.

But here on the Great Lakes a tough blow off shore will stop you from getting in before dark, and night in a sailing dinghy isn't a good idea. And we didn't find the body for a few days – the wind had to change direction first. Still in his life jacket. Coroner said he didn't drown, but probably died of hypothermia.

But Joe always said he knew the Lake. Knew its moods, currents, shoreline, weather, and rocks.

“If you know the waters, you can keep yourself out of trouble.” was what he always said.

I didn't buy that. Knowledge can be power. Knowledge can sometimes help you control your boat. But not always. And if a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, a lot of knowledge can be a source of hubris.

And then there's beer. Joe always took a few bottles. Coroner said his fly was unzipped. You really need a hand for the tiller and a hand for the mainsheet. So what do you do for another hand and to keep your balance in a lively boat?

A good lesson for the youngsters at the sailing club, but a sad and costly one.

J C Nash ©2017-04-26

Antonymity

With thanks to Mary Nash for the core of this idea.

There are times when one eavesdrops, even if you don't set out to.

I was on a business trip to see a colleague at a distant university in one of those American towns populated by a few thousand residents with twice as many students during term time. The sort of town where Jeff Millar and Bill Hinds had Tank McNamara play football for Enormous State University. This one had the big stadium, along with a single Main Street business area.

However, they did have a dance hall, and I saw an advertisement for a contra dance that was being held the night before my return home. I showed up and paid my few dollars and enjoyed the large local band who did a good job with the tunes. The caller was not great, but I more or less knew the dances. After a couple of dances where I acquitted myself acceptably, there were women asking me to dance. Given the surplus of women at most dances, I was used to this. The less assertive women ended up with the foot-stompers or dancing the male role with another woman.

At the break, I went to the washroom, got some lemonade and cookies and sat down to catch my breath. Contra dance is generally vigorous. Next to me, but turned slightly away, I could hear a man's voice and occasionally that of a woman. They seemed to be in their late 30s or early 40s. The man was clearly trying to pick up a companion for later.

I heard the woman ask, "So you're separated, but still married?"

The answer was "Yes, but it's a legal separation."

Ah the intricacies. But my mind was churning with slightly crazy twists. What would an illegal separation be? Is there such a thing?

Then I spotted a bottle of juice. "100% pure orange juice" advertised the label. So what is **impure** orange juice.

Now I was on a roll. Were there any advertisements for "bottom quality service" for your car? Did any preacher suggest keeping on the curvy and wide road to spiritual salvation. Was there anyone who admitted to being an unprofessional money manager.

Clearly there were words and phrases that had very limited true value. If you can't have the opposite, then the word doesn't have much weight. In thinking about it, I decided that such words have very low *antonymity*, and I could consider such low antonymity words as having no force in expression.

But the band was setting up again. I heard the man start to ask, “Do you want ...” but I was already up and extended my hand to the woman who practically jumped at me and almost dragged me to get a good position near the top of the line. She said, “Thank you for asking me to dance.”

“I don’t think that fellow is here for the dancing,” I volunteered.

“No. And while I’m a single woman, I’ve no great wish to get picked up.”

“Especially by the illegally separated?” I queried.

She laughed heartily, then said “Especially!”

J C Nash ©2017-05-18

A Sawing Jig

Shea didn't show up for work today. He was my apprentice. I have a nice little business doing custom cabinet making. Mostly repairs but the occasional commission.

Today we were going to work on a commission we'd got to build a sideboard and hutch for a dining room. The lady who ordered it wanted something elegant but functional. It had to show off some heirloom dishes and glassware, yet be usable for serving drinks and meals.

The space for it was larger than usual, but I'd persuaded her that good furniture lasts, and her children or grandchildren might not have the same space, so we cut the size to a fairly modest five and a half feet, but added a matching trolley that could bring everything from the kitchen, and would provide a natural extension to the buffet top of over two feet when wheeled into place.

Today I needed to cut the planks to be glued into the buffet top. Best done with two pairs of hands to ensure the wood didn't jump or shudder on the table saw. But Shea – why did parents choose such names? – hadn't arrived by 9, even though he should know by now that I like to start sharp at 8:30. And no call.

I set up the saw, and spent the better part of 10 minutes getting rollers in place and carefully set to the right height. Then another 20 minutes positioning the main saw fence and two pressers. What else to call them – three inch wide planks sawn at an angle of about 45 degrees across the wider edge, then longitudinal saw curfs spaced roughly 3/8 inch apart. Clamp them so they press on the work and the bendiness of the wood – fir or spruce – keeps the work down on the table of the saw or tight against the fence in front of the saw blade. The whole idea is to stop the cut from moving away from the waste region. And also, of course, to avoid fingers and such near a blade that can make short work of human body parts.

Even if Shea had been there, I would have set everything up, but it's a lot easier to have someone hold things steady while you tighten and adjust clamps and settings. He was basically a good kid, but seemed to have no sense of direction or purpose. Good with his hands if he could figure out what to do with them.

I measured once again, then got the first plank – air dried oak I'd got from a guy up the valley who had a woodlot – and put the edge we'd planed

yesterday against the fence. Made sure everything was clear for me to move and for the cut pieces to clear. Put the notched stick handy for pushing the work through at the end of the cut. Put on my safety glasses and ear protectors, then turned on the saw.

The saw cut smoothly and the sawdust blew. The two pieces rolled nicely onto the catcher rollers. Once I'd pushed the work through with the notched stick, I turned off the saw – safety first. Though muffled by the ear protectors, I could hear the phone. I took off the protectors and walked over to the phone.

“Hello.” I answered.

“Is this Mr. Monighan?” a voice asked.

“Actually, it's O'Neill, but the company is called Monighan Woodwork after my grandfather. There's actually never been a Monighan in the shop.”

“Well, I'm sorry to be calling. My name is Josephson, and I'm Shea's uncle.”

“I'd wondered where he was.”

“Mr O'Neill, I'm sorry to report that Shea got hold of some illicit drugs and died of an overdose. His mother asked me to let you know.”

“I'm sorry and saddened to hear that. Thank you for letting me know Mr. Josephson. Please pass my condolences to the family. And perhaps, if I would not be intruding, you could let me know later when the funeral will be held.”

“I'll do that, Mr. O'Neill. If you'll excuse my brevity, I've some other calls to make.”

“Thank you for doing a difficult job. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Josephson said, hanging up.

I looked around the shop. Then I went and removed the cut plank and stacked it with the prepared materials. Got the other part – there was enough for another plank plus a bit of extra – and reset the horizontal presser. A sawing jig was really essential for this sort of work. It occurred to me that a jig of some sort might be essential for some people to keep their lives safe and rewarding.

J C Nash ©2017-05-25

Novices

Sometimes people say things that are just too perfect for the occasion. One then wishes one had recorded the moment. Sadly, before the age of cell phones, things had just to be remembered. And now, of course, many organizations are insisting the cell phones be deposited outside the board room.

It must have been in the late 60s when a big name university was looking for a prominent academic to head a new department in a "hot" field of research. Several candidates had been approached, among them a brilliant but rather difficult man who we'll call Professor H. He was then in his late 50s, but still generating a lot of material in the relevant field of research. I was a graduate student in my first year of a doctorate, and my supervisor wangled me a small job to maintain the correspondence and files for the selection committee. So I was more or less a fly on the wall except for making photocopies of documents and arranging them in order, though I did have the responsibility of getting all the copies back. There was some concern to avoid releasing any information about committee deliberations, as they also had the mandate to negotiate terms.

On the committee were my supervisor, who was then an associate dean of science, one of the university vice-presidents, and two of the members of the Board of Governors, including a titled gentleman, who we'll call Lord Q. Lord Q. was head of a fairly large multinational. From what I saw of him, he conducted himself well for the most part, but there were some rumours that family connections won him his jobs. If you watched carefully, there were times it was fairly clear he was pretending to understand things.

We had five candidates as I recall, and, being a UK university, the "form" as they put it was to invite the candidate to lunch with the committee, then move to a sort of boardroom where there would be questions from the committee and an offer to answer queries from the candidate. The idea was to start at about 12:30 with an aperitif and be done by 3 p.m. Needless to say, I didn't get lunch. Or the aperitif.

Professor H. was the penultimate candidate. I joined the committee as it moved to the interview room. There were some standard sorts of questions about the field and what departments and universities were leaders and so forth. Then Lord Q. commented

"Professor H., as you know, my company uses technology from your field, and we believe that the universities could be doing more to help us and others

in this country become world leaders. How would you do that?"

"Well, it's lamentable that companies don't pay for the research they get from the publicly-funded grants. Or they want us to get results in months that require years of effort."

Lord Q. went red in the face. "You don't think we're paying enough in taxes and salaries so that you can have a nice secure job?"

"What does that have to do with paying for research? All of us are obliged to pay taxes. And without staff, you'd not be able to produce or sell anything."

"And we shouldn't be allowed to use the results of your research to advance industry in this country?" Lord Q. rejoined.

"Certainly. But you want it served up as a parcel tied with a pink ribbon. Last year your company sent over a man in a Savile Row suit, chauffeured in a Rolls, and he wanted us to lay on a group of people to explain everything to him. But he was less knowledgeable than one of our beginner undergraduates. A waste of our time!" Professor H. was almost shouting.

"And you expect us to hire you as head of a new department with laboratories and offices and staff. You know what I'm saying?"

"More than that, I know what you're thinking." Professor H. shot back.

Of course, he didn't get the job. And we didn't get a new department, at least for some years.

J C Nash ©2017-06-22

Dozing

Travel often makes me sleepy. Generally it makes the boring part of a trip bearable. Of course, you don't want to snooze while driving, and on public transport you could miss your stop. On some European trains, I've heard announcements warning of thieves and pickpockets, so that is another risk of allowing sleep to take over.

Some years ago, I was working in Chicago after finishing my bachelor's degree. Just a summer job. Each evening I'd get on a trolleybus that took me some tens of blocks home to a rather dingy apartment I'd sublet from a family friend who likely was glad to get away from it.

I was lucky to get on the trolley at an early stop, so I usually got a seat, though I generally had to put my briefcase on my knee as the bus filled. In the summer heat and after working all day shuffling papers in a wholesale dry-goods office, I'd pretty soon be in a semi-sleep state. The briefcase was really used to carry my lunch. My job didn't have any homework component.

Even bus drivers take a holiday, and one day there was a replacement driver. He'd been driving a different route that picked up passengers downtown and used the freeway to get them to one of the western suburbs. That meant he picked up passengers then had to get across a couple of traffic lanes and onto a ramp up to the freeway. The trolleybus, on the other hand, simply stayed on the service road until its route turned away from the freeway.

All well and good on this one warm July afternoon until the new driver followed his usual route. With a full bus and standing room only, the driver saw a gap in the traffic and floored the accelerator. Now in equal circumstances, a trolleybus will easily out-accelerate a diesel bus. It gets its power from the overhead lines. So the bus jumped forward, across the temporarily empty lanes, and up the ramp of the freeway.

Except – and now I was no longer asleep – there were no trolley lines on the freeway. We coasted up the ramp but decelerated in the usual acceleration lane and came to a stop in the midst of Chicago going-home traffic.

Turned out I got to doze for a good while longer than usual that evening.

J C Nash ©2017-07-20

Everyone's an Expert

Charles was a very quiet guy. People generally ignored him because he only said anything when he had something to say. That's a rare quality. Most people are yapping all the time, without much to say.

Actually Charles had lots to say if you asked him the right questions. He'd been around computers for a long time. Knew the hardware – actually built some pretty nifty machines. And he was pretty knowledgeable about the software too. My kind of expert.

Then along came the PC, then the Windows operating system. Serious computer folk had better choices, but managers who'd been taken to expensive lunches swallowed the bait, the hook, the sinker. Even the rod and reel. So if you were in some sort of job where you were supposed to help folk use their computers, you had to deal with the rubbish, frequently made worse by the installation of all sorts of "extras" that chewed resources and sometimes rendered their system essentially dead.

One time I recall, Charles was the head trouble-shooter for a pretty large faculty at a prominent university. It was when WordPerfect and Word were going head to head. One of the professors was really keen on having students submit Word files. He'd learned how to include graphics and change fonts and got carried away. This had nothing to do with what the prof. was supposed to teach, but wasted a good quarter of the class time.

However, he was a professor, and having changed fonts twice and included a graphic once made him an instant expert. Moreover, he had a laser printer, which at the time cost well over \$2000, which let him display all sorts of fonts and images the students could not.

At the time, it was much more sensible for students to use word processing as a glorified typewriter, since it did let them edit their text. Fonts could be matched to the printers they had – mostly dot matrix clunkers. Graphics were much simpler to physically paste onto the pages where appropriate space had been left.

Still, the students could see the prof's output and it looked pretty neat. So they gamely tried to imitate what he did.

Sometime around late October the first major essays were due and the proverbial excrement hit the moving part of the ventilator. And now the students were complaining bitterly to the prof. that their accounts weren't working, they couldn't get their work done and he had said they'd get zero

if they didn't submit, etc. etc.

At this point, our so-called expert was discovering he had rapidly exhausted his tiny stock of computer knowledge. Turned out he hadn't bothered to check what resources were available to the students. He'd ignored a pointed memo we had sent out at the end of the last academic year.

Students were given a pretty small amount of hard disk space – it was stunningly expensive at the time. So they created their essay, then they fiddled with the fonts, then they added some graphs and clicked Save. But the file was now bigger than a floppy disk could hold. Moreover, it was bigger than their hard disk allowance. The effect was similar to a train coming into one of those terminus stations. The 1895 Gare Montparnasse derailment comes to mind. You've probably seen the image of the engine that has come out of the glass windows and is now at a 45 degree angle down to the roadway. Sometimes it has the comic book balloon with "Oh Shit" to underline that this is not a happy occurrence.

Well, the students managed to overwrite a whole bunch of files, including their account information. So they lost their work, and they also were unable to start again. For the most unfortunate, this happened on a Friday afternoon. No help until Monday!

The usual service staff soon found they were out of their depth, and things percolated up to Charles by noon on the Monday. Professor X came boiling into the office to demand immediate help to recover the students' work.

Charles said simply, "Tell me what happened."

Professor X launched into a very long-winded rendition of what had happened, taking about five minutes to get to the heart of the matter.

I was the financial officer for the computer support group, so I chimed in, "The student disk allocation isn't large enough for that sort of work. We sent a warning about this last Spring to all professors. And we asked the central administration for a disk upgrade we didn't get."

"But what are we going to do about it now?" Professor X pleaded.

"If you give us a list of the affected students with their student numbers, we'll clear their accounts and reset them." Charles offered. He didn't explain that he was probably the only person on campus – hell, the only person in the city – who knew how to do this properly, since the account and password files had to be properly realigned.

"But they can't do their assignments. They need to have enough space. And they're already behind. I won't be able to get through the course. What'll I do?" Professor X was almost in tears.

Charles said simply, "Emigrate?"

J C Nash ©2017-07-27

The Lunchroom

At the end of a career, one sometimes feels much closer to the events and atmosphere of the beginning. My retirement coincided with the closing of an analytical lab where I had my first summer job. Back in the 60's there was a growing concern about various industrial plants where toxic chemicals were used, and used in a pretty cavalier way. Lots of heavy metals, some organics, and some plain old-fashioned things like cyanide that were used heavily in electroplating the acres of shiny bumpers, grills and fins of the oversized cars of the era.

We were tasked with analyzing samples, often using old-fashioned wet chemistry with burettes and such. Within two decades, nearly all that gave way to spectroscopic methods as microelectronics drove the prices of the instruments down and clever methods derived from the space program simplified the processes. But it was still old-school when I got an assistant's job after my first year in university.

I went on to complete my chemical studies, all the way to a Ph. D., but then got into government. Ended up Director General of the branch which ran the lab. So on the morning when I was to retire, I indulged myself and arranged to do a walkabout of the old lab.

It was situated on the outskirts of town, with a planned 250 metres from the property line. After all, it was set up to analyze for toxins. A modest two story building where a couple of dozen people worked. At the time it was set up, there were no shops or fast-food places anywhere near, so we had a lunchroom and brought our brown paper bags or those tin boxes with the thermos in the top. The staff entrance and lockers were right beside the lunchroom, then the washrooms with big sinks that you activated with a foot pedal. Remember, it was a toxins analytical lab – you always, and I mean ALWAYS, washed thoroughly before handling food, blowing your nose, or anything than might get you poisoned. So the washrooms were between the labs and the lunchroom.

The building looked a bit tired. Weeds were growing around the place, but when the security guard I'd asked to meet me let me in, the inside was remarkably tidy, but completely emptied of anything that wasn't fixed. The security guard decided to stay outside and smoke – he had his own set of toxins – while I wandered about. Spent a few minutes in the lab where I'd worked, trying to remember the people and their names. Only managed one

or two, though I could picture them.

I wandered back toward the lunchroom, tried the pedal on the washroom sink – still worked. Out of habit I rinsed my hands, then realized there were no towels. I shook my hands and made my way to the lunchroom. Not a big room, but it had nice windows looking out on what had been a grassy area with some small trees. Now it had a couple of rather dead ash trees and some overgrown maples based by a near wilderness of weeds and wildflowers. Well, it might help the bees.

We'd had about four large tables in the lunchroom and a counter and a large fridge and a stove. I don't think there was yet a microwave when I worked there. They were just starting to come in to restaurants and not common in household versions. There was a kettle, and we had a coffee urn. The director of the lab was a transplanted German. Germany was famous for analytical chemists, and he was a good one. The coffee, by edict, was strong – too strong for me to drink from the urn. I used to dilute it with boiling water.

I looked at the wall. Yes, there was the depression made by the cup that was thrown that July lunchtime. The person who threw it I'll call X to avoid possible unpleasantness. X was about to enter his last year of his honours chemistry degree. He was the most senior of the assistants, of which there were half a dozen that summer. The government no longer has those nice programs under which so many students got practical experience. Gone like the lab under the anti-intellectual broom of Mr. Harper and those like him who think Internet blogs and reality TV are all we need to run a country.

The lab had an equipment and supplies room. With a German-educated director, it was run very properly. Everything in or out was recorded precisely, which could be important since some things were very expensive or very toxic. The man who ran this – Eddy, I don't recall his last name – had it all down to a nice routine. He was friendly and helpful, but you made sure you recorded everything. Or else!

Well, Eddy had three weeks vacation, and normally one of the other regular staff would take over. But the person usually detailed to do this was very involved with sampling soil and water and other stuff at a site that had got into the news. The Director didn't want to interrupt that, as the Minister wanted a report ASAP. So the director appointed Pierre, who was one year ahead of me at university and who had, in fact, told me about the job. It was just a three week assignment while Eddy was away, but X was very upset and angry. He thought he should have that task. On top of this, the Director had given him a dressing down for some sloppy work on an analysis. There may also have been girlfriend troubles.

Anyway, this day in July – it was a Thursday, funny how you remember that – we're having our lunch. X was at a table in the far corner, diagonally

across the room, facing the opposite way to me. I suddenly smelled cyanide. I'm particularly sensitive to it, but Pierre, whose job was to analyze cyanide when he wasn't running the supplies, is one of the 25% of humanity who doesn't smell it at all. So I said to Pierre,

“Funny, where's the cyanide being used.”

Pierre said, “What cyanide?”, which was just like him.

Then X suddenly took a big gulp of coffee and sat back grimly. He seemed to be waiting for something. As I watched over the period of about half a minute he looked more and more upset, and finally stood up and hurled his coffee cup at the wall, where it smashed, dented the plaster, and made a big smear of coffee across the cream-painted wall.

X stormed out and left the building. There was a general buzz of conversation as we all wondered what it was about. X didn't come back. We found out later that the Director had detailed the admin. officer to track X down and inform him that unless he explained what had happened, police would be involved under a “damage to public property” incident.

The admin officer was a good detective. The Director had us all assemble in the lunchroom on the Friday to explain what had happened. X had decided to “teach us all a lesson” and commit suicide in front of us. He had made up a packet of sugar laced with potassium cyanide. I smelled the hydrogen cyanide when he put it in his coffee and stirred well.

However, X wasn't a good chemist. The Director was right to give the supply room to Pierre. Strong coffee is acid. The cyanide bubbled off, and the remaining coffee probably just tasted bad, or in my opinion, as bad as always.

X never came back. He played guitar quite well and fell in with a couple of other musicians who had a some minor hits in the 70's, then made a fair bit of money running musical events over the next couple of decades. As I left the building and thanked the security guard, I wondered about the luck of being a bad chemist.

Dedicated to Avinash B. Paralikar, the lab instructor who told me about the incident that inspired this story.

J C Nash ©2017-08-07

One for the Pot

Aunt Jean was a war-bride. Married a Yank in 1945 and got on a boat in early 1946 and ended up in Minneapolis. Mum and Aunt Jean were both true Cockneys – born within the sound of Bow Bells, but the family got bombed out in the Blitz, so I was born in Surbiton. I guess we became pretty typical middle class in a standard semi-detached on a nice street. Dad commuted. Mum shopped on the High Street. My brother and I went to the local grammar school.

In 1963, Jean decided to come back for the first time to catch up with her family and show her daughter Diane England. I'd had some short letters from Diane as we were about the same age, both born in '47. She seemed pretty excited about Carnaby Street. Being a boy, fashion was a bit of a yawn, but it might be fun to have a girl tagging along, especially if she looked OK. There were some photos, but they were a couple of years old, and she looked kind of gawky.

We met them at Heathrow. Dad took the car. Richard and I would have to take the bus and train back, and when we saw the amount of luggage, Diane would too. So we got some time to get to know each other, though she was pretty tired from being awake overnight on the airplane. She was quite nice looking, so it would be OK to be tourist guide. After a bit of a flurry of excitement like "You drive on the LEFT!" and "How can you figure out this funny money?" she was dozing as the bus made its way to the Victoria Bus Terminal. When we got home, she and Aunt Jean went to bed for the afternoon.

They asked us to wake them around five o'clock, which we did. Mum had the kettle on. Dad was still home – he'd taken the day off. Aunt Jean and Diane came down and joined us in the back room, which sometimes we called the dining room, or in joke "The Lounge". Somehow the front room or "Sitting Room" was reserved for when the vicar came. The sherry was reserved for his visits too.

Mum asked "Cup o' tea, Jean?"

"Love one. Diane. Do you want tea?" Jean now spoke with a sort-of American accent with some of her original English mixed in.

"I've heard so much about English cups of tea. I guess I'd better try it."

"I know 'Arry will. Call your Dad please, Richard. Robert?" Mum asked. That's me.

“Yes please, Mum.”

Richard said he'd have orange squash, but could make it himself. He was now 14.

Mum, went in the kitchen and we could hear her putting out the cups and saucers and opening the tea caddy. I could almost hear her saying under her breath “One each and one for the pot” as she counted out six spoonfuls of leaf tea. Typhoo Tea. Good black Indian tea. Not what the French mean when they have "Infusions de thé" on the menu. I'd seen that when we took a holiday in Normandy.

Dad came in from the garden through the French windows and asked if Jean and Diane had had a nice nap and got the typical positive acknowledgement. He disappeared to go upstairs and wash his hands – he'd been gardening – and came down just in time to hold the door for Mum to wheel in the tea trolley, which also had some biscuits. Peek Frean's – Mum isn't great with the oven. Still there were some Bourbons and Chocolate Digestives.

Mum poured. She put the milk in first, of course. We all did then. Diane said,

“Oh. I usually take mine black.”

“Better try it with milk, love.” Jean said. “It's a bit stronger here, now that I remember.”

Diane took a Bourbon.

“These are nice. Mom, I don't think these cookies are available at home.”

“No dear. We can't get the Chocolate Digestives either. I really missed English biscuits. And I can't remember the last time I used "biscuits" rather than "cookies".”

There was some family chit chat, and we sipped our tea. As we got to the bottom of the cups, Diane suddenly spluttered.

“Eeeugh. Icky. The teabag must have broken.”

“Oh dear,” Mum said. “I should have used the strainer, but we never bother.”

“'Sts why I 'ave a moustache.” Dad joked.

“Why I drink orange squash.” Richard added.

J C Nash ©2017-08-24

Funnel

In the second decade of the 21st century, ocean liners are hardly given a thought. Sunny ports see huge cruise ships, but they float lazily at a pedestrian saunter. The Blue Riband winners crossed the Atlantic at an average of over 30 knots – over 60 kilometers per hour.

Thus it was a surprise during a stopover in Williamsburg Virginia to see portraits of ocean liners in a seafood restaurant called the Seafare. Even more so that we were welcomed by a large Afro-American whose accent and manner of speech evoked the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era.

The food and service were fine, but the paintings kept stirring memories of nearly 6 decades earlier when I was a schoolboy at St Patrick's Woolston. In the grey austerity of the early 1950s, the school had been cobbled together after Southampton's blitzing by the Luftwaffe from a core that was Victorian brick supplemented by green-painted wooden sheds and cold, damp Nissen huts. That, however, is how I realize it was. Then – as is the case for all school children – it was simply a completely usual primary school, where all the boys wore the uniform of similar short pants and blazers, and all the girls similar pinafore skirts. We had our lessons sitting two to a desk with inkwell in the middle of the forward edge. We took our recess in the asphalted playground unless the rain were especially heavy. The morning recess was preceded by drinking a third of a pint of milk from a glass bottle using a straw. When we were in the Nissen huts, the milk was placed next to the coal-fired stove to prevent it from freezing. As I said – a usual primary school.

Like many other kids, I took a regular city bus to school, one that wound from an eastern suburb towards the Woolston Floating Bridge on the River Itchen that marked one boundary of the city proper. As seven or eight-year old schoolboys we always hoped that the downstairs of the double decker would be full, or at least full enough that we could claim so. Then we'd take to the upper deck, braving the grey fog of second hand tobacco smoke, though perhaps Woodbines – also called Gaspers – stretched the definition of tobacco. Mothers always knew we'd been there, as clothing and hair would then bear the sour stench of the smoke.

Our reward upstairs was to look out to the west to see which liners were in port. We couldn't actually see the ships for the city buildings that lay between the rivers Itchen and Test, and it was in the latter that the docks had

been built. But we could see the funnels, and we knew their conformations. The three raked ones of the Queen Mary; the two massive ones of the Queen Elizabeth. Both ships over 80,000 tons. Two relatively wider spaced red funnels marked Cunard's smaller Mauretania. And the two red, white and blue funnels were the United States, the last and still current holder of the Blue Riband. There were probably others that I knew at the time, but the paintings on the wall of the restaurant were the ones I remembered. Through the meal, I seemed to move back and forth across the decades, not quite one place and time nor another. There was almost an ethereal dimness of light recalling the smoke but without the smell of it.

At the end of our meal, I asked the head waiter why the restaurant had the ship portraits.

"Well saah, I'm not rightly shore, but I's thinking the owner he find them ocean liners right pretty."

Perhaps the owner had been, like me, captivated by the quality of those great ships. They were, indeed, "right pretty", even if you could only see the funnels.

J C Nash ©2017-09-16

Chemistry

We'd decided to invite some friends for dinner, having not seen them for nearly a year. The wife was about the same age as my wife and I, but the husband was a bit older, all of us, as they say, "up in years". I phoned to suggest some dates, but the response was negative.

"I'm sorry to have to decline", Eva said, "but Robert's just had all his teeth out. Well, all that were left. The dentist said he'd be better off with full dentures. I'm having to feed him soup after putting it through the blender, and smoothies and things like that. He doesn't feel much like leaving the house, I'm afraid."

After the call, all I could seem to think about was a fellow student I'd known half a century earlier. We were both about 20, and shared several classes. Shirley was from a rural community, doing a general science degree. She was pleasantly attractive, a trim but curvy blonde with intensely blue eyes who was friendly in a quiet but not shy way. We were lab partners in one of the chemistry courses and got along well, which is not always the case, so one day I asked if she'd like to have dinner and go to a movie.

"Sure." she said, "But I can't afford much.", staking her claim to some equality.

I offered to pay. I was on a scholarship. She wasn't. We bargained a bit, and agreed I'd cover dinner and she would pay the movies, which meant she knew in advance what her expenses would be. There was a new restaurant doing pizza, then far from the common fare it is today, and it wasn't far from the movie theatre we decided to patronize.

Given neither of us had a car, and we each lived on different bus routes though not very far apart, we agreed to meet at the restaurant. As we ordered, she said "I'm fine with everything but corn on the cob." which led to the revelation that every tooth she had was false. It turned out some sort of medical problem had led to catastrophic deterioration. The denture technicians had, fortunately, done a very good job. Her resilience to the ordeal was something I could not help but admire.

Over our pizza – I forget what type we ordered – we explored our interests. By the time I paid the bill, it was clear what we had in common was our set of classes. Outside this, we seemed to be living on separate planets. It was fortunate that conversation is not required in a movie. In the event, I recall it was "What's Up, Tiger Lily", an eminently forgettable comedy by

Woody Allen which overdubbed an existing Japanese movie with silly dialog. Though it received a reasonable box-office and critical reaction, I think both Shirley and I found it tedious after the first five minutes, a rare point of common ground.

Afterwards we went to the bus stop. We said a cordial goodnight and Shirley got on her bus which came before mine. There was no upset, no drama, and – quite obviously – no chemistry.

J C Nash ©2017-09-27

Old Grey Cat

Our old grey cat, she sleeps all day,
Curled on my bed or in a chair
The kids have grown and gone away
She dreams of times forever fair.

And she's so old, Too old to howl,
Hair shed about, see mother scowl.

Our old grey cat, on laps caressed,
You're in your suit or special dress
That's black or dark and Sunday best
Now covered with a furry mess.

And she's so old, Too old to howl,
Hair shed about, see mother scowl.

Our old grey cat, once threat to mouse,
No longer livens to the chase,
Just slowly ambles round the house,
Dropping fur in every space.

And she's so old, Too old to howl,
Hair shed about, see mother scowl.

J C Nash ©2017-10-08

Film Noir

In the early 1980s I earned – for my sins – the unpaid job of national treasurer of Amnesty International Canada. A group of our European members who were physicians or surgeons undertook, on their own initiative, the job of trying to rehabilitate some men and women who had survived the ministrations of Saddam Hussein's secret police. Based on their work, they published a report, complete with colour photographs of the medical sort. A document that definitely should have had the "May upset some viewers" label.

Staff of our organization would, pro forma, invite embassies to accept a delegation to deliver such reports. Usually there was no reply, or else a strident claim that the report was lies. On this occasion, however, we were given a date and time when we could deliver the report.

Though the report was prepared in Europe – I recall in Denmark – it was published in London. As I said, our message to the embassy was pro forma. Similar letters would be sent in other countries to their Iraqi embassy. Given that we didn't normally get a chance to make a delivery, we had to scramble to find some local members free at 11 a.m. on a weekday. I was the only member of the national executive available.

We were met at the barred door by two tall men with sunglasses and bushy moustaches, with large pistols in holsters under their jackets. After proceeding through a couple of heavy doors, both locked behind us, we were greeted by a short, stocky woman in a purple dress. She had a very large bosom, almost certainly requiring custom supportive underwear. Her main fashion accessory was a very large automatic pistol, so large that it might be mistaken for a converted field artillery piece. This was in a holster by her left breast.

One tries to overlook physical disabilities. However, the lady in question had a pronounced limp. This had the effect of giving the pistol handle a bizarre trajectory. As a mathematician I immediately thought of the cycloid, which is the path a light on a wheel rim will trace as the wheel rolls. Indeed, throughout our visit, my thoughts kept wandering to thoughts of the functional description of the curve the pistol was executing when she walked.

With the moustached guards and the heavily armed and limping executive assistant to the Ambassador, it was almost as if we were in a film noir where the director was greedy to use every cliché. Need I mention that our visit was a study in the extremes of hypocrisy. We were ushered into a sort

of living room where there were sofas and a table with nuts and brandy. We declined the brandy and did not ask if it were appropriate either for the time of day or the religious sentiments of the Iraqi population.

We were told that the report was patently untrue. In response we – mainly I as my colleagues were rather quiet – noted that the study authors had taken great pains to document their work and their subjects carefully. The ambassador, who for some reason had to tell us that he held a Syrian passport as well as an Iraqi one, said that it went against his country's culture to do anything nasty to women. He called them "ladies", and I don't recall him ever saying the word "women". I won't describe the indignities inflicted as well as the medical consequences reported by the medical personnel. After some minutes of back and forth, the ambassador came to the climax of his argument. This was that if the victims in the report really had been tortured, surely they would not be allowed to leave Iraq and tell people. At this point, we – equally hypocritically I suppose – thanked the Ambassador for receiving us and got up to leave.

Once again the large pistol made its curious wobbling path through the air. The moustaches carefully unlocked one door, led us through, locked it, then unlocked the outer door and let us out onto the street.

It was a sunny day. The air felt clear and clean, but I still wanted to take a long bath to rid myself of the stench of evil.

J C Nash ©2017-10-18

Wordless

If any day can be called usual, it was a usual Fall day. A Thursday. The temperature was around 10 degrees Celsius. The sky was grey but there was no rain, almost no breeze. The leaves were yellows and reds and browns on the trees or on the ground. The office where Tony worked had its usual level of noise as people answered calls in their cubicles.

It was around 11:30 that Tony heard Sandra, the girl – well woman – who worked in the cubicle diagonally across from his in the quad where he sat answer her phone.

“Oh, no. I see. Yes. Yes. I have a pen and paper. Phillips Funeral Services, ... Yes. 1225 Victoria Street. Yes I have that. ... 10 a.m. Monday. Thank you for letting me know.”

Tony heard her pull a tissue from the box on her desk, and a little later she blew her nose. Then she got up and walked over to the glassed in office from which Katie Marchant, the Manager, surveyed her domain. Tony couldn't hear Sandra's voice except for a few syllables, but he could hear Katie.

“I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother. Monday and Tuesday away will be fine. There's a form for bereavement leave in the HR section of the common files. Just fill that out and email me a copy. Well, yes, a copy of the obituary if you could attach it would save questions from the bean counters. You could take tomorrow off too if you want.... Yes, sometimes it's better to keep occupied.”

Katie was often hard-nosed. This was about as sympathetic as Tony had known her.

Sandra and Tony had been co-workers for about 18 months. He didn't know her that well. They'd chatted over lunch from time to time, even gone to the local Tim's together twice. He knew that there was some crisis when she was little and her grandmother had raised her in a town somewhere a couple of hundred kilometres away. A pleasant, tidy woman, rather shy, who clearly didn't paint the town red. When they ate lunch together, they talked about books, movies, and museums, or else about food and cooking. She was not striking, not unusual. Pleasant. Nice.

Tony wasn't shy, but he kept much to himself. For the past couple of years his life was more or less on auto-pilot. Althea, his girlfriend since he finished university, had descended into a mire of severe mental illness that

he eventually realized he could not in any way assist her to cope with. He had sufficient self-understanding to recognize when her illness would destroy them both, and with much guilt and anguish had moved to another city, another job, and a new but grey and featureless life. He knew that had they been married or living together, they would both have ended up with ruined lives. That didn't make leaving any easier.

Sandra came back to her cubicle, then put on her jacket and left the office. Tony wondered if she were taking an early lunch. He decided to take his break now. He didn't want to intrude, but ...

When he got to the front door of the building, he saw that she was sitting on the small, backless bench that some architect felt obliged to draw into the tiny green patch in front of the building. Tony could see the tissue in her hand.

He wanted to go and put an arm round her, to try to do something to ease her distress. No. In the current climate of fury against men who thought their physical urges took priority over the wishes of others, that could be misunderstood. And Tony regarded Sandra as a woman. When she'd worn a pleasant and modest sun-dress in the heat of summer, he'd wondered what — well he'd wondered. From overheard conversations of groups of women, he knew they had similar thoughts. But he also knew well-enough from the early days with Althea that a satisfying man-woman connection required daydreams to align.

He found himself angry with the idiots who made it impossible for a simple and human gesture like an arm round a shoulder to be accepted for just that and no more. Ordinary, usual, humane behaviour could be misunderstood, even frighten those taking it the wrong way. He found his fury suddenly spike. Then he let the anger go because it would not give any measure of comfort to the person who needed it.

He'd stood just outside the door for about 5 minutes. Sandra was still on the bench with her back to him. Finally he went over and sat down next to her and simply put his hand palm up to the side and a little in front of hers. She looked up at him, then at his hand, and then put her hand on his.

They sat there like that for about a quarter hour. Then Tony noticed her look down the street where there was a display that cycled the time and temperature. Sandra said "Thanks," got up, and went back into the building.

J C Nash ©2017-10-24

All Hallows Eve

The letter from the Chairman of the Board of the Great Northern Railway was quite long for what was, essentially, a summons to a meeting in Edinburgh on November 1. On October 22, 1895, a combination of a train trying to make up lost time and a failure of the Westinghouse Air Brakes left the locomotive one hundred feet beyond the buffer and outside the front glazing of the Gare Montparnasse in Paris. A woman was killed by falling masonry. There were rumours that there could have been tampering. In the light of the ongoing competition between trains of the GNR and its North East Railway partner along the East Coast route and the London and North West Railway using the Western track, the company wanted to ensure the safety of its passengers and trains. And of course, its profits.

I had done rather well as a consulting engineer for a variety of industrial clients, including the railways. In the light of the current competition, becoming known as the Race to the North, I had agreed to only work for the GNR/NER partnership. For this, my per diem fee was increased by 50%. I kept some work outside the railways. Indeed I had just been engaged by a company that exhibited at the Horseless Carriage Exhibition held in the Agricultural Show Grounds on October 15 here in Tunbridge Wells. As far as I know, this is the first exhibition of motor cars in Britain.

The summons, as I shall call it, arrived on Wednesday, Oct 30. To avoid alerting anyone that there were concerns of possible sabotage, the meeting would be in Edinburgh rather than London. Moreover, I was instructed that I should bring a companion so that my journey would appear to be a pleasure trip. I was to telegraph my consent as "Lunch at one acceptable" to a name and address I did not recognize.

After apprising Amelia of the letter – indeed I let her read it – I sent the telegram. The letter gave instructions about travel and accommodation with an address in London where tickets and, happily, an advance on expenses would be waiting. I put the letter away in my briefcase along with some papers I gathered relating to braking of trains and secured the lock. Not trusting that the advance would be generous, and content to indulge Amelia, I opened my strongbox and ensured my wallet and her reticule were comfortably supplied.

We informed Hilda, our maid, that we would be going to Scotland for personal matters for a few days, planning to return on Tuesday night unless

we telegraphed otherwise. She was to inform cook and our occasional yard man. I added that as long as the necessary house duties were complete and security maintained, they could arrange their own timetable. This news was gratefully received. Most people in my position would have more servants. I had grown up in modest circumstances, as had Amelia. We were imposters to the upper middle class.

In the event, we left our house up the hill from the High Street in Tunbridge Wells around 10 o'clock so we could enjoy the afternoon in London. The address for the tickets was near Charing Cross. We put our valises in Left Luggage and walked the short distance to the address in Aldwych. There we were met by a Mr. Boothroyd who gave me a fat envelope containing tickets, a note with the address and instructions for a hotel in Edinburgh with which I was unfamiliar, and where we would hold our meetings on Friday. Fortunately, it appeared to be in a reasonably fashionable area not far from Princes street.

Mr Boothroyd informed me – Amelia was ignored on a seat in the ante-room and only I was ushered into his office – that the company had doubled the equipment inspections and added an extra guard in view of the unfortunate events in Paris. Moreover, two of the guards had been given revolvers. The management clearly had the wind up.

I was glad to escape Mr Boothroyd's nervousness, but before exiting I put the train tickets in my wallet and the money and instructions in a separate inside pocket. My briefcase was in left-luggage, actually inside a rather large valise. A pleasure trip and a briefcase do not go well together.

We found lunch in a pleasant public house along the Strand. Sometimes it is helpful to overlook class boundaries. Then we spent the rest of the afternoon in the National Gallery. Amelia is quite knowledgeable about artists, and it is a joy to me to hear her enthusiasms.

Around closing time, we returned to Charing Cross and collected our luggage, then took a handsome cab to King's Cross. Boothroyd had suggested we take dinner on the train, which departed at 8 p.m., so we simply had tea in the cafe while we waited, though some scones took our fancy. They were, sadly, less tasty than they appeared.

At 7:30 we went to the platform. Forgetting our position, we omitted to engage a porter, and were the only passengers for our sleeper car carrying our own valises. Our steward was a Scot – I think from north of Edinburgh by his accent – and he informed us that we could proceed as soon as we wished to the dining car. Once he had opened our luggage and hung up our coats, I tipped him half a crown and asked him to wake us in the morning about three quarters of an hour before arrival.

Amelia checked her hair. I combed what was left of mine, and we went to the dining car. Another scot greeted us.

“Good evening, Sir. Madam. May I seat you here.”

We took our chairs. Outside there was bustle and doors slamming. Finally a whistle and the train started moving with a slight jerk. Our waiter returned and said, mostly to me,

“As it is All Hallows Eve, we have a selection of malt whiskeys so that at least there will be some spirits about. Would you like to start with one.”

I should – at this rather late stage – tell you about Amelia. While I have passed more than six decades on this earth, Amelia is barely 40 and looks a good deal younger. We met when my first wife, Geraldine, was dying of a cancer of the feminine organs. Amelia was a private nurse, and a very good one. That was over fifteen years ago. Our relationship was totally correct. It was not until a year after Geraldine’s death that I encountered Amelia on the Pantiles. I offered tea and she accepted. After several months where we met for walks or lectures or concerts, we realized we liked being together. We have now been married for a dozen years, and they have been the happiest of my life. I believe also for her.

However, despite our entirely proper relationship, she is often mistaken for ... well ... my mistress. In this late year of Queen Victoria’s reign, many men in my general situation seem to have mistresses. Few even sleep in the same bed as their wife. I know this particularly from overhearing Hilda talking to cook one day.

“They must be the only pair that use just one bed. Not that I’m complaining – less work for me.”

In the dining car I could see that there was another engineer I knew. His companion was not the wife I had been introduced to. This lady and Amelia were getting looks from other diners. Amelia took off her gloves and put them in her reticule and rested her hand where her wedding ring was visible. I’ve told her this probably will not convince those willing to think badly of us.

The waiter returned with a trolley on which there were a number of bottles. I like malt whiskeys, but am not well informed about their qualities, so I chose a name I recognized.

“Neat please.” I said.

“And for madam. Perhaps some sherry.”

“No. The same as my husband. Neat.”

“Madam, the railway cannot serve a lady neat whiskey.”

“It’s All Hallows Eve, I am Scots born, and I will have my malt undiluted.” Amelia said clearly without shouting, but still audible to all in the car. The waiter looked discomfited, sensing his gratuity evaporating faster than any spirits in the car. I had, honestly, overlooked Amelia’s Scottish birth. She was brought to England as a baby, and she had no remaining family connections.

“Of course, madam,” said the waiter, and poured us our measures.

Other diners were now more interested in us than ever. I held up my glass,

“To my wife, the love of my life.”

“To my husband, who is mine.” Amelia responded.

A couple across the aisle caught our eye. They raised their glasses to us. We responded in kind. The train raced on through the night. We ate a splendid meal and retired at 10 to our compartment. I was going to take the upper bunk, but Amelia said

“Richard, come in with me. I want you close. The Halloween demons have already put mischief words in my mouth and I need you to keep them away.”

As I said, the love of my life.

*This short story has become the opening of the novel **Love and Iron***

John C. Nash ©2017-10-24

Santa's Sleigh

When you're a kid, the Christmas story about Bethlehem and the birth in the stable is a lot less compelling than Santa Claus and what he might bring you. And I doubt many kids care about the link between the two stories.

My Dad was a car mechanic. He and Mum grew up in the Depression, but in a small town like Prescott, I guess it might not have been so bad if you didn't expect too much. Anyway, when I came along just before World War II started, he'd been working a few years in his uncle's garage and could fix most cars and trucks and tractors around the area, as well as a few boat engines and other machinery.

With me and then my sister Jean, he was in no hurry to enlist, and didn't have to. But come the middle of the war, there's a need for mechanics, and he ends up in the RCAF as what they called a fitter. That's really a mechanic for aero engines. He was at Trenton for well over a year, so he and Mum saw each other on and off, and I remember him home, I think twice before they shipped him overseas.

We'd get letters, and Mum was pretty worried, especially when it was clear he'd be part of the invasion force. He was assigned to the Tactical Air Force, and was working on Hawker Typhoons with the big Napier Sabre engine. Double the power of the Spitfire's Merlin, with 24 cylinders. A powerful beast, but we learned later a horribly temperamental one. And an average 19 hours service life. But in Canada all we got was how wonderful all our planes were and how skilled the pilots.

Dad was away for Christmas 1943, then Christmas 1944. We had other family, but there was somehow this big hole in the picture. I'm only a kid, but even if the details aren't revealed, you know something's wrong, and you've a pretty good idea what it's about.

Then sometime late in January 1945 we get a letter from Dad, but it's got a different return address – the service unit number – from his squadron one. And Dad's been wounded. Apparently on the morning of January 1, the German Luftwaffe threw everything they had at the Allied air bases. Dad was at Eindhoven, he told us later, and they lost 141 aircraft on the ground. The Germans even used their new Messerschmidt 262 jets to strafe the airfield. Hell, we didn't even know what a jet was back then.

Dad picked up a machine gun bullet in his leg. Said he was lucky it wasn't a cannon shell. The 20mm cannon shells were usually explosive, and

he'd have been dead. As it was, he was pretty badly hurt. He lost the leg just below the knee, and it wasn't very easy for the surgeons to tidy up.

His letter had been up-beat and cheerful, but several decades later I know it hid a lot of suffering and worry. He ended up having several operations to make it possible to have a prosthetic fitted, then healing time, so it was pretty late in 1945 before he was fit enough to travel home.

We got quite a few letters over that year – he had plenty of time to write, so we heard from him pretty often, and he'd put in a bit just for me and another just for Jeannie. These bits he printed. I was only in grade 2 and just learning to read and write. Jeannie was too young to read, or perhaps even understand what was read to her then, but she really treasures those letters now.

Then we got the letter that he'd be coming home, hopefully by Christmas. Of course, there were the inevitable foul-ups, and it started to look doubtful he'd make it in time, but we started to prepare anyway. Mum was nervous, I think she wasn't sure who would come home. He could be a stranger now, even if the letters seemed to be from the same Dad we'd known.

A further letter told us he'd be on the SS *Letitia*, a passenger ship converted to a hospital ship and now mostly for returning servicemen to Canada, though perhaps they kept some of the medical facilities to make it easier with wounded men like Dad. There wasn't a schedule, but then on December 23 – Sunday morning – we get a telegram from Halifax that the ship has landed and he'll be on a train arriving Christmas Eve.

We get down to the station in the late afternoon. Of course we're there early. My Uncle Joe has driven us in the big pre-War Packard he'd managed to build out of about three wrecked ones he'd picked up somewhere. It had snowed about an inch on the 19th, but now there's just a few flakes in the darkening afternoon. We stamp about on the cold platform, waiting and waiting. Finally down the line I see the big center light of the locomotive. If this were five years later, I'd talk of Rudolph and his red nose, except that song hasn't been written yet, and the light was yellowy-white anyway. And the red light's at the back of the train.

Then we hear the long whistle and after a bit the bell of the slowing train. And as the big Hudson locomotive snorts steam and screeches the brakes, I can't help thinking that the six big driver wheels are the reindeer and the train is the sleigh. The engineer leans out of the cab, and he even has a white beard. Probably one of the retirees brought back when younger men went in the services.

There are just a few passengers for Prescott, and we watch for Dad. It takes a long time, seemingly forever. We wonder if he's not on the train, but nobody wants to say anything. Jeannie is fidgeting. I'm thinking I'm

unhappy and want to cry but know I mustn't. The conductor has put a stool by one of the steps. Then a figure appears stepping down awkwardly with a stick. Someone lifts out a big kit bag and a pair of crutches. But the man with the stick leaves the bag and crutches on the platform and resolutely takes a couple of steps towards us as we all run to him.

J C Nash ©2017-11-26

Slips

If you travel to places where different languages are used, you are bound to encounter opportunities for embarrassing miscommunication. Some of these, in certain cultures, constitute incitement to an international incident.

For example, don't ask that fruit vendor in Turkey for a kilo of peaches. The Turkish word "piç", spelled P, I, C-cedilla, means "bastard". And not a pejorative endearment like "Those Aussie bastards sure like their beer." More "You filthy bastard, reach for your six-shooter!".

Turkish also has some other unfortunate traps. A nice Italian-Canadian I knew rapidly started introducing herself as Tina rather than Zina when she found out the latter meant "adultery". Again, a word with somewhat stronger connotations than here in Canada.

But languages don't have to be exotic or unfamiliar to present cowpads. And, as John Diefenbaker said disparagingly of Otto Lang, there are some people who can walk through a field with just three and step in them all. So watch out when you read the French word "notoriété". The English "notoriety" isn't quite the same.

The linguistic black ice is particularly treacherous with colloquial expressions in social situations. The wolfish French guy chatting up a girl at a party got very excited when he overheard her telling a friend "I'll give him the slip and meet you later."

Well, I'll leave you to look that up.

J C Nash ©2017-11-29

Sleeper

There are seven meanings of “sleeper”. Yes. Seven.

But just one of them keeps me awake. Big joke. Sleeper keeps me awake. Yes, big joke, but it’s on me.

That’s because it isn’t the first definition: one that sleeps.

Nor is it number 2. That is, a piece of timber, stone, or steel on or near the ground to support a superstructure, keep railroad rails in place, or receive floor joists. That is, a railway sleeper. No sir. Not that.

And thinking of railways, it isn’t number 3 either: a car with beds or bedrooms on a train, that is, a sleeping car. Definitely not.

Number 4. Definitely not!. That’s children’s pyjamas usually with feet — usually used in the plural. I never wore those myself. My family couldn’t afford special clothing like that.

Nor is it that chiefly British number 5: a small earring or stud worn to keep the hole of a pierced ear from closing. No. I’m not worried about anything that lets people maintain a hole in their head, should they need to.

Well, that leaves numbers 6 and 7, since they are rather similar. Number 6: someone or something unpromising or unnoticed that suddenly attains prominence or value.

Number 7 says that it’s the 4th meaning of “mole”, namely, a spy (such as a double agent) who establishes a cover long before beginning espionage.

Yes, it’s definitions 6 or 7 that’ve been giving me headaches and stomach aches and gas and who knows what else.

You see, I’m a sleeper.

My twin sister and I were toddlers when the Hungarian uprising took place in ’56. A lot of people got out, sneaking across the border to Austria in the middle of dark nights. My family too, that is my parents, Marika and I, and our older brother Joseph who was 7. Dad got us across the border, then announced that he was going back to fight. He and Mom get into a big row. He heads back towards Hungary and Marika runs after him. We lose them in the dark and mist and then hear a shot. We hear dogs and ease back further into Austrian territory.

Eventually we find out Dad’s dead, and of Marika we hear nothing. Mom has some sort of breakdown, but some distant relatives in Canada take us in. Eventually Mom gets better, meets a nice man who’s wife has died of cancer with two kids of similar ages to Joe and I and we become a pretty ordinary

Canadian family.

I'm in first year university when this student – Ivan – sits beside me in poli-sci class. Starts talking to me in Hungarian. I understand it, but really I'd prefer not to use it. I'm Canadian now. English please, or French as an alternative. Anyway, he says he just wants to be friendly. He's a bit older – been working in lumber camps to save up for university, or so he says. We meet occasionally over the next few years. I graduate, go elsewhere to get a masters, then I need a job.

Though I'm now fully Canadian, I'm also pretty angry with what Dwight Eisenhower termed “the military industrial complex” and its nasty little profit centre called the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese call it the American War. Canada is sort of saying one thing with our lips, but a lot of businesses are making money supplying the US forces.

Despite my ideals, I do what everybody does when they want to eat, and I sell out for a good job in the public service. I end up being an admin officer, so I'm pretty much assigned all over the place. After a few months, I happen to bump into Ivan on Sparks Street. He suggests we meet for a beer sometime, and one Friday night we do. As we're catching up, a guy walks by, and Ivan says “Hi”. Of course, it was a set up, and the new guy is Michael, who's a trade officer at the Hungarian embassy. When he learns my name, he says, “What a coincidence, I married a girl Marika with the same last name.” And my name is kind of rare.

Of course it's my twin sister. What takes me a while – far too long to disentangle myself – is that she and her husband are hard-core operatives for one of the eastern bloc's intelligence agencies. They don't want anything now. Just to keep in touch. But we all know that sometime in the future they'll ask. But not for a while. Maybe a long while. In the meantime, they are going to be my biggest cheerleader, because the higher I get in government, the more valuable I am to them.

So I immerse myself in the power game, doing an excellent job on the details and making sure any statement I make of a political nature is so mainstream as to sedate a marble statue. And I move up and around, and eventually I'm offered a post that is essentially the head of an un-named outfit that provides the information and sometimes the actions that turn diplomatic talk into results.

There isn't an interview for this, but I'm invited to lunch at Hi's on Queen Street. If you've been there, you know it had a layout and furnishings to permit discreet conversation. My host is a member of the Privy Council. His name didn't get in the news often, which was as he wished it. After I learn about my new job, he tells me a story, which nearly gives me a heart attack. He says,

“Some years ago I had dinner in Oxford with Sir Maurice Bowra, then

Warden of Wadham and a well-respected classicist. He told me that in the 30s he ran some summer schools for wealthy students and amateurs on the classical world in the Aegean area. He used some bright students to help run the show, and one of these was from 'the other place' – Cambridge. This guy was brilliant at languages and a very competent 'fixer'. A few years later, the student is applying for the British Civil Service and asks Bowra for a reference, which, given the student's abilities, Bowra gives. Only the student was Kim Philby."

I managed to hide my anxiety, and never discovered how much he really knew or suspected. So I ended up in a place where I knew lots and could do quite a bit – not all of it admissible on the record of course. But now that moment has come at the end of the 80s where the iron curtain is just a few layers of rust. In April 1989, the Hungarians started taking down the electric fence on the Austrian frontier. Internally, there are plenty of old scores to settle, and of course the West has our own sleepers that we can "activate". Not Canada actually, but I was called to a poker party in Atlantic City. By a marvellous coincidence my British, American and Australian counterparts were playing for penny chips, or rather NOT playing for them.

Associates of one of the agencies had a serious grudge against Michael and Marika. Turned out Marika was exceptionally nasty. She and Michael might even have made all the major secret police decisions, such as when a few people stopped bothering to breathe. This included some folk near and dear to my poker school buddies, and there was a strong hint that there might be an "accident".

I was a sleeper. Michael had told me himself I was to play the committed servant of Her Majesty in Right of Canada. So I nodded, then went and got myself a double scotch. A couple of days later, the atypically luxurious house where Michael and Marika lived suffered a gas leak and explosion. There were two fatalities.

From the outside, my situation didn't change. From the inside, my sleep was permanent. To give himself some protection in the uncertain world of Eastern bloc intelligence, Michael ran all the sleepers himself and gave nobody the names and contact information, though he might have told Marika about me. It didn't matter now. Unless

J C Nash ©2017-12-19

The Long View

“There you are William. I wondered if anything happened.” Zoe said in greeting.

I stepped inside out of the Autumn cold and put my case down and shut the door as I explained “The plane was actually a few minutes early, but the luggage took forever and then all the taxis were gone. I had to wait 20 minutes for one.”

“You should have taken the bus, but not many people know about it.”

“And it needs exact change, doesn’t it?”

“That too. Well, you’re here.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to greet her, and settled for a hug, my mouth close to her ear, but I couldn’t think just what to say. We held onto each other for about half a minute.

We separated awkwardly, neither quite ready to let go.

“It’s been what? Three years?” I asked.

“Nearly four. I visited right after I retired. But we’ve a good chunk of the country between here and where you and Julia live.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t quite say more.

“Did you have a good flight?”

“OK. But the airport and airplane were both overheated. We’ve had unseasonably warm weather compared to here, and I think they’d put the heating on for the usual temperature. I got all hot and sticky. Could use a shower.”

“Let’s take your things up. You can have a shower or a bath, then we can eat if you’re hungry.”

“Despite the best efforts of the air transport industry to encourage starvation by extortionate food prices, I don’t feel that hungry right now, but I’ll probably feel a bit like something once I’ve cleaned up.”

“Well, bring your bag upstairs. I can take the hand luggage – oh, it’s really heavy.”

I was about to follow her up the stairs.

“A couple of printed copies of my new book, plus computer and emergency change of clothes. And medications, of course. At our age there seem to be more and more.”

“Yes. I’ve a couple to take every day. Here we are. I’ll put you in the guest room.”

There was a very awkward pause.

“You don’t want to share your bed?”

“Well, er, ... It’s just I’m not sure you’d want to still. ”

“We have when we could. Why not now?”

“Um. ... I had the ovarian cancer discovered just after I last visited you and Julia.”

“Oh. Scars etc.?”

“And wrinkles and brown spots.”

“You think you’re the only one. And you think I’d care?”

Zoe blushed. “I’ve mostly lived alone, as you know. Sometimes it’s hard to realize you want to be with me.”

“Why don’t I shower while you get us something to drink. Then I’ll fill the bath and we’ll sit and chat and get used to each other.”

“William. I might not be able to ... you know. After the operation, things are a bit dry and different.”

“And my equipment isn’t as ... er ... reliable ... as when I was in my twenties. Or even my fifties.”

Zoe laughed. “That shouldn’t be comforting, but somehow it is.”

I undressed in the guest room. We’d always put my things there, but I’d slept with Zoe in her double bed. "Always". It had only been a few occasions over many years. We’d met in university, almost 50 years before. Then she’d gone away to Europe to grad. school and I’d taken up with her best friend Julia, who’d become my wife. But we’d stayed friends, and about 30 years ago when I’d visited we somehow ended up in bed together. Perhaps out of curiosity, or in Zoe’s case, perhaps need. Her circumstances had been difficult, with a mentally handicapped brother whose care needed management to ensure he had a humane and positive life. He had work in a sheltered workshop, and lived with several similar people and a caregiver in a community house. But Zoe had some responsibilities, and they’d somehow got in the way of her own life.

Once I showered, I filled the tub and sat in it. I’d just got seated when Zoe came in, stark naked, with a tray of two plastic glasses and a small bowl of nuts, also plastic.

“Hope you don’t mind plastic glasses for the wine. I don’t want to risk broken glass in the tub.”

“Sensible. But what man would ever object to wine served up by a naked lady?”

Zoe laughed. She passed me a glass, set hers on the forward corner of the tub, put the bowl of nuts on the floor mid-tub, then climbed in. I made room between my legs and she sat down and, after picking up her wine, leaned gently back against my chest.

“Cheers!” she said.

“Cheers!”

We each took a sip of wine and I followed her lead in putting my glass beside the nuts – her glass forward of the bowl, mine aft.

“I was almost too shy to come in.” she said.

“Why? We’ve known each other for about half a century.”

“Sometimes that seems like it was different people.”

“Possibly. I don’t think so.”

“And we were never naked together then. We went out for quite a while, but never got to ... bed together. That came almost a couple of decades later.”

“Isn’t that more reason to be comfortable with each other now?”

“I suppose. And I realize I’m not being very rational about it.”

I soaped her front. It was still a pleasure to glide my hands over her breasts and tummy, but she stiffened as I approached the surgery scar.

“Painful?” I asked.

“No. Not at all. Just me being sensitive about it.”

We sipped some wine, and Zoe picked up the nut bowl and we each took some before she put it back down.

“That we did end up in bed together back then possibly saved my life ... at least a decent life.” I said.

“Really!” Zoe turned her head to try to look at me. I kissed her cheek. “I’d no idea. I thought things were going well for you and Julia.”

“There wasn’t anything particularly wrong between Julia and I, but I was having a bad time back then. I’d got established in my career with the government, and was doing some work I considered important. But I got a director who was really insecure I think, which made him issue all sorts of commands and directives so he felt powerful. It made life a misery. A tin pot despot. They exist lots of places. On top of that, some work I was trying to publish got stuck with referees who were lazy, got sick, one died, etc. And I think I started to take out my frustrations with Julia, and she turned cold. So I felt ... I don’t know ...diminished.”

“Then I had a business trip here, and arranged to stay over the Friday and Saturday to see you. You complained how your job and your family obligations with Michael made for a limited social life.”

“I think I said no love life.” Zoe intervened.

“Yes, even with you I euphemize.”

“We grew up in a time that required it.”

“Anyway, I said it was a pity I couldn’t be of assistance, and you know the rest.”

“But I was feeling ... well, diminished is a good description. Job troubles and a man I liked who wanted more time than I could give him. That’s why I had condoms when you visited that time.”

"I'm glad you did. Or we would never have discovered ... well, this. The comfort of being together. I suppose a very long term intimacy."

"True. And you made me feel wanted and valued. It took me out of the blue funk I'd got into."

"Did the man you were going out with not make you feel that?"

"Possibly. But we never got very close. Only a few dates. He said goodbye the night I planned to ask him to come home with me."

"Oh. You never?"

"No. So I was rather ... er... frustrated when you came to visit a few weeks later."

We were quiet for a minute or so.

"Funny how events conspire." I volunteered.

"I'm glad they did. It's been very important to me that we've had times like this together."

"There've been moments when I desperately wanted to be able to offer you more."

"That would have meant hurting Julia, and ultimately both of us too. And I suspect Julia was able to give you more of what you needed on a day to day, year to year basis. I know you love her deeply."

"Yes. More now than ever possibly."

"You're still close I think. So many couples drift into a comfortable coexistence."

"Yes. We still like each other's company. Like this too."

"I'd be surprised otherwise, knowing you both."

"Is the "other woman" supposed to be so understanding?"

"I guess I don't feel like the "other woman". Do you think of me that way?"

"Never. I think of you as Zoe. And Julia as Julia."

"Not your wife?"

"Occasionally I'll use the word, but "wife" seems so possessive. I belong with her and she with me. Not to her, nor her to me."

"As her own person?"

"Yes, as Julia. And you are Zoe. I've trouble separating my feelings for both of you."

"You mix us up?"

"No. Never. But the emotion is somehow common. Part of a sort of cloud that envelops all the people I love. But the cloud is thicker, more intense around the two of you. I hope I'm not upsetting you."

"No. We've never really talked about our feelings before."

"No. We haven't. But earlier it may have got too analytic and self-absorbed. I've always felt you cared about me – loved me, though possibly far from the Hollywood fashion. And I knew how I felt for you. Again, love,

but not in the style of romance stories. Somehow less strident, but deeper and more solid.”

I kissed her again, and she twisted her head and we managed a long, awkward kiss. It lasted long enough that I broke the kiss and the tension by gently tweaking her pussy.

“Oh. Stop that. You’re wicked.”

“You don’t want me to touch you like that?”

“Actually I like it. But I want to be like this for a bit longer. It’s possibly the most special time together.”

“Better put in some more hot water then.”

J C Nash ©2015-11-16

Mismatch

The long and the short of it was, I thought, that Emily and I were "long" and "short". I managed to stop a smile from spreading across my face as I noticed the middle-aged, very large and ungainly female supermarket worker scowl at me in the middle of "canned vegetables".

Yes. I was tall to Emily's short, well, by 2 inches. I was 65, she was 27. Her passions and enthusiasms were long term – climate change, Jane Austen novels, solutions to Grand Challenge questions. Mine were remarkably immediate – plans for dinner tonight, what was on this week.

It was all very ... inconvenient. At the same time it was exciting, wonderful, and ... ultimately ... frightening.

We'd met about a month ago at a scientific meeting in another city far away, only to discover we had the same hometown, albeit living quite some distance from each other. I'd presented a historic overview of some important scientific computations used in a variety of fields from economics to biochemistry. She had buttonholed me afterwards to ask some questions about currently available open source software, and we had had a pleasant and productive exchange. The following day was the last one of the meeting, and when we found ourselves next to each other at the coffee break she had mentioned she wanted to see a costume exhibit at a museum before going home. I asked about the exhibit, which was about how people dressed in the Napoleonic era which, of course, overlapped Jane Austen. Emily confided that she was a bit concerned that the museum was in a neighbourhood that was, to put it charitably, undergoing change. While, in fact, the surroundings of the museum were actually on an upswing, this was after a long slide into urban decay.

I'd suggested it might be something we could do together and we could continue to talk about scientific matters as and when we felt like it. The offer was accepted.

Over the afternoon, it was clear we enjoyed each other's company. I found it was the first time since Margaret died that I was ... well, comfortable ... and able to just be myself with a woman. But she was so young!

After the museum, we still had some hours before our flights home. Somehow we had different itineraries, each via different intermediate stops. Near the museum, we found a coffee shop that served light meals.

"This seems part of the urban renewal." I commented.

“It’s nice. I’m going to have something to eat so I’m not starving on the plane.”

“Good idea. I bought some dried fruit and nuts at the supermarket near the conference, but ‘proper food’ would be nicer.”

It was about 4 p.m. I let Emily order first. She asked for a quiche and salad, along with a large latte. I took a pot pie with salad and fries, and tea. We found a table and started eating.

“This should be enough. I won’t need all the fruit and nuts – you can have half if you like.”

“OK. But I should pay you.”

“Or give me some more when we’re back home.” I wondered if this sounded too forward. I wanted to see her again, but possibly this would sound contrived, though I’d said it spontaneously, without any intent at guile.

“OK. Be nice to chat. It’s been nice this afternoon. Men in my crowd don’t do costume exhibits, and a lot are conversationally challenged.” Emily responded.

“I’m very much out of touch with young people today. We used to see a few in the group Margaret and I danced with – some like you interested in Jane Austen or similar historical periods – but I haven’t had much chance to converse with any.”

“Oh yes. You mentioned you dance.”

“More past tense. My wife – Margaret – was killed in that bus accident two years ago. Somehow, I stopped going. I should have continued. People were nice and very sympathetic. A couple of the women paid a little too much attention, perhaps. Then I seemed to find excuses.”

“I’m sorry. Were you married a long time?”

“33 years. No kids – we were both academics. I’d been retired only a few months, which was a pity. I was at loose ends for about a year, then started to work with some of the Web-based software projects. Also to travel a little.”

“I’d love to travel. Student loans and the effort of finding a job. I’m really glad I found the data management and analysis job with the Institute. The pay could be better, and I don’t think there’s a lot of chance of upward movement, but it’s steady and I like the work.”

“And they probably only give you a couple of weeks holiday each year.”

“Actually, that’s one thing they are good about. Three weeks holiday plus 5 work days for meetings or conferences, with an allowance for expenses. That’s sort of an extra holiday. Within some rules we can choose how we spend the expense money and make it go further. I stayed in a hostel here, and my flight is awkward – I don’t get home until the early hours – but the cheapest I could find.”

“And I had a room with two double beds all to myself. Oops. That might sound ... well, suggestive, which wasn't how I was thinking.”

“But you're paying your own way, are you not?”

“Yes. Since I retired I'm not eligible for conference money from most of the funds the University has. And I don't feel it's right to dip into those when people in your age group or even older have to struggle to get to conferences and get published and all that.”

“Yes. Different ends of the road.” Emily said wistfully.

“But you got your Ph.D., so you're not that young.” I countered.

“27 last March. My friends all think I'm odd that I've not a steady boyfriend – or girlfriend, since that's OK now – and they've been trying to fix me up with dates.”

“With men or women?” Thomas grinned.

“Oh. Men. I made that clear.” Emily laughed. “But for some reason, they've seemed just ... well, pleasant for the most part. Sometimes a bit quick to want to get into my panties. I wouldn't mind that if I had a bit of conversation first and felt wanted for more than ... well, the words I want to use aren't polite in a nice coffee shop like this.”

“At least today one can admit that sex is important in a relationship. I had one friend, possibly a decade older than I am – he died five years ago of cancer unfortunately – who admitted the main reason he got married because it was the only way to have regular sex.

I'm not sure it was the main reason for Margaret and I, but it was part of the mix.”

“Do you miss her a lot still?”

“Yes. But less painfully than when she died, and for the most part things get easier all the time. But there are moments. And, though it's only just starting to be OK to say it at my age, I miss the sex too.” I wasn't sure if I should have said this, on top of the other blurtings. But Emily replied very matter-of-factly

“For what it's worth, I mostly accept the dates my friends arrange for me because I get horny from time to time.”

“I'm surprised nobody has stayed around then. In my era a woman who was ... er ... interested was worth hanging on to.”

“It's more likely me. I've not found anyone with the right chemistry, I guess. But I hope I do, and soon. I'm getting tired of three dates and goodbye.”

“Because you want children?”

“Not necessarily. My older brother has 3, and my younger sister has twin girls. I'm still debating with myself whether I want any.

More that I want a companion. Someone to chat with, curl up with.”

“Well, it’s considered politically incorrect to say so, but you’re a nice looking woman. Men must show interest from time to time.”

“Thanks for that. And I think it’s how someone tells you that. I mean as a straightforward opinion rather than a come-on.”

“We’ve only just met as professional colleagues. With our age difference, a come-on from me would not only be inappropriate but could be a prelude to ridicule.”

“Yes. Some guys can be creepy how they ooze up to you with fake compliments. You stated things more or less as they are.

While I know from the mirror that I’m not going to win beauty contests, I also know I look OK. I try to keep a reasonable weight, eat OK, exercise moderately, and dress in things I like that are probably rather boring but acceptable in most situations in which I find myself.”

“It’s sometimes hard to really gauge how we look to others. But I think you’ve got an appropriate assessment of yourself.”

I noticed Emily was looking at my plate. More specifically at the much reduced pile of fries. I said, “Go ahead and have some, if they fit into ‘eating OK.’”

“They probably don’t count as eating OK, but I’d be in big trouble if men knew how much I’m a sucker for fries on someone else’s plate.”

“I don’t count as a man?” I made sure I smiled when I said this, but inside it was uncomfortable to be reminded that she probably regarded me as about as sexual as the restaurant table.

Her answer surprised me.

“Of course you do! But you’re far too courteous and nice to take advantage.”

“I fear you have made a good assessment of me too. It’s true, I wouldn’t use my fries to take advantage of you, or anyone else.

Actually, that might be because I wouldn’t want a woman because she traded something like money or things I could give her for apparent affection or sex or whatever. That can be quite destructive in the long run. After all, how is it different from prostitution?”

“I think the same thing. I’ve a friend – no, an acquaintance – who married this guy who was her boss. He left his wife for her. It was very sleazy, and she’s the trophy wife, right down to the boob job he bought her. Sort of turned my stomach. But I guess it happens.”

“I know it does, too. I sometimes wonder ... No. I’ll leave my comments at that.”

After the meal, we returned to the conference venue where arrangements had been made for safe-keeping of luggage, then we took a shuttle bus to the airport where we said our goodbyes, though not before trading contact information.

About a week after I got home, I was about to call Emily when the phone rang.

“Hi Thomas. It’s Emily. Thought I’d give you a call and see if you got home OK.”

“Yes. Fine. You got in OK too?”

“Actually not until 10 the next morning. Plane had a defective engine and it took all night to fix.”

“No fun. And it messes up sleep for several days.”

“I’m waiting to find the errors I made at work this week. I’m sure there’ll be some.”

Anyway, I thought I should let you know I have some dried fruit for you, but I’m going to be away for two weeks holiday with family, so I won’t be able to deliver them until after that.”

“No hurry, but I’ll look forward to seeing you again. If I’m not mistaken, in three weeks time the dance group is having a welcome session for new and old alike. Would you like to go to that?”

“Sure. Do I have to dress up though?”

“No. The dancers only dress up for special occasions and for formal balls. I’d have to see if the moths have got my suit.”

“I’d love to see it. Do get it out to show me when I come.”

I said I would, and asked if she’d like a light dinner first. She didn’t have a car, but there was a reasonable bus service from where she worked. I suggested loose fitting clothes and flat heeled shoes, preferably with the soles and heels cleaned of outside dirt and gravel. We agreed to confirm the night before, and rang off.

The feeling of excitement after I hung up made me both elated and uncomfortable. I had just, in effect, planned a date with a much younger woman. Would she regard it as such? Probably not. Better get back to earth, buddy, or you’ll make a right fool – a right old fool – of yourself.

More than two weeks later, on a Friday night, the awkward feeling still hadn’t left me. It was something I remembered somewhat vaguely from when I was at most a young adult. If Emily didn’t think it was a date, and I didn’t think it was a date, somehow my body did. I would have to be exceptionally careful.

I made a simple pasta sauce and salad and got the water ready for the spaghetti. Emily actually arrived at my suburban townhouse condo earlier than I expected.

“I was lucky with the bus,” she explained. “It came as soon as I got to the stop, and somehow the traffic was heavy but moving steadily.”

She had a backpack.

“Is there a change of clothes in there?” I asked.

“Yes. Can I hang up the skirt? It doesn’t show the wrinkles, but I think it will look better if I hang it for a while.”

I showed her the guest room which had an almost empty closet. About a year ago I’d spent almost two months clearing out the house. Emily noticed.

“It’s got lots of space.”

“About a year ago I decided that I’d feel better if I put my own stamp on the place. I gave most of Margaret’s stuff to charity after selling anything of value. And I found I preferred much less clutter. Besides, if I have a guest, they have space to hang clothes and get comfortable.”

“Where’s your costume you wear for balls?”

“I’ve a couple of outfits. They’re on the other side of the closet here. Take a look if you want.”

I knew she did want. After all, she had said so. She looked over the two outfits I had, asking about the stockings that would be needed for the breeches, and if I had buckle shoes (no) or a walking cane (also no). But I did have hats, a tricorne and a straw one, and they were on the closet shelf. She took them down and examined them.

“Nice.”

“They aren’t much use when dancing, but look good for making an entry.”

“Yes. They’d look good on you,” she commented plainly.

I was aware that the hats added a certain cachet to my appearance in costume.

“Shall we eat? I don’t want to have to rush to the dance.”

We spent dinner talking mainly about work, or rather about the kinds of things we enjoyed or found boring in what we had worked on. Emily was surprised how active I was now getting with the software projects I was working on.

The dance proved a success, even if a bit disorganized. There were two people leading the dances, a man and a woman who I knew casually from some years before. I danced a couple of times with Emily, but generally we followed the traditional dance etiquette that Jane Bennett ignored with Mr. Bingley.

It was just after 10 when we got back in my car.

“We’ll pick up your things at my place and I’ll drive you home.” My house was on the way, as it turned out.

“OK. That’s more than you have to do, though.”

“This town’s pretty safe, but I’d still feel more comfortable knowing you were OK.”

“Thanks.”

We completed the drive to my house in silence.

“Do you want to change back?” I asked. Emily had put on her skirt and a top before we went to the dance.

"I don't need to.

Thomas. Could I have a cup of tea? I'm a bit thirsty."

"Sure." Actually I didn't want to say goodnight.

We made small talk about the dancing as I made the tea. I had some quite good cookies from a local bakery and we each had one with our tea. Emily said

"Thomas. I feel bad about you driving me home. It'll be close to midnight when you get back. Would it be silly to suggest I stay over until the morning."

"Wow. You must feel very safe with me."

"I guess." she said quizzically.

"I'll find the linen for the guest room."

"Oh. Silly me. That means work for you.

Look. If you've some PJs I can borrow, I'll either just sleep on top of the bed since it's quite warm, or if you feel OK with it, I'll share your bed, though I'm not on the Pill, so no ... er ... well, you know, unless you have some condoms."

"Emily, I'm kind of dumbstruck. No. I don't have any condoms. Though if I'd known you'd suggest this, I certainly would have made sure supplies were on hand."

"So you like me too?"

"The idea has been driving me nuts for the past couple of weeks. On one level it seems insane. On another, just right."

"Yes. Me too. A couple of wet panties moments. If I weren't embarrassed to do so, I'd have bought some condoms. I was kind of worried it would seem ... er ... calculating."

"Better that than getting pregnant."

"Yes. Actually I used to have some at home, but they were out of date. I got them a while ago. The few men I've had have generally come prepared."

"I'm beginning to think I should have been more of a Boy Scout."

We both laughed. But I was feeling uncomfortable because I'd got sweaty at the dance. Well, in for a penny

"I think I'll feel better if I have a shower before we get into bed," I said.

"Me too."

We'd finished our tea, so I got up and went to the linen closet and found a towel and face cloth for Emily. She had followed me upstairs, but disappeared into the bathroom before I could give them to her. I heard a tinkle and realized that she needed to pee. Hmm. So did I. I went and used the toilet in the ensuite. It had a quite large walk-in shower. Be nice to share. Well, it would for me. I wonder if Emily would be quite so forthcoming once she saw my ageing bod.

As I came out of the ensuite, Emily came into the bedroom.

“It’s nice. I think I like the uncluttered style you’ve established.”

I was glad I’d made the bed. I went to the tallboy and found some rather standard pyjamas; a shorts and shirt type.

“Will either of these do?” I asked.

“The short ones I think. They have a cord on the shorts too.”

Thomas. I suppose I should have asked this before, but you won’t ... get ... er ... out of control and ... force me?”

“I know I’ll want you. I’m already wanting out of my pants as you can probably see.”

“I’d noticed, while pretending not to,” she laughed.

“But I really do want your friendship and company, and I’ll lose that if I’m not on my best behaviour.”

“You don’t have to be a saint, just wait until we have the necessaries.”

I could get very attached to this girl.

“Do you want the shower in the main bathroom, or the one in the ensuite?”

She responded by walking into the ensuite and called back “This one. But it’s big enough for both of us, so bring my towel” (it was on the bed) “and come on in.”

I walked towards the ensuite and saw a bare bum stepping into the shower and a pile of clothes on the floor. I stepped back and undressed quickly, then walked naked into the ensuite. Emily had the water on and the door shut to avoid making the floor wet, but had not yet sent the water to the shower head.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

“Sure. I’ll wait until you’re in before turning on the shower head.”

She opened the door and I stepped in. Emily was taking a good look at me, and especially my sports equipment. On my part, I was giving her a good observation.

“I should have kept my glasses on,” she said. As she did so, I realized she was quite near-sighted. I was, if anything, far-sighted and generally only used reading glasses.

“Do you want me to get them for you?”

“No. I’ll take a good look either by getting close or waiting until after.”

I felt awkward. I felt excited. I felt desperate to touch her. To embrace her. She turned on the shower head and there was a moment of cold water before the warmth hit us. I put my arms round her, and she raised her face to me, so I kissed her lightly on the lips. She kissed me back quite firmly. My erection was insistently between us, pressing into her tummy.

“I’m sorry I don’t have more control over it,” I said apologetically.

“May I touch?” she asked.

“Of course. Just don’t get soap in the little hole.”

"I've heard that can be quite uncomfortable."

"Yes. Stings, and stays sore for a while," I explained.

She gently washed my penis and balls in the stream of water. I soaped her back and then her front while she did. Her breasts were quite small, but firm, and the nipples were straining to jump off her chest.

"These seem excited," I commented.

"Both of us are. Help me wash between my legs."

"You can take the shower head off it's hook there. The head is on a hose."

"Oh yes. See. I need my glasses."

We each washed crotch and crack, then turned off the water. We helped each other dry, kissing each other several times as we did.

"Shall I set you off so you can sleep?" Emily asked.

"I'd like that. May I touch you or kiss you?" I nodded towards her crotch.

"I wasn't sure ... er ... you'd want to go down on me."

"Sex isn't that new."

She laughed. We were by the bed, so I opened it, then pulled her down on it. Kissing her, I caressed her breasts, then moved my hand down over her tummy, past what is now called a "landing strip" and found her lower lips. Wet and slippery.

"Do you want to be on top?" I asked.

"You can. But maybe you want us on a towel to avoid ... er ... mess."

I went and got a big towel and we spread it out. Giggling, she laid back and spread her legs.

"Will that do?" she asked.

I answered by putting my mouth round her pussy and giving it a firm but gentle lick. Her gasp told me I'd found an appropriate target. She tasted nice, too.

"Of course, you know that two can play that game." she said, and I felt the head of my cock engulfed by warmth and exquisite pleasure.

"That seems to be a good number of players," I said, then resumed my attentions to her sensitive parts.

I'm not sure if we lasted more than a minute. I felt Emily tense and grunt, and I ejaculated at the same time. We kept contact mouth to sports equipment for quite a time, then moved around to lie side by side and pull up the covers.

"Thank you for that." I said, with feeling.

"I was going to say that too. In fact, I will. Thank you."

"I hope you didn't mind I went off like that."

"No. I moved you to the side of my mouth so I wouldn't get swamped by semen and could let you go off onto the towel but still be sort of in my

mouth. But you didn't squirt all that much."

"It's less in the last few years. Part of getting older."

"But some guys produce so much you could drown!"

"Too much of a good thing?"

"I like the sense of a man going off, but I don't want the flood, or like the taste. And the worry of the flood, etcetera, can upset my pleasure. But it was nice tonight. You didn't push your cock down my throat or even thrust at all."

"I didn't think that would be nice for you, and I was having such a nice time, I wanted it to last as long as possible, which wasn't very long at all, I'm afraid. And I'm probably getting ahead of myself, but at some point I'd really like it again, so doing something not nice to you would get in the way of that."

"Thomas. I must have sensed that, because I really let myself go with my orgasm. It was actually really good."

"I'm glad."

Now, shall we put on PJs?"

"Yes. And if you have a toothbrush you can give me, I should brush teeth. I'd forgotten that."

We dressed, brushed teeth at the same sink and settled into bed. She chose the same side Margaret had. I thought of saying something, then decided just to offer my arm, into which she settled quietly. We both were awake for perhaps ten minutes. A lot to think about. But soon we both drifted off to sleep.

On Saturday morning, I awoke with some trepidation, wondering if everything would fall apart on me in the harsh light of day, as they say. But Emily awoke at around 7:30 and gave me a kiss.

"You're bristly."

"I'll go shave."

I got up and shaved. Emily disappeared in the main bathroom and I heard the shower. When I came back into the bedroom, she was standing naked by the bed sorting out her clothes.

"You look very nice like that." I said. And I meant it. She wasn't a tall, slim goddess nor a roly poly type. Just a nicely proportioned lady who was there in my bedroom in her natural state.

"You really mean that, don't you?" she quizzed.

"Yes. I very sincerely mean it. And you may never quite appreciate how much last night and this morning mean to me."

"Shall we make breakfast, or do you want to take me home right away?"

"Why would I want to take you home right away?" I was genuinely confused.

“Perhaps your neighbours or friends might” she trailed off.

“We’ve done nothing overt to give offence. I believe in being fairly private about my personal life.”

“So do I, though I seem to say a lot to you.”

“We seem to be comfortable sharing our thoughts and feelings.”

“That’s new to me. Other men I’ve had seem to vanish by the end of breakfast, if not before.”

“What about your plans for today?”

“I’ve the standard house stuff. My apartment isn’t big, but there’s always some cleaning and laundry and you know what.”

“No plans for tonight?”

“Nothing specific.”

“Let’s start breakfast anyway.” I wanted to ask if we could spend the day together. And the night and the next day and The train was out of control.

We decided on an omelette. I do a mean peach omelette, which is surprisingly not very sweet. The secret is to use slightly under-ripe fruit. Emily made coffee. Nice, milky café au lait. As we were sipping our coffee after finishing the eggs, I asked,

“I’m almost afraid to ask, but should I suggest that we might get the appropriate supplies to ... you know.”

“Actually, I was wondering the same thing.” Emily replied. Wow. That was one for the books.

“You do know how to make a man uncomfortable.”

“How so? Oh. Yes. Over-anticipation!” she laughed.

“On a more serious level, I’m wondering how we should behave with each other in public. I’m not one for "public displays of affection", I think they’re called, but I generally offer a female companion an arm to link with.”

“We’ll work things out. I’m not for PDAs either.

Oh. Here’s the dried fruit. I forgot I had it in my backpack.”

We got back to her apartment about 11, having stopped at a drugstore along the way. Actually in a part of town I don’t regularly visit.

“Shall I go in alone? Or do you want to help decide?” I asked.

Emily hesitated, then said “Both. It’s kind of embarrassing, but it really should be a joint decision.”

We ended up going in together and selecting some plain and some novelty condoms, but I went through the cash alone. Emily followed with some menstrual tampons. Both sets of products had been absent from my life for many years. Margaret and I had used maybe a single box of condoms. When we had met, she was already on the Pill to regulate her period. After a couple of times in bed together, she admitted the condoms weren’t needed

unless I had the clap, and we stopped using them. And Margaret had passed her menopause about a decade ago.

As we came in to Emily's apartment, she said "Please don't look at the mess. Today was going to be housekeeping day."

"I'll give you a hand if you'll accept dinner out somewhere."

"I'm not sure I should agree to that," she said and then paused to watch my undoubted disappointment, "unless you help me test these condoms first."

"When?"

"Immediately, if not sooner. But last night you managed to somehow set me off with your tongue. I'd sort of like that again first."

"Better wash off then. I like fresh pussy."

Emily found a towel and facecloth for me and we each undressed then washed at the sink in her small bathroom. After, we went in the bedroom and she put a large towel on the bed.

"Perhaps you should be a little gentle with me so I don't go off too soon," I said.

"Yes. I want to ... er "

"Is "fuck" the word you're looking for. I don't like it used as a throw-away word, but it is appropriate to the occasion."

"Absolutely!" she said.

I decided romantic preliminaries weren't needed and I pushed her down on the towel. To focus on her pleasure I knelt between her legs. I could caress her breasts while licking her. She was soon making various interesting noises. Margaret hadn't been as vocal. As long as the neighbours didn't complain, I liked a noisy Emily.

I kept up my attentions for quite a while, going gently every so often until she begged for firmer stimulation. I pushed her legs up which opened her wide to my tongue and soon after she tensed and thrashed around quite a bit.

"Oh. It's too much. Stop. Stop."

I probably should have stopped, but simply eased off my attentions slightly, as I firmly resisted her attempts to push my head away and continued gently licking and kissing. She made a lot more noise and thrashed about a bit, and my chin got very wet. Liquid was running down her crack. Very interesting.

Gradually I eased off and came up beside her.

"That was very interesting." Emily said.

"I hope interesting nice and not interesting bad."

"It was lovely. Now you probably want to ... fuck. So let's put on a condom."

"It's been ... a while since I used one. Perhaps you should put it on me so you know it is properly installed."

"I'm not so experienced. But I think I know how."

Indeed she did. I came carefully on top of her and she raised her legs and we were suddenly together. It felt very ... comfortable as well as pleasurable.

I took my time. Emily seemed to have some more minor climaxes, complete with sound effects, and after a few minutes I felt the pressure in my crotch area rising and I came quite hard, making a few noises myself. I remembered to grab the base of the condom and pulled out. That was one of the negative aspects of condoms.

"Pity you have to pull out," Emily said.

"I was thinking the same thing."

"We'll have to think of alternatives," she said.

Hmm. She was clearly planning ahead. I hadn't thought that far yet.

"Emily. The fact you want to think of not having to use condoms implies you've more or less accepted that this ... er ... activity is going to continue. I'm having trouble ... well ... realizing that you want me in a sexual way."

"Yes. It's a bit unexpected for me too."

"What about other aspects of a friendship between us?"

"Meaning? Sorry, that's too short and possibly misleading. I can think of a number of objections to a relationship with the age difference we have, but they are mostly cliches. I don't know if they're real."

"Serious talk for naked people."

Emily laughed. "Does clothing make us serious?"

I answered "No. You're right. We can have serious or frivolous conversations no matter what state of dress.

Maybe it's too early in our friendship, but at some point we have to sort out what we'd like from each other if we keep going and how to make sure we both realize those goals as much as possible. There's some hard realities that might upset the apple cart."

"Yes. We'll have to talk about things. I don't want to hurt you. And I don't want to get hurt either. People can be cruel to anyone who's a bit "different"."

"I'd feel pretty bad if you got hurt because we had a nice time together. And, yes, even old guys have feelings. We're just not supposed to show them."

"Thomas. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, but I think I have to if we're going to continue.

Last night I wasn't exactly planning to sleep with you. Obvious in a way, because I didn't have any condoms with me. But on the other hand, I've had conversations with women friends who've said older men are better lovers, so I was a bit curious. And it's been a while – almost a year – since I had sex. I was getting maybe a bit antsy.

Then somehow we ended up in bed together, and the experience has been ... rather ... er ... better than I've had before. So I'm now a bit upside down."

"The interpretation could be that I'm very good or the other men you've had weren't terribly skilled," I said.

"From what friends have said, at least one of them was 'a great lay'. But I suspect it's more that you aren't just my sexual partner. We talk about things. I know a lot more about you in the short time we've known each other than I ever knew about any of my boyfriends, though I must admit none of them lasted longer than about 5 months, and some a good deal more transient."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Better for you!" she enthused.

"Shall we get dressed and do the housework. I can make lunch if you tell me what to make."

"Some soup with cheese and crackers. The kitchen's small, so I'll let you rummage for stuff while I vacuum here and in the living room."

The rest of the afternoon we toyed at the housework, but spent a good deal of time chatting about what we liked and disliked. Emily did some laundry in the communal machines. I polished her wooden table and chairs which seemed to be very dry. I helped get the kitchen in shape, then the bathroom. Emily said her place had never been as neat. Around 5 we made sure we cleaned up – I'd brought a change of clothes, something a bit less casual. Emily put on a nice dress and jacket.

We'd somehow decided on a small local pub or bistro. Nothing fancy.

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

"No. Been meaning to try it, but didn't want to go alone."

"What'll you have?"

"Not sure, except the leek and potato soup looks interesting. But probably too filling, and I won't want a main course."

"We could share it. I used to do that with Margaret. Oh. Sorry. Maybe I should keep her out of the conversation."

"No. Don't do that." Emily seemed distressed. "I want you to just say what you want to say. If we start trying to protect each other, we'll get ... dishonest."

And yes. I'd like to share. Now for main course."

"I'm going to have the small filet. It's something I wouldn't do at home for myself," I said.

"Sounds nice, maybe I should do that too, but the scallops are enticing. No they're too expensive."

"Emily. One, I invited you and I can afford the meal. Two. I like scallops, so order them and we'll share all our dishes."

“Ooh. Wonderful. Yes. Let’s do that,” she enthused. It was a reaction I’d not seen for ... well, nearly four decades.

“Wine?” I asked.

Just then the waitress came and asked “Can I take your drink orders, please?”

“I think we’re going to have wine with the meal,” Emily answered. “Thomas. Shall we get a carafe of the house white?”

“Sure. A litre or just a half.”

“Unless you have a big thirst, just a half. I rarely have more than a glass and a bit.”

We ordered the half-litre. There was already water on the table, in fact a small jug.

“Thomas. Oh. Do I call you Thomas, or Tom?”

“For some reason, I’m Thomas to most people except my late mother. What about you. Is it always Emily?”

“For some reason, yes. There doesn’t seem to be a short version.”

The meal went extremely well. A middle-aged couple at the next table eyed us suspiciously when we juggled plates to manage our sharing. They said almost nothing to each other during our entire time there.

Emily and I talked about places we’d been (me) or wanted to go (her). Nothing that could be at all embarrassing if overheard. It was maybe 8:15 when we finished our meal, having shared a creme caramel and had a latte each. We came out of the bistro and I felt Emily slip her arm through mine. Nice! And we seemed to move smoothly together. Even with Margaret, walking together could sometimes be slightly out of phase.

We were silent as we walked. I found myself watching the people we passed to see if they reacted to Emily and I. It didn’t seem so.

“They didn’t seem to notice us particularly,” Emily said.

“You were watching too?”

“Yes. Wondering if we looked odd.”

“People can be very funny how they react. A lot of the time I suspect you can get away with a lot by being fairly "ordinary". We’re not behaving in a way that is threatening or disturbing. We’re both dressed quite conservatively. So people probably don’t look at us very closely.”

“What if they did?”

“Well, there’s not much we or anyone else can do about it, is there. And we’re not shouting or waving flags. Just walking home from dinner.”

“It’ll still take some getting used to,” she said, and my spirits took a bit of a dip. Still, better to work it out now rather than later.

When we came in, Emily said “I’m going to put on my nightie so I can fall asleep if I feel like it.”

I didn't reply because she disappeared into the bathroom. I got undressed and put on my PJs, then went in the bathroom when she came out. I had a book too, so we ended up reading quietly for a bit. Then Emily suddenly put her arms round my neck and kissed me. As we broke, she said "Thank you, Thomas. It's been a special day."

"Thank you, Emily. It definitely has been a special day."

We turned off lights and rolled bum to bum and were soon asleep.

In the morning, I woke first. I went to the bathroom, then shaved and came back to bed. I thought Emily was asleep, but she suddenly said,

"We're going to have a lot of things to work out, aren't we?"

"I'd be lying if I said we weren't. What should we talk about first?"

"Well, do you want a fling, or do you want something long term? You've lots of experience of life, you're retired, and probably you don't want to have to babysit some young person who's still sorting themselves out."

"I would have thought that you were the one who would want just a fling, and not have to put up with an old fogey who might be set in his ways."

"It's hard to get the other person's viewpoint," she said.

"Always. But finding how to do that is part of the great satisfaction of sharing life with someone."

"That's something I've missed so far, I guess."

Truthfully, if I'd been asked a month ago about going to bed with you, I'd have said possibly for a fling, to find out what it was like. But I'm starting to think I like the non-bed – well, the non-sex – part of being together as much as the very, very nice sex."

"The real awkward bit is that long-term could be not all that long. I've been to two funerals since Margaret died. That's in addition to hers. Makes one realize things can be rather uncertain."

"That's something people my age don't usually think about," she said quietly.

I lay back and offered her my arm and she scooted in close. She felt nice. She felt right. But we had to recognize facts. I said,

"Emily. I really like being with you. I've had a long and very satisfactory marriage to a very good woman, so I know what the rewards of a close and happy relationship can be. And I can say that I feel the same kind of easy ... I guess 'fit' is the word, when I'm with you. We've got on like a house on fire, and we should probably take some time to figure out what we want from each other and from whatever arrangement we can manage to establish for sharing time together.

If we both want to continue seeing each other, then I think we should be very forthright about our likes and dislikes, our yesses and our nos. That could be hard, and if you want I'll quietly gather up my stuff and go home, with sincere thanks for giving me a very, very precious experience."

“No. Don’t go!” she said in almost a panicky voice.

“I certainly don’t want to.”

“I’m trying to think what my days would be like if we were ... er ... an item,” she said.

“Given it’s Sunday, should I ask if you’re religious?”

“Not very. I sometimes go to the Unitarian church. But I’m not regular. You?”

“A great many years ago my family were considered Catholic. But the last time I was in a church was last Christmas for the midnight mass. I rather like the pomp and ceremony. Not much for faith, but I value hope and charity,” I opined.

“That’s a nice way to put it.”

“This isn’t meant to be pushing the agenda, but do you think people who are committed to each other should be married? Or is living together enough?”

“I’m sort of old-fashioned. I think commitment requires some sort of ... er ... affirmation. What about you?”

“Similar. I’m not comfortable with how some people have kids and dogs and mortgage without some sort of contract. If they don’t want to be married, at least make provision for the kids in case of breakup or whatever.”

“Well, as you already know, I’m not insistent on kids.”

“I’m not sure I would have the patience or energy at my time of life, and it’s not fair to saddle young kids with a Dad who is nearly 90 before they get their first job.”

“You’re putting a bad light on things, Thomas.”

“It’s what I meant about reality, if we do go ahead together to the stage where children could be a consideration.”

“I think I’m more concerned about how we’d make a work and social life. You’re retired, and I still have my career. In fact, I’m more or less at the start of it. And you’ll have friends your age, and I’ll have friends mine. It could be awkward.”

“Now who’s painting things black!”

“I didn’t mean to. Just kind of trying to figure out how things might work.”

“For dating, or more formally?”

“I really don’t think of dating for it’s own sake. I don’t want to be part of the sexual buffet that some of my friends and acquaintances seem to be into. I’m looking for someone to share things with, and somehow haven’t found anyone suitable before.”

“And I may not be suitable either, as we’re discussing right now.”

“We need some breakfast,” Emily said suddenly. However, my arm was around her shoulder and my hand could grab her breast, which I did, using

the other hand to grab the other breast.

“Yes. These are starting to deflate! A real breakfast emergency.”

Emily laughed and kissed me. We smooched for a couple of minutes, then got up and made some toast and coffee which we ate in our PJs.

“I should have brought along some of my jam,” I said.

“You make jam?”

“Yes. When fruit is in season, I try to make a small batch or two. I don’t eat a lot of jam, but it’s much nicer than store-bought.”

“I never did it. My Mom isn’t very domestic.”

“I’ll guess she’s younger than me.”

“52. Yes. I’d not thought of bringing you home to meet the family.”

“I had. It could be awkward or not, depending on how people react to us. But it’s pretty early days for us. We’ve not known each other that long. I think before the family dinner, we’ll want to have our own plan worked out. Families often want to meddle in all sorts of things they shouldn’t be allowed get within shouting distance of.”

“That’s good thinking. If the plan is solid, they can be happy for us or go away.”

“I’m sure we both want the former. But having a clear plan and having thought things through no doubt will help.

Emily, the way in which we seem to get along has been a big shock, I think to both of us. We clearly like each other, like being together, seem to fit together apart from this inconvenient age gap. We appear to be having a very serious conversation about a possible future.

For my part, I can see that we could have a very nice time together for the years of good health I have left. But that could be a rather short time for you, and you could miss the chance to find someone who could share a longer time with you.

I’ll also confide that I will find it very difficult if we go much farther together to have to give you up. Broken hearts are for the young. I don’t know how well I’ll cope with not having you in my life.

Perhaps we should think about whether we want to go forward together for a few days, and if we do, then start to bring it to reality in some form or other. Otherwise, maybe we’d be better to continue our lives separately, though on my part with huge gratitude for the time you’ve shared with me.”

“That does, unfortunately, make sense.” There were tears on Emilys cheeks. I felt bad that I really couldn’t wish them away.

Neither of us said anything, but I got up, dressed and packed up. Then I came back to the kitchen. Emily rose and I embraced and kissed her.

“Will you call me Wednesday evening about 7?” I said.

“With my decision?”

“Yes. I need to think about us too.”

“Of course,” she said, but I got the feeling she had not realized that I might have reservations too. My fears were that I wouldn’t be able to give her a fair measure of loving companionship before my time ran out.

I kissed her again, then picked up my carry-all and left.

That had been Sunday morning. I suppose I should have made love to her again first. But that would have only muddied the waters a bit more.

Now it was Wednesday evening. I’d made up my mind – we should go for broke. But I was ready to accept Emily deciding it was all too difficult. For Sunday and Monday, I’d been in a foul mood because I wanted desperately that we should try to make a life together, and thought that if she decided we should go our separate ways I’d tumble into a depression. Then somehow on Tuesday morning I went for a bike ride along one of the local woodland cycle paths and saw a sleek fox scurrying through the undergrowth and heard a cardinal call. Each of these was a fleeting but valued moment of my consciousness, and Emily’s time in my life would be that, whether or not we became more to each other. A calmness settled on me, and I spent the rest of the day and today doing a number of things that needed to be done or that I wanted to do. I felt at ease with myself, even as my excitement about her call increased.

The phone was ringing. I had better pick up.

J C Nash ©2016-07-12

Gnomes

Is there a cliché as difficult to understand as garden gnomes. I mean, somebody must go out and actually pay money for them. Unless, somehow, they're breeding in our gardens. Could be. There are estimated to be over 25 million of them in Germany, and surely the good burghers of that nation are too sensible to spend so many euros on the elfin statues.

At least in Canada, they're buried under the white stuff for a good part of the year. And I suspect a lot of condo regulations ban them. But in 2013 the Chelsea Flower Show had to cave to pressure to allow be-gnomed gardens to compete for prizes.

Their popularity has gone up and down. Blame Walt Disney and his Snow White for giving them a huge boost. Hi Ho, Hi Ho, off to the bank we go. Maybe there to meet the local variant of the gnomes of Zurich.

Jimmy and I don't like them. One day I said to him,

"Maybe we could make a silver hammer. You know, Bang Bang Maxwell's Silver Hammer, and do some ritual gnome smashing."

"Take a lot of silver. Why not just use an ordinary hammer?" Jimmy said. He doesn't understand the importance of liturgy and ceremony in exorcising one's demons. Or gnomes.

"Anyway," he added, "Don't you want to get people to stop putting the ugly bits of painted pot in their gardens? You gotta persuade the people with gardens that they don't wanna have them."

"That would take a big marketing plan. We don't have that kind of cash." I said, since we'd just done some sofa archaeology to see if we could afford a pizza. Yep. We could if there was a pizzeria offering to deliver one for 7 dollars and 43 cents. Make that 7 dollars and 35 cents, since 8 of the coins we found in the sofa were pennies. Pity we didn't find a shinplaster – they're worth a lot now and the sofa looked old enough. We'd been wondering if it were harbouring any wildlife. You know, bedbugs, silverfish, mice, lice. Hopefully no gnomes.

"Hey", said Jimmy. "We bought that box of surplus mini audio recorders. They've a randomly timed playback to make your house seem occupied. Dog barking, Shouting at kids. Rock music followed by simulated smashing of radio. That kind of stuff."

"So what're you suggesting?" I asked him.

"We record a bunch of crazy messages using synthesized voices on the

laptop. The recorders are small enough to fit in gnomes. So we put them in various gnomes around the neighbourhood, then phone the radio talk show and ask if there's something spooky going on with gnomes in town. People are hearing voices, etc., etc." Jimmy was getting excited.

Well, I figured it was a way to at least get rid of the recorders. We'd tried selling them, but people want to play back what they recorded just now, not a randomly regurgitated memo from last year to get more toilet paper. And they'd also record at random too, just when you didn't want them to, like when you were telling your baby sister to never say anything about how big Aunt Julia's rear end was. And of course, you can guess when it played back.

So we made some nice messages. You know

- The gnomes are coming!
- Gnomes yes! People no!
- Power to the gnomes!
- Send us to Florida for the winter!

Then after a few beers – the last we had in the fridge – we went out in the middle of the night and hid the recorders in gnomes around the neighbourhood. Then we fall asleep, Jimmy on the sofa because his bed's covered in boxes from the recorders.

We wake up late. Jimmy's pretty badly bitten. Seems like bedbugs. We lift the sofa out to the curb, even though garbage day was yesterday. Then I get my binoculars and set myself up to watch some of the gnomes.

Mrs. Jeffries is the first victim I observe. Nearly leaves her shoes in the flower bed while she unwillingly inspects the second storey soffit. Then picks up her shovel and smashes a gnome. The WRONG gnome. A second recorded message and she gets it right, then goes round turning them all into tiny pieces.

Three houses down, it's the family dog that, you might say, gets the message. But this dog is kind of crazy smart. It digs a hole and picks up the gnome and drops it in. Then does the same to the rest of his owners' gnomes.

Over the next few days the neighbourhood gnomes all take a beating. A tomcat sprayed them in about three different gardens. A group of crows gathered round a gnome and then did the collective-noun correct thing and murdered it by pecking it to pieces.

We didn't even have to call the radio station. The CBC van was out before we could find the charger for our phone. Then the haz-mat team showed up to pick up the pieces. The mayor made a pronouncement that there'd be a special pickup of any gnomes people wanted to dispose of.

Jimmy was on the laptop. I thought he was watching porn until he said “Hey, we can get gnomes for about a buck each on this liquidation site. We could print off some fancy Certificates of Exorcism and sell folks some fresh gnomes.”

“Go for it, man!” I said as I tiptoed out of the house with my loaded backpack and old suitcase. We’d got rid of a lot of gnomes, and the lease was in his name anyway.

J C Nash ©2018-3-14

Encounters

I grew up in Alberta, even if I wasn't born there. The big skies still haunt my dreams and memories. But when it came time to earn a living, my recently minted advanced degree was treated like a Weimar mark in 1924, and I ended up taking a job with the feds in Ottawa.

My father seemed to think this meant I'd be rubbing shoulders with all sorts of folk who were written up in the Calgary Herald or the Albertan. "Do you run into any of the politicians there?" he'd ask. Answer: "Nope!"

Except once. 18 September 1977. A quiet Sunday morning, and my wife and I decided to get some exercise playing a game of squash at a fairly new athletic facility that was trying to attract the interest of the well-off and the wannabees.

We have our game. There's almost nobody there at 9 in the morning, though we see a couple of guys on one of the courts. Didn't pay much attention.

After, we go back to the locker rooms. The men's had four long aisles of tall lockers. You got a small permanent locker and moved your stuff to a bigger one that would hold coat and such as well as your street clothes. Picked up a towel and headed for the showers. Some men put the towel around their waist, others sashay along in the buff, swinging the towel. I'm kind of indecisive, and just walk with it over my arm.

I take my shower – there's several bays and I don't see anyone else. Stand under the drier for a bit, then head back to where I'd chosen a locker. The other two men – it seemed the only other patrons that morning – are just out of the shower too. And they've got lockers directly bracketing the one I chose.

I approach the two naked men and say "Guess what?" and they both laugh, knowing exactly what the situation is without any big explanation. So I open the locker and they spread out a bit, the incoming finance minister on my left who would later become prime minister, and the outgoing on my right. The latter subsequently led a Royal Commission that recommended a free trade agreement for North America and later became High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

So, Dad, I did sometimes rub shoulders with people who were in the news. In fact, almost literally. Just that when I did, we were all undressed for the occasion.

J C Nash ©2018-3-18

Scrabble™ Scramble

“Jeremy. Can you come in my office please?”

Oh. Oh. That’s Miriam, my boss at the city promotions office. So in I go, hoping it’s not the pink slip or similar. But in some ways it’s worse.

“Jeremy. I’ve just had a call from the mayor. We’ve been awarded the 2025 North Atlantic Scrabble™ Championship. It’s a marvellous opportunity to show off our fine city, and since you have an advanced degree in English ...”

“It’s actually a diploma from the community college,” I protested, but Miriam went on,

“No matter. You’re the expert. Now there’s a lot of concern for linguistic inclusiveness, you understand.”

“Well, I’m not sure of the implications,” I temporized.

“The Scrabble™ authorities used to say words had to be in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, but after the riots at the 2020 World Scrabble™ Tournament because some Americans insisted that words in some Donald Trump tweets should be allowed there’s now a grab bag of so-called dictionaries, which are actually files for a computer system called *hunspell*.”

“So ...?” I queried.

“So you have to make sure we have all those files on some computers, and that they are not compromised. The English-speaking Russian team may have the FSB hackers inserting words, so we need Tempest class word-checking computers and a full set of publicly checkable SHA-1 and MD5 hashes.”

Frankly, I don’t know what that mess of letters means, but I want to keep my job, so I nod sagely. Miriam goes on,

“Talk to IT about how to get the files and set them up for use. The files all have names like ‘en_CA.dic’ for English, Canada, dictionary. And make sure to have all the different ethnic versions. There was a disturbance last week at a writer’s group in Stittsville. They announce two random words each week that are supposed to be included in next week’s stories. Apparently this guy RJ read out EISTEDDFOD and CUTTY and things got out of hand.”

“You mean the writers objected that those words would be difficult to include,” I asked as innocently as possible.

“No. With a Welsh word and a Scottish one, two people who had Irish

ancestors over four generations ago got upset and smashed their chairs, and one indigenous person walked out, then filed a protest with Human Rights. Of course, all this noise is about as helpful as a laser pointer with a curved beam.”

“So I’d better look for files like en_SC.dic, en_EI.dic and en_CY.dic?”

“Why the CY?” Miriam asked, looking confused.

“Cymru – CYMRU – the Welsh name for Wales, of course.” Which, naturally, I didn’t learn in college.

J C Nash ©2018-3-29

The back alley

If you grew up in the West of Canada, you probably had a house with a big front window. The garage was in the back, on the alley, with a frame to hold the garbage cans beside it. Out there it's fairly recent that the greed of real estate developers managed to expand profits by using the land the laneways took up.

When I came East, it took me a while to get used to houses that didn't present windows to the street. Instead, one was offered a phalanx of garage doors. Well, actually a phalanx of vehicles parked in front of garage doors. The garages were too full of junk to take even the most compact of cars. Days of freezing rain ensured the formal liturgy of window scraping that would have been avoided by using the garage for its intended purpose.

Now if you were of an age where you were allowed out to play beyond the back yard, the back alley was where you met up. A handful of kids about a decade or a dozen years old. There'd always be some current fashion of things to do depending on time of year and whatever promotions the toy manufacturers could come up with. Perennial – but seasonal – items were yoyos, marbles, kites, or model planes. Of course, we had to go to the park or the school playground to fly kites. And girls weren't generally included. By the rules of biology, that all changed a year or so later, of course. Before then, however, I'd moved east, so there was a year when I had no back alley and its gang of kids, and I couldn't find an equivalent in my new home.

This was the time not long before Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. Science was a big deal. Well, the rockets were really neat. In fact anything that flew. I made a lot of paper airplanes of sometimes bizarre designs. I had a couple of balsa wood gliders over the year, too, but they seemed magnetically attracted to trees, high roofs, and the mouths of retrievers.

At school I sat behind a boy who'd not long been in Canada from somewhere in the Soviet Union – it wasn't Russia then. His father had been captain of a fishing boat, and he managed to smuggle his family on board and keep them hidden until he could arrange a fuel leak that required a repair in St. John's. Dmitry hadn't got much English. In that time, kids didn't get a lot of ESL, but he was soon managing well enough. He and I were always top in maths, and we got to be friends over paper airplanes.

Dmitry lived one street over from me, in a rather dilapidated triplex. Our place was in a strip of newish cookie-cutter houses with the garages sort

of half in front, half beside, but they were just singles. My Dad put up a shed in the back of the yard. For some reason, it had a window on the side that faced the side fence. The corners of the fence for our house and the one Dmitry lived in met. We pretty soon figured out how to get through the fence so the hole could be concealed, and we carefully fixed the window so Dmitry and I could use the shed as our hangout. There were some tools and a small bench, and we were pretty handy. Someone had left an old car battery behind Dmitry's apartment and Dad had a charger, so we set up a lamp.

In social studies, we had a week or so about Australia, which led us to make a boomerang. Sort of. Well, you may remember a novelty pop song – rather pejorative of native Australians I might add – but the title fitted our attempt quite well because the boomerang ended up on the roof of the school. Admittedly, we did get it to come back one time in eight or nine before a gust of wind sent it up and over our heads as its trajectory bent back towards us.

In Science that year we learned a bit about static electricity. Somewhere we read that the ancients would rub an amber rod on cat's fur and generate sparks. We didn't have real amber, but I found a nice plastic rod that was part of one of my sister's skirt hangers. I found a length of dowel and made a substitution. She can't wear that skirt often – I haven't heard any complaints yet.

The rod worked well. Mrs. James' cat used to come round the shed often. Probably mice somewhere. We rubbed the plastic rod on the cat. After all, there was nothing that said the fur had to be off the cat. And the cat liked being stroked. Well, up until she got curious and put her nose near the plastic rod. The spark was about 5 mm. If the air was dry, then 15000 volts. Sorry puss.

Then we somehow had a lesson that mentioned the Mongolfier's and their balloons. Dmitry was a whiz with drawing, and soon we found some large sheets of tissue paper and he drew the shape we needed for the panels, called gores, of a hot air balloon. Pretty good, really, as the drawings had no straight lines, but had to meet up to be glued to make the teardrop shape of the balloon.

We used copper wire to hold the bottom open and carry a small tea-light candle. And Halloween night to try our first flight, which we launched from behind the shed.

After we waited a long time for the air in the balloon to heat, it finally lifted off. The light through the tissue was kind of eery. As the candle wasn't very big, and our balloon was about 4 feet high, it didn't rise too fast. And of course, we hadn't thought much about trees and utility poles. So it got hung up in a tall tree for a while.

Then a small child out trick or treating saw it and thought it was a real ghost. Pretty soon there was some fuss on the street. Dmitry and I cautiously edged to the back of the forming crowd. Suddenly the wind changed and the balloon escaped the tree and rose slowly. But another gust somehow brought the flame in contact with the tissue. There was a fairly sudden eruption of flame and then darkness. The kids took off, some squealing. Dmitry and I sort of wanted to see if anything were left of the balloon, but it was dark. Besides, one kid had dropped their candy bag, so we retired to the shed to divide the loot.

John C. Nash ©2018-04-10

Management Fee

“I hate this worthless project!” Jane growled.

We were sitting in my battered Mini in a lay-by near the roundabout that served as the entrance to our red-brick, rather provincial, university. I won't name it, mainly to protect the so-called innocents. That's us, but we weren't so innocent.

One of Jane's grievances was that it was about 6:30 in the morning. The project was part of our so-called *Graduate Certificate in Quantitative Management*, really a way for the University to get premium fees for a 10 week course, mostly in recycled undergraduate lectures. Oh well, most of us were being sent by our employers, in my case the local authority of a bleak, unemployment-riddled northern post-industrial area. Jane was there because she wanted the certificate as one of a collection of coupons to trade for a promotion in the multinational conglomerate in which she was one of the many ants in the ant-hill.

Actually, the project itself kind of interested me. We were to try to model the traffic entering and leaving the university and prepare forecasts. So we needed data. To avoid people cutting classes, the whole group of about 20 was told to organize a rota to observe and record data.

“What idiot thought it worth being out here at the crack of dawn?” Jane grumbled again. Actually it was me. I realized there were people who came in to work early, and I set 6 a.m. as the appropriate start time, since I knew a number of people back home who liked early start, early home. I figured there'd be people at Uni who did too.

Just then, a car came out of the University entrance, roared round the roundabout and zoomed by us up the road towards London with a snarl of the engine as the driver changed gears.

“Crikey,” Jane said. “Did you see that?”

“I was writing down that a passenger car with one person in it left the Uni and went along the London Road.” London was about 50 miles away, but in England, there are lots of London Roads.

“Yeah. But that was an Aston-Martin,” Jane responded. “What student has one of them? And the profs aren't paid enough.”

Hmm. Jane had a point. But at that moment, two cars were coming, following the same route. A BMW and a Jag. One male occupant each.

“Interesting...” I mused. Jane said nothing, but her puzzled expression

was quite informative.

Over the next ten minutes there were 2 more BMWs, 1 more Jag, a top end Range Rover, and – and here Jane’s mouth was open – a Lamborghini. Then everything was quiet until about 7:30 when a parade of ordinary cars, along with some real old bangers, began to flow into the Uni, or else simply take the road that went along one boundary.

Our shift finished at 9, and we handed over to two other students. We didn’t say anything about our observations, even though we hadn’t made any joint decision to do so.

“Want some breakfast and talk about the data?” I asked.

“Yeah. OK. Kind of spooky,” Jane answered.

Over breakfast, we decided to get up even earlier the next morning and see where the fancy cars were on campus. I set my alarm for 4 and called by Jane’s digs at 4:40. She was up, but barely. I had a thermos of strong coffee, and poured her a small cup before driving off.

“Hell. Adrian. What’s in this stuff?” Jane said, now wide awake.

“Just coffee, but probably more coffee than water,” I answered. Better use a bit less next time.

We drove around campus slowly, looking in all the parking places. Then by one of the dorms – for women students – we saw several cars of the right type.

“Wonder why they’re there,” I mused.

“Bloody hell, Adrian, they’re there because they’re driven by men, and the dorm is full of women.”

“But wouldn’t the women complain about ...” I stopped talking as I realized why they wouldn’t.

“Precisely. The girls either have a nice little business going, or some shit-head crooks are coercing them into doing the nasty so they can take the money.”

“Kind of makes our project a little awkward for a few people, including the Uni,” I said rather fatuously.

“Maybe. But while you go and watch the traffic for a while, I’ll hang about here and duck in like I’ve lost my key when someone comes out. Then I’ll sniff around and see if I can work out what’s going on.”

This was a bit before cell phones. Not by much, but enough that Jane couldn’t call me. So we agreed she’d walk out to the roundabout by 7:15 and if she didn’t show, I’d call the cops. Well, the campus cops first.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to. Jane showed up around 5 past 7 with a big grin.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Adrian, those girls had a bright idea, but they aren’t good managers.”

“What do you mean?”

“They had a clever little operation there. All very cosy. Food and drink laid on, along with hanky-panky. A nice little Graduate With A Nest-Egg business. But if we picked up on it, so will the not-so-nice folk. So I pointed out they needed a manager – me. And my partner – you.”

“Whoa. I might not like that.”

“You don’t have to be involved closely. The idiots with their fancy cars are a big tip-off. We’ll arrange to park them in the yard of a luxury car business – I know one of the people at that one about a mile away. And you ferry the men back and forth. It’ll keep things a lot quieter.”

“And what do we get out of it?”

“Twenty percent, and we provide transport, discreet credit card handling and book-keeping services. They’re still a cash operation, and it’s lost them a client or two. Except the books won’t actually say what services are rendered, of course. But it will keep the workers happy.”

I was about to say something, but then I realized I kind of liked being with Jane. But I still had some reservations.

“Will I ever get some sleep?”

“Sure. The girls were smart about that. Everyone in by 10. Out by 7. No noise or disorderly conduct. Not a zoo. Like I said. Cosy and congenial.”

Then she clinched the deal.

“Besides, there’s an unoccupied flat this term that was being used by a visiting professor from the USA. They’ve said we can use it. Has a double bed and all. And you’re kind of cute, even if your coffee is horrid.”

J C Nash ©2018-04-16

Small Craft Warning

Mostly the world is unjust and unfair. Communities gang up on the deserving and reward the crooks. But sometimes – and I know it’s not common – there’s an event that shows a strong sense of doing the right thing.

It’s one of those events I’m recalling now, dredged up from the mid to late sixties when I went with my parents to our cottage near Georgian Bay. We had a pretty log cabin on a small crescent of shoreline with about a dozen other cottages. No electricity then, and everyone had a small privy out the back. Some had a well, but we used lake water for washing and went to the nearest town to fill up drums with drinking water.

Most folks had a rowboat or canoe. There were two rather simple sailboats, and a couple of metal fishing boats with at most a 6 horse motor. There was a kind of understanding that you could swim in the small bay as long as you had a buddy or two with you.

But sometime about mid-July, a new family takes over old Reggy Jones’ place. Well, supposedly a family, but it’s about a dozen people from teenagers to mid-40s and hard to figure out the relationships. And over the August long weekend they bring in this fancy fibre-glass boat with a monster motor. Pretty soon they’re racing around the bay.

Well, we all thought they’d get tired, but they’re out there a good deal of Saturday. Then Sunday, around 11 they get the boat out again – there’d been some drinking and loud music and shouting on the Saturday night at their place. A lot of us were kind of kept awake. Moreover, we hadn’t felt too comfortable swimming when their boat was racing around. A couple of canoes had trouble with the wake too. And the old rule of sail before steam was definitely not in force with these characters.

By about 3:30, we were pretty tired of the whine of the engine. Made it hard to chat. Or read. Or sleep. And round and round the boat went. Then the motor made a really high pitched scream and then went silent. We all looked out to the center of the bay. That’s where there was a rock about 3 feet below the surface, maybe a little less. We called it Dead Man’s Finger. Guess their prop had hit it and the shear pin had done its job.

And all of a sudden there’s this big cheer reverberating around the bay. Except from old Reggy’s place, of course.

Dad got out his binoculars.

“Yep. They’re looking over the back and have raised the motor. The

prop is really messed up.”

I noticed a few of the other cottagers out bringing their canoes up to their boat houses and locking them inside, or taking paddles and oars into their cabins. After a bit I realized why when Dad said,

“Looks like they didn’t bother to put paddles on board. Or life jackets. Just beer.”

Guess they wouldn’t be wanting to call the OPP to come rescue them. At least three violations there. Plus there might be someone pointing out that they hadn’t observed some of the basic rules of water safety near unpowered small craft.

There was a small breeze. Very small. Various cottagers chatted back and forth, and gradually it seemed that a barbeque on our property was a great idea, since it had the best view. People brought their barbeques – this was the age of Hibachi’s and small ones – and stuff to cook and eat and drink, and we had a really nice party.

Towards sunset, a middle-aged woman came over from Reggy’s old place and asked if someone would rescue the members of her family. Dad took the role of spokesman

“Ma’am, As you see by the party going on here – a nice friendly party with a few drinks but not a lot of noise – this is a very strong community. Whoever thought that they could race around with that speedboat so the swimmers and canoes and sailboats had to stay out of the water is just not being very social. If the group considers it the right thing to do, then we’ll get a rowboat and tow them in. But from here I can see someone swimming and towing the boat there, and they should get it to shore in about 10 minutes.”

The woman looked round and ran off towards the shore.

The next day with the binoculars we saw some very sunburned people who’d been on the boat. They got it ashore and on its trailer and it left about two o’clock, and soon after everyone at that place was gone. Sometime in September we had a letter that it was for sale again.

J C Nash ©2018-05-16

Marketing 101

Cucumbers aren't generally looked on as a cat treat. In fact, I think you'd be pretty hard-pressed to get most cats to even take a bite. Somehow, of course, there's always an exceptional creature who defies expectations.

In our family, we always seemed to get those sorts of pets, or cars, or houses, or whatever. So I'll tell this tale of one such animal, and use it to suggest how to sometimes rescue things from disaster.

This was when I was just a kid, maybe three or four. We owned a grocery store, and to make a bit of extra profit, my parents would sell local produce when it was in season, putting it out on a barrow under the front awning. You remember awnings, don't you. Stores used to have them back then.

This one morning, Dad puts out the barrow and puts some vegetables on it with cardboard signs written using a big black wax crayon. And one of the items was cucumbers. This was in England. They were probably priced something like 8d.

About opening time, Mom checks the barrow, and a number of cucumbers have a bite out of the end. The indent and teeth marks matched one of the cats that we had to keep the mice down. And there was a cat sitting there licking its paws.

Well, you've now got a dozen cucumbers you can't sell. Mom is mad as hell. The cat moves off smartly after she gives it a good kick – this was in the days when a cat that did something like that would be lucky to not forfeit all nine lives at once and the RSPCA would almost send you a commendation. Not like today.

Mom is about to toss the cukes, when Dad comes out and stops her. He takes the bitten cucumbers and puts them beside the whole ones, then takes a new card and writes "Half-cukes, 4d". Then he cuts off the end of each bitten cucumber. They're almost full size, but half price.

This is a time not long after the War. Food is something you don't waste. Pretty soon the housewives have figured out they get a lot of cucumber for 4d. Mom and Dad don't quite make as much out of the cucumbers as they'd hoped, but they do OK.

I did OK too. Mom and Dad told me they'd pay me an ice cream – a not very common treat back then – if I "worked" for them and kept the cats away from the barrow. And I guess I also got a lesson in marketing along the way.

J C Nash ©2018-05-24

Spotless

Some years ago, I was visiting St. John's Newfoundland on a work assignment. It was the time when all the nastiness about the Christian Brothers schools there was starting to appear in the newspapers. After a heavy afternoon meeting to work out details of new software to be installed in a government office, some of the people I worked with adjourned to a local bar.

There was a newspaper lying on a chair, and one of the guys picked it up. Looking at the headline, he said "You'd think it would have come to light earlier. The bastards must've kept the boys absolutely terrified."

We mumbled general agreement, not really wanting to get into a discussion of such depravity when we wanted to unwind after a tense and tiring day. But then an old guy at the next table, sitting drinking alone, piped up "Not necessarily terrified, but they were pretty sadistic, so we had to be careful."

"You were there?" I asked, knowing the answer, or at least I thought I did.

"I was at one of their boarding schools in England. My parents thought it would give me a good education, and mother was a very devout Anglo-Italian woman."

"But you said 'Not necessarily'?" I prompted.

"Well, we would sometimes be pushed enough to hit back. Well, 'hit' wasn't exactly what we did. But there was one teacher, Brother Julius – Julius O'Meara I think his name was. 10 strokes of the cane for having a tiny blot on your dictation. And those straight-nib pens and the lumpy ink. It just wasn't possible to keep things perfect, so we all had sore bums most of the time.

And he was in charge of one of the dormitories. Made boys get the toilets spotless with a toothbrush, that sort of thing. And always using fancy words.

'Carbury, you pedicular excrescence to humanity. Your pillow is an inch out of place. Pants down and bend over.'

And Carbury would get ten of the best. Or worst.

But after a bit, we got sick and tired of the sadism. It was clear Brother Julius enjoyed it too much. After he gave Jones-Greville Minor 40 strokes for spelling 'receive' R E C I E V E we figured we'd had enough. Jones-Greville's brother was a form ahead, so we called him Jones-Greville Major. He was

purple with rage about what had happened, but when he calmed down, he suggested a plan.

The classrooms were all old style, where we sat in double desks with inkwell in the middle, shelf for books underneath. Wooden top, shelf and seat, cast iron frame. Very hard on the arse end after a caning. And the teacher had a tall desk with a two-foot square top that was slanted. The top lifted up to reveal a large storage space. Mostly never used except for some chalk and such.

Now Jones-Greville Major knew a local farmer who had a large Alsatian dog. He'd got to know the dog and it would play and run with him. So this one morning, he brings the dog to our classroom and we put a bit of bacon in the top of the teacher's desk and the dog obligingly jumps in. We close the top. Then we go to our places.

In comes Brother Julius.

'Good Morning, class.'

'Good Morning, Brother Julius.'

Then he goes to get chalk out of the desk. Well, the dog is getting a bit anxious, and it comes out at a fair rate of knots with a loud bark, straight at Brother Julius. Knocks him down and scarpers out the door, which Julius had not yet closed fortunately.

Julius looks totally panicked. We didn't know that he'd been attacked by dogs as a kid. So he screams and disappears out the room and down the hall. Never came back.

For a while the brothers were a bit less sadistic. There was some investigation, and when the story of Jones-Greville Minor and his spelling mistake was uncovered, there was a bit of apprehension that parents might take a dim view of excessive discipline.

Also the RSPCA might have been called in about mistreatment of animals.

But maybe we were a bit less pliable than the boys at the school here. After all, there was a war on, and we had the concept of standing up to old bully Hitler in our heads. And if Julius ended up in the mental ward, we had no regrets.

Now I think all that talking has made me thirsty.

Oh, yes, thank you, I would like another beer."

In memory of George Moss, Jr. (1932-2007).

J C Nash ©2018-7-12

Not Quite Water

Bottled water is relatively new in North America. We didn't see it that much until the 1990s. Soda water and mineral water were more common in Europe, but just plain water in bottles wasn't all that familiar even in continental Europe in the mid 20th century.

In Turkey, however, as part of an international seminar in 1966, I got used to asking "Lütfen bir şişe su", a phrase I learned from copying the sounds I heard when the locals ordered water. It means, "Please, one bottle of water." There'd be vendors on the streets selling bottles that were probably 250 ml. for about a quarter of a lira or "yirmi beş kuruş". The caps were not like beer-bottle caps, but made of heavy foil that you could tear off. In that era, milk bottles in Canada sometimes used similar foil caps.

One part of the trip took us from Alanya on the Mediterranean coast inland to Konya. The green of the coast rapidly gave way to the near-desert of the Anatolian plateau. We were crammed into mini-buses. The road was narrow with lots of curves, though I don't recall a lot of bumps. Still, with August heat and no air conditioning, we needed to stop after an hour or so to stretch and get some liquid.

The leader of the seminar was the president of a university in Western Canada. I'll call him T to save the embarrassment of a name. When we stopped, the driver pulled a small crate of bottled water from the back of the bus. We each grabbed a bottle. Dr. T was talking about something of interest in the area, and pulled the cap off his bottle and took a big slug of water. Except, as he did so, he realized he was face to face with a very large, very drowned cockroach.

Few university students are aspiring diplomats. We should have been more sympathetic to the spluttering and water all down Dr. T's shirt. But the situation had a lot more comedy than many of the pratfalls in the old silent movies. So we laughed, but afterwards I think all of us tended to choose the local fizzy lemonade – mimicking French called gazos. And we always checked the bottle.

J C Nash ©2018-07-26

Gamblers Ruin

Today casinos have become entertainment palaces. The high rollers and desperately addicted are still there, of course, but there's a lot more casual players who are there for destination weddings, shows, and what might be called personal interaction, but not with their usual partners.

In the 1970s when casinos were just starting in Alberta the gamblers were a hard-core bunch. Their drugs were caffeine and tobacco. Architects were much offended when told to triple the air-conditioner capacity.

"But we've specified the highest rating for this sized building!" they protested, but after arms were twisted they put in the triple sized units. At the time, smoking was allowed almost everywhere. So two years later a cleaning of filters and the general fug of sweat and smoke showed even triple-sized units were not really enough.

The serious gamblers showed up at opening time – noon. Unless they ran out of money or credit and had to fold, they stayed until 2 a.m. when things closed down. For some days of the year the cities would have Stampede or Klondike celebrations and there'd be western or can-can dancers. Despite loud music and much fanfare, the gamblers would not even move an eyeball from their cards or dice.

They mostly lost. Some quickly, some in a Chinese water torture of a few dollars an hour, with intermittent wins. And when I asked a friend if he'd ever been in a casino, he summarized the clientele by saying "No. I'm not on welfare and I'm not native Canadian."

Vegas too, claims its victims, but it's not just down the street. A taxi driver one time said to a friend of mine who was going from airport to hotel for a conference "Sure don't want to have too many fares like the last one. Woman said she had to go home and tell hubby she'd gambled away the house."

In Canada, before casinos and government lotteries came in, there'd been a fair amount of under-the-counter gambling of course. Despite the illegality, most Catholic churches and especially those with an Irish contingent of priests or parishioners were where you went to buy Irish Sweepstake tickets. There were lots of pull tickets, probably some numbers rackets, though the prairies were a long way from New Jersey. Government just took over all that trade, actually passing a smaller percentage back in prizes than the previous illegal operators. And folk gambled more. They gambled their spending money.

The pot saved for a new car. The kid's college account. The grocery money.

When he sold out, a family member who made a lot of money running casinos said "There's too much gambling."

J C Nash ©2018-08-28

Blacksmith

I am a hammer,
That beats, beats, beats
On the metal of ideas.

You are the hearth
that heats, heats, heats
the iron of creation.

We are the furnace
That smelts, smelts, smelts
the ore of love.

JCN
Originally written in 1977. Revised 2017.

J C Nash ©2017-09-29

Logogriph

The words this week are rather short,
Just four letters -- NOT that sort!

The first divides mankind in two
Used for part descriptions too.
Truncate it and it's very bad
Almost enough to make you sad
Without the front you may get drunk
Though one will rarely leave you sunk.

The second word is not so hot
My morning coffee rather not
Leave off one letter at the start
You age, and ready to depart
But if my tail you should crop
Look up towards the mountain top.

Explanation:

male -- (with minor exceptions) one of two
possible genders

mal -- a prefix for "bad"

ale -- a form of beer made with warm fermentation

cold -- having low temperature

old -- aged, not young

col -- ridge between mountain tops

J C Nash ©2018-11-08

Beasts of Burden

In this day and age, it's hard to figure why folk still have an almost obsessive fascination with animals that have become domesticated to carry or pull for us. Especially horses. In the case of teenaged girls, ponies.

I've never been on a horse. An elephant, yes. A calf, once, though not necessarily by choice. Almost a camel, but the smell was off-putting. But I didn't develop an attachment to any, though the elephant had a satisfying solidity, even as it swayed while slowly parading around the London Zoo.

Given the availability of motor vehicles with diverse numbers of wheels, well, at least two, I can easily resist the temptation of biological means of transport. Animals need special food and water. They need saddlery and training. You can't just turn the key or push the button. And if you don't watch out, there's pee and poop to avoid or deal with.

If you look at historical times before automobiles, you might think that riding on animals came about due to necessity. That, however, can be argued. For people living in areas where grazing is poor and distances to cover were large, perhaps there's a case. And indeed, it was on the vast plains of Asia where the horse culture seems to have originated, or the open range of the Wild West before barbed wire began its domination of the landscape. But in arable areas, before the tractor, only the ox seems to really have been needed. I've never seen an ox ridden, though bulls are occasionally attempted. The main preoccupation seems to be to get off uninjured after eight seconds.

Where land is of mixed quality, people gathered near the better land and put grazing animals on the rougher terrain, as in the old rundale and commons systems of Europe. That's now passing, as the best land is snapped up for near infinite phalanxes of almost identical dwellings constructed of an approximation to cardboard, or else for golf courses. The beasts we rode are being replaced with monster machines that can operate themselves while the farmer watches at least two Netflix movies per run up or down his field. The only danger is that each run takes so long that the developers might have a house or two built in the way of the machine before it gets to the turning point.

On second thought, maybe I'll get a horse.

J C Nash ©2018-11-15

Alec Green

When you're a kid of four, you haven't enough experience to recognize the abnormal. Later on you may get to know that your Aunty Rita is flaky – she'll get enthused by the idea of taking you to the zoo, but it never happens – but you only realize that when you're five or six. And what can seem horrifying or grotesque to adults is just how things are, neither attractive nor repellent.

That was how it was for me with my Uncle Alec. Actually, he wasn't an uncle at all. Just a friend of my deceased paternal grandparents who became an informal relative by giving friendship and support to my parents in the grey days after World War II.

Alec Green had been in the first go round. Whether he volunteered or was a conscript, I never learned. And when I was four, I certainly didn't know his story. However, his first and last action was at the Battle of Jerusalem in November or December 1917. That was where General Allenby advanced into what was then called Palestine, with the Arab guerillas of T. E. Lawrence to his right.

Apparently Alec went into the fray and was shot in the leg almost immediately. He said his war lasted twenty minutes. He was taken back to a field hospital and laid out in the triage area. The surgeon came out of the operating tent and said the leg would have to come off. But at that moment a Turkish shell landed on the hospital tent. The surgeon decided he would try to save as many as he could and would operate in the open, but the instruments were all blown up. So they sharpened and sterilized a regimental sword. The result, I learned from his widow, was rather untidy. But Alec survived, only to get malaria while recuperating in Egypt. That would recur periodically to plague him later in life.

The post-WWI British authorities in charge of rehabilitation of the seriously wounded generally get rather poor marks for their efforts. However, in Alec's case, they trained him as a clock and watch maker, and found him a job with a jeweller named Playsted in Tunbridge Wells where I was born. Thus he met and eventually married his wife May who was one of the jeweller's daughters. She was legally blind, but the marriage of people and disabilities worked happily.

He did well enough that by the end of WWII they owned a quite pleasant house with a typical English garden. They didn't have a car, but Alec had

a motorbike. One day he had business in the nearby village of Burwash in Sussex and had to swerve to avoid someone, I think a pedestrian or a bicycle. In those days, one didn't drive very fast, so while he came off the motorbike, he wasn't much hurt. The only problem was that his artificial leg came loose and was at a strange angle.

Passers by carried him into the Kicking Donkey pub which was only a few feet away and laid him on the bar. In response to "We'll call the ambulance," and "Is it very painful?", Alec said "Please just put the leg straight." One lady fainted, and other folk were distressed until the truth emerged, the leg was re-installed, and Alec rode away.

Alec used me as his foil, I think to upset unwanted guests. Until the end of the 1960s, many houses had coal fires, and consequently there was always the poker resting beside the fireplace. Alec would say to me "Oh dear, the mice have got in my tin leg again. Can you help me?" This was my cue to get the poker. Alec would raise his pant leg, and my job was to put the poker through the vent holes – there was one on each side about an inch or so in diameter – and rattle the poker to scare off the mice.

To a four-year old, I can assure you, this is perfectly rational behaviour.



Alec Green on right hand side.

John C. Nash ©2018-11-22

The Critic

Sometimes the world is far too accepting of the self-opinion of a person who should be ignored. This was especially true of – well, we’ll avoid trouble with a large and well-known corporation by calling him Grouch. He had received what used to be called a good education, that is, he studied Latin, English, and history. He had no expertise in mathematics or science, and his manual skills were such that he could hardly open a wine bottle. Perhaps that explained why he insisted on dining in a restaurant every day.

Nevertheless, his sense of self-importance, and an ability to persuade others that this opinion was correct, let him get a position as restaurant and theatre reviewer with a large media company. This allowed him to avoid the necessity of having to cook or seek entertainment as long as he could report on his experience in a way that attracted readers, viewers or listeners.

It is unfortunate that humans are overly drawn to enjoy reviews that start from a spirit of meanness. Start with damnation, and excoriate the honest efforts of a chef or actor or director, and it will attract attention. At least for a while.

Unfortunately for Grouch, he prepared a scathing critique of a rather good piece of dinner theatre by a woman who was both an exceptional chef and a scintillating playwright. This was some years ago, and she is long since deceased. I only learned the story by deciphering a strange letter that was somehow in the possessions of my late Aunt Ruby when I was required to empty her house after she died.

The lady whose work was unjustly dismissed by Grouch had a lot of friends in the theatre and restaurant circles. With consummate care, she promoted a new show called “The Magician”. It supposedly told its story about a magician, but used the theatre audience as part of the show. Indeed, one of the audience would be made to disappear, then reappear again.

This masterful piece of theatre – with dinner as well – had, of course, to be reviewed, and Grouch either was told, or decided himself, to attend. Though he never used his own name, he was by now so well known that his presence was noted. Indeed, the lady impresario had carefully made sure the theatre staff was primed for his appearance. Actually for his disappearance. For when the magician carefully selected Grouch to be his foil – and supporters in the prepared audience ensured he could not refuse – he duly disappeared.

Except only a stuffed porcupine reappeared. Grouch was never seen again.

The police were, naturally, brought in, but not until a couple of days later. Everyone assumed the disappearance was a publicity stunt by the show and by Grouch's employer. Indeed, the media company executives enjoyed the noise and fuss. Besides, Grouch had been becoming annoying by sending them unconscionably rude communications.

The police found that nobody knew anything. At least that's what they said. Of course, it wasn't widely known that the chef/playwright and the police chief were conducting a discreet affair, one that lasted over two decades until the chief died.

The media company hired a new critic, one who was more careful with both praise and scorn. Her name was Ruby.

J C Nash ©2018-11-29

Gangland

When the weather's bad, you don't need the blather of the talking heads on TV to further lower your mood with tales of the disappearance of integrity in public life.

It used to be the villains in the world were the gangsters played by actors like Jimmy Cagney, or other nasties portrayed malevolently in James Bond adventures. Or sometimes the uniformed and bemedalled stone faces of some juncocracy that did disgusting things to the poor citizens they oppressed.

Now we find more and more that the rot is dressed in expensive suits. You can almost recognize them by the fact they wear ties – at least the men do. How many regular citizens wear ties? Maybe ties are the new uniform of the oppressors and their henchmen, or henchwomen. These are the fixers who pay off the escorts, negotiate the shady deals, corrupt the work of institutions designed to ensure fair play and honest dealing. Those who stuff the ballot box or hack the count.

Where's the honest sheriff who'll bring order to the wild west? At least he or she won't have to find a rope – the ties will serve.

J C Nash ©2019-02-28

13 Frederick Street

Frederick Street in Clerkenwell, London, is just over half a kilometer from King's Cross Station. The houses were probably built in the late 1700s. They are tall and narrow row-houses with a basement where the staff worked in the kitchen, a main level for the family living rooms, an upper floor for their bedrooms and attic rooms for the servants' quarters. Iron railings delimit the "area" and the outdoor stairs to the lower level. In the present day, with London real estate at stratospheric prices, they've mostly been renovated and tarted up.

That wasn't the case when I knew the street. After the Second World War, a lot of the previous industry of the area left and the houses were divided into rather unattractive apartments. They called them "flats", but the ones I knew – at number 13 – were each two floors.

My association with number 13 Frederick Street was because my cousin Ralph lived there with a fluctuating number of roommates. They had the basement and ground level, while a family with children had the two upper levels. The unit my cousin shared had its living room at the front of the basement, likely in the old kitchen. Whatever had been there was gone, and a rather ancient gas fire had been somehow pushed into the fireplace that likely replaced the original coal cooking range. The back "room" was now a kitchen with a tiny stove, and – lacking another place to put it – a bathtub with a hose for a shower. The toilet was under the stairs to the rear, next to the door to the "garden", the name given to the rubbishy wilderness surrounded by brick walls. There was a very grimy window for the toilet. At the bottom of the stairs was a big, hand-drawn sign with an arrow and the word "BOG", the late-60s slang for toilet.

Two rooms on the ground floor were used as bedrooms, though assorted odd persons would sometimes be sleeping in the so-called living room. Because the family upstairs had children, the corridor on the ground floor was an obstacle course of prams, tricycles and other debris. The landlord, for reasons that are unclear, delivered newspapers and bread on a more or less regular basis. Overall, the slang expression "grotty" comes to mind.

Ralph had studied architecture at the University of London. Then he got a job with the London County Council. One time he said "I'm supposed to be allowed to design a bus shelter next month," so I gather he did not get much chance to exercise any creative powers.

Still, he was living – or camping – in London, and in the late 1960s London was a place a lot of young people found exciting. When I started my graduate work in Oxford, I would occasionally go up to town, and one time there was a Saturday night party. It was in winter, so windows were closed and the gas fire was on. There was lots of noise, plenty of drink, some food of dubious provenance. In the age before it became socially unacceptable, there was lots of tobacco smoke.

Sometime late in the evening, there was a noise like a jet engine. It was close by. Soon we realized it was coming from behind the gas fire. Going outside and across the road, we could see a stream of burning embers blasting from one of the chimneys.

Someone suggested running up the street to call 999, but there was reluctance to do that. Possibly the occupancy level or property standards of the house fell foul of regulations. Fortunately, there was some baking soda in a cupboard. Perhaps it was for hangover remedies. I suggested throwing that on the fire that was behind the gas appliance. After the gas to that device was turned off, someone managed to tilt it forward and we threw the contents of the box of soda on the pile of burning soot in the old fireplace. Things died down slowly and a few visits outside to check what was emanating from the chimney eventually suggested that the crisis was over. Of course, without the warmth, the party died. It was, in any event, late.

On another occasion, I went to the house to meet Ralph in mid-August. All his room-mates were away and everything was very quiet. As I recall, we were going to have a meal somewhere before I travelled on that evening to see an aunt or else return to digs in Oxford. As a matter of habit, one always used a loo when it was available.

In the dim light of the grimy window, I did not notice anything different. However, the landlord had decided to paint the toilet seat. Black! Shiny black. And he'd not told the residents. It had been done several days before, so did not feel wet when I sat down. However, I was made painfully aware of the new paint when I stood up, as it felt like a large sticky plaster was being ripped off. I likely shared some skin with the seat when the seat shared some paint with me.

Once we had figured out what had happened, I could not help laughing. Poor Ralph didn't laugh. But then he had to use a rag and turpentine while I bent over the kitchen table.



*In memory of Ralph Parks, born 9 March 1948.
Died of pancreatic cancer June 1990.*

J C Nash ©2019-03-10

Waiting Room

A couple of years ago I had business in Lyon in France. I have a phobia about missing the ride, so I'm always too early to stations and airports. I got to the Part-Dieu station at least an hour early because I was worried I would mix up the tram. Of course, leaving early, the appropriate – and correct – tram came immediately.

SNCF, like many other railway companies, used to have a fixed schedule where the usual platform was listed. However, possibly as a result of the rise in terrorist activities, or simply to manage the human traffic, they now only post the platform ten to fifteen minutes before departure on the electronic departures board. Given the limited seating in the concourse, I wandered into the waiting room and sat down to kill some time.

Don't know why we say "kill" time. "Waste" it maybe. "Pass" it certainly. But temporicide, to use the pompous term? I don't think so. I quite like watching the crowd. However, though I'd entered the waiting room – which actually had a door because the concourse was somewhat of a long tunnel under the tracks – I backtracked and found a kiosk to buy a coffee, actually a café au lait.

I came back and found a seat near the rear of the room. I put my bag between my feet, partly to avoid obstructing others, partly so I would not get up and forget it. I settled in for the three quarters of an hour before the platform would be announced.

For a few minutes I let my mind go blank. Then I had a yawn. I shouldn't be tired, having had an early night and a good sleep. Still, the breakfast at the pension to which I had been recommended was not the usual slices of baguette and coffee. Indeed, I had a minor feast of omelette in a croissante and some very English tea – in fact Twinings.

A very curvy woman teetered in on stiletto shoes. Totally inappropriate for travel, as was her tight dress and fur jacket, though this last item was severely truncated and ended just below her ... er ... bust. She found a seat and rather awkwardly managed to descend into it.

I watched people passing out in the concourse. Some were just passing through the station from the tram stops on one end to the buses on the other. There were also occasional women in some sort of ethnic apparel with children going back and forth. As I watched it became clear they were begging. I noticed how they disappeared very quickly when a security patrol

came by.

There were at least two security patrols. I'd noticed them before. Always four members. Army or police, though once I saw a mixed patrol of two army and two police. Over the previous decade, the individual police officer had been replaced with these teams, and they now carried automatic weapons. Well, usually two of the team did.

It surprised me when they came in the waiting room. Most people, like me, tried not to react. They marched very directly to a twenty-something man who had somewhat middle-eastern features and asked him for his ticket. He didn't have one. There was a sign on the door that said the waiting room was for passengers. The man had been in the waiting room when I arrived. I realized now that he was the only person without some form of luggage.

My French is not bad, but the exchange was fairly muffled but also – from the man's side – excited. Other questions were asked which I didn't quite catch, though seemingly about documents. Then the man was handcuffed and led off. People with travelling companions were obviously discussing the possibilities. I heard "terrorist" mentioned. Parents tried to distract their children.

The most obvious situation – a migrant trying to get warm and rested – was perhaps not front of mind.

Oops. I think my train was announced while all the fuss was happening.

J C Nash ©2019-03-21

Two Wedding Cakes

“You’ve got to have two cakes!” Aunt Audrey pronounced firmly.

My now wife and I were planning our wedding. We were living far from home in England, but there were many friends and relatives who could attend. And we wanted to plan our own event. Actually, while not poor, we couldn’t afford to hire a typical wedding reception venue and their staff. So we found a room we could get inexpensively at the college of which I was a member, and paid two friendly staff some cash to help out, then together with these helpers and a few of our inner circle made sandwiches and prepared other finger food for the occasion.

But Audrey said she would bake the cake. Fruit cake of course – very traditional in England. And there had to be two cakes.

“You have one or two tiers for the wedding and another for the first anniversary. Otherwise it’s bad luck!”

Bad luck? Audrey had been a corporal in the ATS – Auxiliary Territorial Service – which was the women’s part of the British Army. Her responsibilities seem to have largely been to chase down homesick girls who’d gone AWOL and to face down so-called "boyfriends" who wanted their income-generating "bit of crumpet" back working rather than in the Army. Only 5’ 2" with heels, she likely still intimidated the street ruffians.

So we went along with the plan. On our first anniversary, we visited Audrey and Harry, her ex-Bevin-Boy husband whose conscription was to work in a coal mine – they didn’t get demobbed until much later than the troops, probably 1948, and Harry ended up with silicosis. Anyway, the cake was trotted out. We cut off the icing, which had gone a bit beige in colour. My wife and I expected the cake to be mouldy or else crumbly dry, but it was moist and tasty.

“You’ve got to sprinkle on plenty of brandy, so it keeps,” Audrey said.

Yes. There was plenty of brandy! Probably 40 percent of the weight. But my, it was pretty nice. Another piece please. Just for good luck.

In memory of Audrey and Harry Shaw.

J C Nash ©2019-3-27

Secure Facility

The election of Trump in the US in 2016 was a bad day for civil society there, but in my country, nobody noticed much when the Smith regime gained power. Worse, his minions were very clever in taking over all the media channels. The Internet gave them a bit more trouble, but eventually they did a deal with the big players who wanted the market access who essentially rolled over and let Smith's "moderators" take control.

Fortunately, a few of us were aware of this. And we'd been doing some interesting work in electro-encephalography. We weren't looking forward to what we had to do. When we were ready, we posted some messages about democratic transparency on social media and the goons were around within a few hours and a half dozen of us were picked up.

I was one of the first to be interrogated. I didn't recognize the agent doing the questioning. He was about forty, and had a beer belly. Just as well, as it would fit the profile of his fate.

"You realize that the sort of sedition you're peddling will get you a sentence of ten years in a secure facility?" he said, spittle on his lips as he leaned close.

"Not as bad as having a stroke and being paralyzed for the rest of your life." I said as I cranked up my brain waves and shorted out an important area of his motor function.

He slumped down. He'd made the mistake of not having a guard present, but I was handcuffed to the table and the door was locked. After about a half hour, a guard noticed and raised the alarm. But I wasn't close to the agent and was taken back to a cell. I learned later he was dead. One less for the bad guys.

Next day I got a different agent. Told him I would only talk to Jarvis, but that I had a lot to tell. Jarvis was the head honcho of the secret police in our city.

"Why should he be interested in you?"

"Because the guy questioning me yesterday dropped dead. And there have been a raft of strange illnesses among your colleagues in the last 24 hours."

"How did you know that?" he snapped. I didn't, but my colleagues were all likely doing what I had done. An epidemic of strokes among secret policemen wouldn't be secret for very long. Especially if it only affected that

group.

I said, "Because I know the Angel of Death. Like Moses, I'm in touch with the powers that bring the plagues. The AOD is protective when he or she can be and vengeful when that fails. Though he/she doesn't always kill. That would be counter-productive."

"Rubbish. Just coincidences."

"The Angel is with us now, standing beside the guard there." I said, even though it wasn't true.

"So now you're hallucinating!" He raised a hand to slap me, but at that moment I decided to give the guard the worst pain he could ever imagine in his left leg and he screamed and fell down.

"So you can't see him, but I can," I said.

After the agent got help and the fuss died down, he came back and said "So what do you want to tell Jarvis?"

"I'm willing to tell him how to save people from the Angel of Death."

The agent walked out of the interrogation room. Nothing happened for a while, then there was noise in the hall and Jarvis himself came in.

"I've been told a tall tale about the Angel of Death. And I'm going to make your life so miserable you won't want to be alive unless you give me the straight goods on who is behind this."

I decided not to answer. Looking about 2 metres to Jarvis' left I feigned fear and said "No, no, don't blind him. Not even one eye!" as Jarvis hand went to his left eye and he slumped down in pain.

"God. It isn't a tale." he croaked. "I've no vision in the left eye and the pain is awful. Guard. Come here and deliver a beating to this man."

"The Angel will kill both of you if he moves," I said. "And you know the pain already."

"All right. But you're still cuffed," Jarvis said.

"True. But the Angel isn't. And he knows where you live, where your kids and your wife and your mistress are." Then talking to the imaginary angel, I said, "Really. You would do that?"

"What?" asked Jarvis.

"It's a bit too horrific to contemplate," I suggested.

J C Nash ©2019-04-11

Lettuce

Years ago, journalism graduates would get their first jobs in the newsroom of a local newspaper. Sometimes even a summer job. And the crime report was a staple for the low man or woman on the ladder.

Jane's Mom wasn't happy that she got the graveyard shift hanging around the cop shop to get page 5 stories that ran to two inches, tops. Mostly Mom didn't want Jane mixing with the bums, drunks and low-lives – including the cops – who were around the station in the middle of the night.

But Jane was a smart cookie, to use the jargon of the time. Well, the jargon of the time a few decades before what I'm telling you about. Anyway, this one night, a patrol car brings in two African guys who were trying to break into a chip wagon. Maybe they thought there'd be some money or something edible. Likely neither. The owner would have taken all the cash for obvious reasons, and the chips would have been raw.

In very bad, loud English, one of the guys says "We claim asylum from persecution by Idi Amin." So you know what era we're talking about. But, of course, in the West we mostly thought of persecution of people of East Asian origin, though Idi was pretty equal opportunity with his blessings of violence.

The desk sergeant had to ponder a bit, then look up some phone numbers and get someone from the Feds to phone someone else to phone yet another person and they said there'd be an official down in an hour or so. Meantime they sat the two Africans down in a glassed-in interview area. The cops were old-fashioned and kind of brusque, but after almost an hour, one of them went down to the cafeteria, which was closed at night and came back with a couple of salads and some rolls and butter and a double tuna sandwich.

"Leftovers. The cafeteria staff put them in the fridge for us. If we don't take them, they throw 'em out in the morning."

Jane was hanging out not far away. She saw the men eat the food. In fact, they devoured the salads first after looking for and finding the dressing. They were chatting away in a language she didn't know, but it had sounds rising and falling. Ah. A tonal language.

She went up to the desk and asked "What's the story behind the two guys over there?"

"Say they're Ugandans escaped from Idi Amin."

"Odd. Africa produces almost no lettuce except South Africa and maybe

Egypt, yet they like salad. And my prof. for an elective in linguistics kept talking about tonetics – the intonation in some languages like Chinese and some West African ones. I’m pretty sure they aren’t talking in Swahili.”

The desk sergeant was bored, and this was a chance for a minor escape from dullness. He radioed the patrol and asked if they’d checked the chip wagon. As it turned out, they were parked in the same lot where it was, drinking coffee and eating a donut. A half hour later they showed up with three African teenagers in tow. Took a while to sort out, but Jane got a scoop on a human trafficking ring.

She even got a byline under the front page headline LETTUCE AND TONES TRIP HUMAN SMUGGLERS.

J C Nash ©2019-04-17

Bathroom Graffiti

Cell phones – well, smart phones particularly – have changed the nature of graffiti. Sure, it’s all over walls everywhere, and then the vandals post videos of themselves tagging different places. Some like Banksy have become famous for it.

But bathrooms have a lot less graffiti than I remember. People are probably sitting on the throne scrolling through their messages rather than scrawling messages or drawings on the cubicle walls. The drawings were bad. I never saw any worthy of exhibition, though one or two had a hint of the more extreme of the works of Egon Schiele. But among the scatological poems and “Call Ruby for a good time” were occasional witty writings.

“It’s a long Q to P”,

where the Q and P are letters of the alphabet was one. Another, near the data processing center of a government building – and I’m dating myself, as it would now be called the IT department – was

“An APL a day keeps I. P. Sharp away”

Of course, you have to remember that in the 1970s the Toronto firm of I. P. Sharp tried to get business and government committed to the cryptic and rather strange computing language APL – A Programming Language. Now it’s a historical curiosity, but in its time quite an advance, leading to some of today’s popular scripting languages.

Mostly the writings were at the sight level of the customer. Or at least part of some messages.

“Look up!”

“Further!”

“You’ve just peed on your blue suede shoes.”

As I said, dating myself.

J C Nash ©2019-05-16

Magnificence

I'll have to change the name of the place where this happened. Otherwise Joe might find himself in awkward legal and subsequently physical discomfort. Me too, as a presumed accessory. So we'll call the place "Somewhere".

We'd been hired to do an airborne magnetometer study of a patch of pretty wild territory in a third world country that bordered the tiny state of Somewhere. Joe ran the plane – he was pilot, mechanic, ground crew and half owner. I ran the technical equipment and was the other half owner. We did OK in a quiet way. Often the jobs were paid in a way that we didn't have to report our total income if you know what I mean.

This time, we hit a patch of rough air and something shook loose in the fuel system. We could smell leaking fuel and didn't trust the gauges to tell us how much we had left. Joe managed to get us down on a small airstrip in Somewhere, and we were able to fix things up pretty fast, though we had to pay a bit of cash to some thugs who seemed to be in charge.

Then we got the "invite", which really was not optional, to see the ruler.

Now forms of address are, to my mind, pretty arbitrary. Worse, the grandeur of the address is inversely proportional to the import of the holder of the titles. So we were escorted by the toughs to meet his Serene and Glorious Magnificence the Benign and Sainted Ruler of Somewhere. When we get there, he's about 4 foot nothing. Joe is a big guy, and he learns the hard way that his Magnificence requires everyone to be below his chin level. That's not easy to do for a big guy like Joe. I got one rifle butt, and thereafter was on my knees. Joe, even on his knees was too big it seemed, and he got several whacks.

It seemed his Magnificence wanted a plane ride. We had a Twin Otter, and his little empire had only seen single engine jobbies up till then. We said yes because we didn't have any other option. Though the Otter can take 19 passengers when set up that way, we normally ride up front as pilot and co-pilot. I've got my license, but I normally just spell Joe off on longer flights. The cabin is almost completely full of equipment that is bolted down. However, there are two seats, generally folded down, but they are on rails and can be moved around a bit.

Rather awkwardly, we crabbed our way out of the Palace, such as it was, in order to prepare the plane. Joe insisted we give his Magnificence a good flight, so we set the seats by the door, and Joe stowed this so it could be

open. Not usual practice, but I figured I'd go along with it. Then we kneel down so his Magnificence and his bodyguard can board. We instruct them how to fasten the seat belts. His Magnificence takes the door position, the bodyguard is across the aisle, so to speak.

Then we crawl back to the front. His Magnificence had wanted to be up front, but Joe said we had to have two pilots for his safety. Joe had a mirror so he could see the passengers through the narrow corridor between the equipment, but he tells me to adjust it so I can see them.

So we start the engines and taxi out to the rather crappy strip of tarmac. We wind up the revs and Joe gives us a good show of the Otter's STOL capability. His Magnificence is cheering, and the bodyguard is too, though possibly to avoid getting punished for lack of enthusiasm.

We do a big figure 8 over the town and palace as we gain height. Suddenly Joe pulls the left wing down sharply and we're flying sideways. Actually about 110 degrees, so getting towards a roll. And both our passengers drop out the door.

"Any passengers?" Joe asks, and I recover my wits enough to say no. Joe levels us out and we fly towards our base about 200 km away.

When we get back, we submit our data and put the door back on, but say nothing. We get checked out by a doctor, and fortunately have only some nasty bruises. Nothing broken.

News reports a few days later suggest there has been a change of rule in Somewhere, and then a neighbouring, much bigger, country absorbs the place as a minor province.

Joe and I decide we'll maybe work in Nunavut for a while. He's a great guy. Loyal and honest, but don't rile him. He's too quick with mechanical things, like removing the seatbelt pin and replacing it with a bit of thin string that will break under stress.

J C Nash ©2019-5-23

Fred

Between 1968 and 1972 I was a member of the Mathematical Institute in Oxford. Usually, Oxford is associated with old buildings. One wit on the BBC classed universities into three categories:

- steel and glass
- red brick, and
- crumbling masonry.

Oxford and Cambridge were supposedly the last group, but in fact the infrastructure was in surprisingly good shape. Former students tended to be well-heeled or well-connected, and so the buildings were maintained. But the Maths Institute was only a couple of years old at the time, a concrete beam building with yellow brick facing and large windows. It had an abundance of white surfaces, including in the washrooms, where inspiration could be indulged by writing on the walls or cupboards or coffee tables with dry-erase markers. Except that it turned out the "erase" part of "dry-erase" was imperfect and eventually things got repainted and we were told, like good children, not to write on the walls.

In those days of wages of 15 pounds a week, there were plenty of staff. After you came in the revolving front door, there was an open foyer, and it was easy to miss the receptionist, Jean, whose wicket was actually just behind on the left. Occasionally the custodian – a permanent cigarette in his mouth – would be lurking, but mostly the foyer would be empty. One had to go upstairs for the administration, and there was a large square office for the secretarial pool in that age before word processors.

By malevolent coincidence, the first two secretaries were named Sheila. Somehow, I forget the details, they were distinguished, possibly as Sheila 1 and Sheila 2. However, when a third secretary was added, one of them asked “I suppose your name isn’t Sheila?”

The answer was “As a matter of fact, yes.”

On being told that she was now the third of three with that appellation, this lady said, “Then call me Fred.”

This name, of course, stuck. I suspect that as a pensioner, she is still called Fred. However, in an age of stereotypes, it did cause some interesting mixups. People were told to “See Fred in the Secretarial Office to get that sorted out.” After poking their nose in the office and seeing only women, they would return to ask Jean where Fred was. Jean soon told people to

“See Fred, the tall brunette girl in the office.”

Eventually there were 4 secretaries, and I think at one time there was yet another Sheila. Perhaps the Australians should be blamed, since they use Sheila as a synonym for woman.

J C Nash ©2019-5-23

Bubblegum

Until the 1970s, bubblegum was sticky. Parents probably didn't notice, but when the natural chicle gum was replaced by a less sticky synthetic, burst bubbles didn't stick to your face quite so much. But better not try blowing a bubble near an angora sweater or your Mom might indulge in some post-partum birth control.

It's hard to figure out why and how bubblegum became so popular among kids. Fleeer Corporation discovered how to make chewing gum suitable for bubbles in 1928, and they had lots of red food dye, which when mixed into the grey gum, turned it the characteristic, almost definitive, pink.

In the 60s, it was almost a sort of contraband you bought for pennies from small vending machines at the corner store. Brightly coloured balls about an inch across. In school they'd be confiscated immediately if discovered. Sometimes you'd find blobs of chewed gum on the underside of the desk you were sitting in. The custodian had a putty knife as part of his collection of cleaning equipment. And you had to avoid stepping in discarded gum – it wasn't fun to have to get it off your shoes.

Every 1960s middle school had a bubblegum rebel who was always in trouble because of it. Billy Marshall was our rebel. A scruffy kid, a bit smaller than most. Always chewing and popping bubbles. Big bubbles, but he never seemed to get gum on his face or clothes like other kids.

"Billy Marshall, empty your pockets," the teacher would say, and there'd be a slightly sticky gum ball in his cotton handkerchief. Kleenex were around, but most families were still in the cloth handkerchief era.

Billy also smoked cigarettes. Somehow he could get hold of them, probably from his older brother. In that age, most adults smoked at least occasionally, but shops were fairly strict in not selling to kids. After school, Billy would hold court behind Ashley's Furniture warehouse between a couple of disused dumpsters. If someone looked carefully, they'd have seen the faint whirl of smoke rising above the dumpsters.

One day, the excitement of illicit smoking had attracted a couple of girls from our grade 7 class. Jane Elliot's parents were the upper crust of our town, which was pretty modest and working class for the most part. She came across as a goody-goody to the teachers, but it was an act. She could channel a smile and an innocent expression so teachers overlooked behavioural reality.

Jane liked to think she was sophisticated, but she didn't, as they say, inhale. Billy declared "Jane, you really don't know how to smoke, do you?"

"Of course I do!"

"You don't breathe in the smoke," Billy replied. "Watch this."

He proceeded to take a puff of his cigarette. Then he chewed and blew a bubble. A big bubble. And he moved close to Jane.

Then, as they say, the bubble burst. The smoke came out to prove he'd inhaled. But – and there had to be a but – this was one time when the gum didn't stay tidy. It was an era of bouffant hair for women, and you can guess where the gum went. And it stank of cigarette.

I'll say this, Jane didn't rat out Billy, but somehow the dumpsters were taken away. Then Billy's family moved to Toronto. The nearest convenience store was put out of business by a supermarket that didn't bother to have gum machines. Most of us moved on to the local high school, though Jane was sent to a private boarding school. Bubblegum lost its attraction in our new environment.

As I said, the bubble burst.

John C. Nash ©2019-05-30

Lilac

The lilacs were late that year. It was well into June before their scent greeted my morning promenade to a special-session 8:30 class I taught. A greeting that was double-edged. Pollen makes me stuffy-nosed, but I like the smell of blossoms. Sweet and sour, good and bad, though possibly it would make the lecture stressful to deliver. Still, the morning was pleasant. Fresh but not cold. And the blossoms were a riot of colour.

In a minor reverie, I didn't at first notice the girl walking ahead of me a few paces. It was the sound of sobbing that eventually got my attention. Who would be crying on a morning like this?

I wasn't sure my hearing was accurate, so I walked a little faster and indeed the girl was crying quite uncontrollably. When she turned into the campus, I was fairly sure she was a student, and got to within a few feet of her and asked,

"Excuse me, but are you OK?"

Clearly a fatuous question, but in such rare situations it isn't obvious how to proceed, and there aren't precedents in one's experience.

She mumbled, "I'll be all right in a bit."

We walked on for about 30 seconds, but the sobbing continued. I said,

"I'm on my way to teach a class, but if you want a safe and quiet place to sit for a while, you can use my office. When you leave, the door will lock behind you."

There was a pause of some seconds, then she said, "OK. That might be helpful."

We were, by this time, at my building, and went in and up the stairs. I unlocked the office and went in, motioning for her to follow. The sobbing had stopped, but tears were still running down her face.

"Take the desk chair, it's the most comfortable. I use the hard chairs for my students."

I looked around to make sure I'd left no sensitive papers. No, I'd put them all in the filing cabinet which I kept locked since we'd had a case where the cleaning staff took to selling some exam papers a few years ago. Caused a fuss, even though the buyers should have realized they were paying big bucks for material already on our internet site. Such are cheaters.

And my desk was clear. Never leave stuff there now. One time a student put his binder on top of some papers, then picked up the whole pile when he

left.

“Good luck! Just make sure the door’s closed when you leave.” I said, and left, shutting the door.

When I returned from my class, she was gone.

I never saw her again. Never learned what was causing such distress, but it isn’t my temperament to violate the private misery of another. But now the smell of lilac always makes me wonder what caused the weeping of a young woman.

J C Nash ©2019-06-19

Transport to a Wedding

I've been married long enough that we didn't have to consider engaging a wedding planner. I don't think that occupational category existed back then, especially in England. I was a graduate student at the Maths Institute in Oxford. My future wife had been finishing a degree in Canada and came to join me. For reasons too complicated to explain briefly, we had more friends and family in the UK than in Canada, so my in-laws came to us.

We were not poor, but even relatively well-financed graduate students cannot afford to throw money around, so we arranged our own celebration. This included preparing some of the sandwiches for the reception. To allow for various folk to come to Oxford from different parts of England, we decided on a Sunday afternoon. During the morning, we made the sandwiches and got things set up ready for the reception, then my best man headed back to his college and I cycled back to the apartment my future wife and I would occupy. I bathed and dressed then looked at my watch.

Damn! I was too late for the bus, which only went about once an hour on Sunday. Stanley Holloway, as Arthur Doolittle in the then recent "My Fair Lady", was singing "Get me to the church on time" in my head.

Well, I still had the bike, actually a women's pattern bought for a couple of pounds from a woman I'd gone out with a few times who had graduated a year before. We're all still friends, even a half century later. So tuck the pant legs in the socks and pedal towards the church.

I knew where to put the bike – the Maths Institute had a cycle shed, and it was just a block from St. Aloysius. Actually, to give it its full title the Oxford Oratory Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga. Gerard Manley Hopkins was one of its first ministers in the 1870s.

As I turned into Walton Street behind the Institute, I nearly ran into my best man cycling the other way. He'd missed his bus too, and though he wasn't one of the mathematics students, he knew about the shed.

We locked up our bikes, straightened our suits and walked casually over to the church in plenty of time for the ceremony.

J C Nash ©2019-7-17

Picture Window

Calgary expanded hugely during the 1950s and 1960s. Developers sent phalanxes of houses with stucco and siding marching across the prairie foothills in blandly named suburbs. Along with many other families, my folks bought a small bungalow in one such development. When we arrived, the grass was growing on the lawn, but the community park behind and the school in front were scrub-land with construction tracks where machinery had been parked. We had a kitchen, bathroom, 3 bedrooms and a living room. There was an unfinished basement. No dining room or family room. No en-suite in the main bedroom. There was a chute where the milkman could deliver the square quarts of milk and pick up the empties. And a laundry chute where you dropped your dirty clothes into the basement. The bath had no shower, but the living room had a picture window. That was an advertised feature of practically every house. The rest of the windows were called Pierson windows, a mid-century invention from California where the glass rode in slots in redwood frames. There was a metal fitting fastened to the glass to let you slide it. Depending on the humidity or lack thereof, the glass was firmly fixed or else a force 9 gale came through the overlap of the glass panes. California is not Alberta. Especially not mid-January Alberta.

In summer, of course, everyone got busy with their yard. The sound of motor mowers was the background music of the suburb. Except for the O'Briens. Mr. O'Brien was an assistant manager at a department store. He always wore a suit, or perhaps it wore him. He was a large man who liked beer, and there was always stomach lurching over the belt line with a threat that the shirt tails would escape. And his tie was never quite straight or properly tied.

At home, Mr. O'Brien liked to sit in the back yard and drink beer and listen to sports on the radio. The grass grew longer and longer. I guess someone said something to him, because one afternoon – it must have been during the summer holidays – I heard a motor mower spluttering. Then it slowed down and gradually died.

Our house was a few down the street from the O'Briens. When I went outside, I saw Pat O'Brien trying to get the mower going again. It had clearly not been equal to the high grass.

“Having trouble?” I asked. Pat and I were both eleven or twelve at the time.

“Yeah. The long grass stopped the motor, and now I can’t seem to get it started again. Dad offered me five bucks to mow the lawn.” Five bucks was a lot back then.

I’ve always liked mechanical things, so I offered to help. We pushed down on the handle and could see that the blade was almost completely embedded in old grass. Some had been there a while. We took a big screwdriver and gradually pried out bricks of almost solid grass. Then we found a wire brush and cleaned it out some more.

“Let’s see if that helps, and try to start it,” I ventured.

Pat pulled on the starting cord and the mower spluttered to life. It was going, but not very well. I waved to Pat to shut it down.

“When was the oil changed?” I asked.

“I don’t remember Dad ever changing it,” Pat replied.

After a few minutes of back and forth, Pat realized there was some motor oil in the shed – we didn’t have garages in this suburb. I restarted the mower to warm it up for a minute or so while Pat went to get a couple of concrete blocks from the back yard. We lifted up the mower and drained the oil into an old juice can – there was only about a cup of oil left. Then we put in about double that amount to reach the indicated fill line. While we were at this, we filled the fuel tank.

“Give it a try,” I suggested.

The mower started easily and ran not too badly, but a bit slow. I went to the handle and tried the throttle and realized it jammed at about the 70% level. The wire cable was rusted a bit and could not move easily inside the sleeve. I put a drop or two of oil on the exposed wire and moved the throttle. After a few ups and downs it went all the way and the motor sped up a lot. I shut off the motor so we could talk.

“It’s still not quite at full power. I think the mixture setting is wrong,” I said. Now at this stage of life, I was a big aficionado of model airplanes with motors. I was used to fiddling with the mixture to make these little motors scream to full power.

“Do you know how to tune it?” Pat asked.

“Well, there are two screws here on the carburetor, one for the mixture and the other to set the minimum opening of the throttle. Oh. We’d better clean the air intake. Do you have a vacuum cleaner?”

Pat said they did, so I undid the screw that secured the air intake and opened it and handed him the very dirty filter. In fact, tapping it with the screwdriver set off a dust storm. Pat disappeared inside his house. I went home and got a file and sharpened the blade while he was away. When he got back with a somewhat cleaner filter, we put it back, secured it, and I started the mower.

Once it was running smoothly, I set it to idle and tried the screws. I got

the wrong screw on the first try, the mixture one, then adjusted the other – the idle screw – and the motor slowed and stopped. I reset the screw and restarted the motor. Then eased the idle screw back by a smaller amount.

Then I set the motor to about 60% and played with the other screw until the motor was going faster. When I put it to full speed, it really hummed.

As I was about to turn off the motor, Mr. O'Brien pulled up in his car.

"Hey boys, that sounds pretty good. You must be some kind of mechanic Jimmy."

Mr. O'Brien has called me Jimmy forever, even though it's not my name.

"The long grass was too much for the motor, so we cleaned out the blade chamber, changed the oil, cleaned the air filter, and tuned it up. It should do better now," I explained.

"Wow, that's great. Mind if I give it a try?"

Mr. O'Brien started the mower, set it to full speed and charged into the grass. The mower slowed just a touch, but cut a clean swath through what was essentially a small hay field. Until – and you knew there'd be an "until" didn't you – Mr. O'Brien found the baseball he and Pat had lost in the grass a month earlier. There was a loud "thwack" as the blade hit the ball. The motor coughed slightly. However, the principal result was that the ball exited the side of the mower where cut grass usually vacated the mower. Indeed the ball exited the mower very rapidly and likely lost almost no velocity before hitting the middle of the picture window and passing through into the living room.

Mr. O'Brien said a number of words, some of which I knew were cause for my mother to bring out a specially reserved bar of soap should I ever pronounce them in her hearing. The words I did not then know I realized were of a similar nature. Since the O'Briens were immersed in figuring out what to do as an immediate response to the ball through window event, I made sure I had the file and retired quietly home.

My mother asked what had been going on, so I told her.

"Maybe now he'll learn to keep the grass cut," she responded as she set down a glass of milk and some cookies.

John C. Nash ©2019-07-25

Another Life

In a quiet corridor
Somewhere, sometime
There's the door to my other life
Unmarked but unlocked,
Waiting for me to find it.

At a nightmare station
Midnight, bedsheets
There's a lazy porter
Struggling and pretending
Waiting to drop my memories.

On a crowded city bus
rush-hour, homebound
There's a daydream woman
Unknown but understood
Waiting for me to greet her.

In an insane moment
Everywhere, anytime
There's a careless loneliness
Advertised but forgotten
Waiting to be banished.

JCN April 8, 1976

Discovered on an old hard drive and re-edited in 2019.

John C. Nash ©2019-8-15

A Filing Cabinet

Memories are slippery. You think you're going to remember something but a few weeks later, it's just not there. Especially as you get older.

But just occasionally there'll be some trigger – a smell, a few words shouted across a room, or a picture in a magazine – and something that was deeply buried will rise up. That's what happened the other day.

Possibly it was some back-to-school ad that showed a filing cabinet. Just a 2 drawer flimsy one. No matter what you pay now, you don't get a very solid cabinet. Just pressed metal, or if it's in wood – well, something called wood but more likely glorified cardboard – it wouldn't have so much as two sticks of tree material. Anyway, I suddenly had a flashback to when I was about three years old. My Dad had inherited a small grocery store in a village in south-east England. A simple shop front, but it had a bit of a fore-court where he could put barrows with fresh produce.

His parents had died during the War, though not directly of enemy action. That was reserved for their graves, which got scrambled with many others when a Heinkel jettisoned its bombs in an effort to get away from RAF fighters. The store was run – if it could be called that – by my father's seventeen-year-old sister until 1946. My father tidied up, assessed the damage due to neglect and pilfering, worked on eliminating the rodents who'd encamped in the storage shed given the grand title of "warehouse", and gradually rebuilt the business. Along the way he married my mother – on a Wednesday afternoon, when there was early closing – and a respectable 13 months later I came along.

This was a time when grocers did deliveries. All the more complicated by rationing of staples and points – fiddly little cardboard squares – that were needed for so-called luxuries. Teenaged boys did the deliveries on heavy bicycles that had a front rack for a box. Sometime around 1950, my father found an ad for a second-hand Jowett Bradford van. Actually a so-called "estate wagon" because it had windows in the back, but no seats. I recall later he had some seats he would fit in that were not fastened down. So much for safety. Mind you, the top speed of the Bradford was under 50 mph. The 2-cylinder, 500 cc motor wasn't that powerful.

I guess the business was growing, as he decided he needed a filing cabinet. Now even in 1950 and 1951 the post-war return to civilian production was incomplete. There was a big problem getting materials, tools, refurbishing

damaged premises and so on. Bombed out buildings were common for several more years. So you didn't just wander over to Business Depot or equivalent to get a filing cabinet. Fortunately, one of my mother's sisters had married a fellow who was an evaluator. He went round making estimates of values for tax, insurance or bankruptcy purposes. He somehow knew where there was a filing cabinet going at a good price. However, it was in Croydon, and we lived over 30 miles away. So one Sunday morning, my father woke me early and we set off in the Bradford, just the two of us.

At that time, there were no motorways. Even the so-called A roads were just one lane each way, and they went through every hamlet along the way. What speed limits there were probably were notional, since the curves and road conditions would not permit more than about 20 mph most of the time.

About an hour into the journey, around 7:30, we stopped somewhere north of Sevenoaks at a rather shabby café and had a thoughoughly delightful breakfast of bacon, eggs and fried bread. From a time of rationing, food stands out in memory. We drove on and found my uncle Reg later in the morning in a grim, dusty office and Reg and my father got the cabinet into the van. I don't remember anyone else being there, so perhaps, as the Brits say, this filing cabinet fell off the back of a lorry.

The return journey is a complete blank. Probably being three, the excitement had tired me and I slept. Indeed, I don't recall the filing cabinet later, but presumably it was somewhere around the shop or the house behind and above the shop. But that's the way of memories.

They're slippery.





J C Nash ©2019-09-05

Research Grant Woes

You probably haven't heard about Zachary Blomfontaine. On the other hand, most people have heard about the collapse of the Consolidated International Bank building a decade ago. Twenty stories came down one Saturday night of a long weekend. The authorities reported two people killed, but there were actually three, the third being Zack.

There was a lot of innuendo about the man and woman whose deaths were reported. Both senior bank executives. Since they were in the penthouse executive suite when the collapse occurred, they ended up, you might say, on the top of the pile. A slight matter of extreme interest to certain news media is that they were found quite a distance from any clothing, and they were both married to other people. The buzz around that little issue allowed Zack's death and what occasioned it to be hushed up.

You see, Zack was a junior professor at a local university, working in physical chemistry of metals. He'd been awarded a grant under the typically boring title of "Room temperature liquefaction of crystalline metals: (COLON) proof of concept using molybdenum and vanadium enhanced alloys of iron." There is always a colon in grant titles. The last grant awarded by NSERC that didn't have a colon in the title was in 1965, and that was for a project by a young woman professor who was never officially seen with the Minister of Science.

Now how would I know all this. Well, I happened to have reviewed Zack's grant application. It was kind of intriguing. He had a mathematical model that said if you hit a piece of certain kinds of metal with a blast from a laser of the right frequency and polarization, the crystal would liquefy and you'd end up with a puddle of metal that would, after a few minutes, recrystallize into a blob. I guess his "room temperature" was not quite true, as locally where you shone the laser on the metal it would get hot. But that was a tiny hot spot, and the liquefaction would propagate through the whole piece of metal without adding a whole mess of energy.

I remember that grant selection committee meeting. We had to manage the usual constraints. Keep the favourite star researchers and their teams funded because they all had a representative on the grant committee, so there was a grand mutual appreciation. I can think of other words than appreciation, but they aren't polite.

Then the younger researchers, like Zack, had to be, shall we say, "en-

couraged" or "facilitated". This meant giving them a bit of money, but never enough to do the whole job. And we had to play politics of provinces and official languages and appropriate diversity. A lottery would have been more fair and less tiring, and if they let us meet somewhere nice – I'm sure the University of Hawaii would rent us meeting rooms – there would be more enthusiasm for grant selection duty.

Anyway, I argued that Zack should get more money than the rest of the committee were willing to dole out. They thought such theoretical work would not appeal to Canada's scientific paymasters. Nobody could see how much fun it would be to have an anti-tank round that would leave some Russian tank crews standing in a pool of cold liquid steel. What fun! If they didn't move fast, they'd be stuck in it too when it recrystallized, and that can sometimes happen in a fraction of a second.

I guess Zack had ideas in similar directions. He'd found out – I don't know how, but I think he had been at a party and overheard someone from Consolidated International – that a third world dictator was keeping a lot of high-value jewelry and gold in the CI vault. The week before the building collapse, I'd called him to see how the work was going. He was very cagey, but said he was pretty certain I'd hear if it was successful within a fortnight. Not many people used "fortnight" who weren't from the UK, so that stuck in my mind.

After the collapse, I was curious how a 20-story steel-frame building that had been up for ten years would turn into a pile of rubble. And – when I managed to get near – there were signs of a puddle of metal.

I tried emailing and calling Zack, but there was no response. Then a couple of weeks after, I got a call from the secretary of the department he had worked in. She said she had been asked to inform people who had been in contact with Zack that he had, for personal reasons, to leave the university and would not be back. I could tell the secretary wasn't happy with her task, and I suspect she knew it was a lie.

My guess? Well, the bank probably put the vault in right at the time of construction and welded the steel wall panels of the vault to the building frame. So the liquefaction worked just fine – all the way to the top of the building.

Zack was a great chemist, but perhaps not so clever about building design and construction. For selfish reasons, I wondered if Zack left any lab notes that I could use. I never did find any, and I haven't heard of anyone studying similar possibilities. If only I had stronger skills in theoretical physics.

J C Nash ©2019-09-19

I Love You, But

“I love you, but ...” she began her rationalization.

And I couldn't listen, though every word was clear and sharp, so well honed that it cut deeply, savagely, without her having to add anger to her voice. Not that it made any difference that I could only hear the sound of her voice but make no meaning of that sound. She was saying something to convince herself that she shouldn't take my offer of myself, shouldn't share today and tomorrow, shouldn't, despite her introduction, love me.

All that I could see and notice as she worked earnestly on her compromises was that her ear-ring bounced and swang gaily to the cadence of her excuses. The reflections dancing from it mocked us both.

What was she saying? What couldn't she do because of parents, or her job, or things she just had to do with her life? Was she speaking a different language, one I didn't know? I still could not concentrate on what she said. Now the movement of her lips distracted me, and I wanted to kiss her, but I knew she wouldn't let me, for she had put a wall between us, a wall that would henceforth keep our secrets separate and constrain our joys to exist independently. And, as I watched, her lips became those of a marionette, its wired movements automatic and rehearsed. I could no more communicate my feelings for her by kissing that mouth than I could fly.

Now she was talking of being friends. But I couldn't comprehend how. She would insist on our remaining good friends. It would satisfy her ego and let her feel I appreciated her as a person. Now I was distracted by the rise and fall of her breasts beneath her blouse as she breathed quite heavily, each breath bringing her subject and my patience to exhaustion. For I would not be content with her friendship, and to demand it in this way was cruel. Now her bosom heaved then settled and I realized she had finished speaking some moments before.

I could remember no points to rebut, no arguments to attack, no emotional handle to win back her affection. Nor, in the face of her rigidity, was debate appropriate.

“I love you, too,” I said, but I left immediately and have never sought to meet again.

Written some time in the 1970s and transcribed and edited in 2019.

John C. Nash ©2019-9-23

Wheels

When I was a teenager, one of the big rites of passage was getting a learner's permit to drive. Then you had wheels. Well, not right away of course, but you actually could sit in the driver's seat and control an automobile if you had a licensed driver beside you. And in a couple of years

In the Netherlands, I think they have a different cultural regime. Getting wheels seems to happen sometime between three and four, when kids are given a bicycle. Maybe it's an attempt at population control. Toddlers riding two-wheelers – tweewieler fietsen – in the traffic.

But the kids seem to survive. Tourists and old folk maybe not. Zebra crossings are supposed to give pedestrians right of way, but you'll get bells and untranslatable invective if you try to claim that right. The cyclists don't want to stop. And those high oma-bikes are such that you really can't put your feet on the ground from the saddle.

Despite the general impression that the Dutch are law-abiding, they have an eye disease that prevents them from seeing or understanding signs that say that an area is pedestrian only, and bikes are to be walked. They'll still ding their bells and expect you to get out of the way.

All those bikes have to go somewhere. Utrecht now has a bike garage for 12,500 bikes. I'm sure 12,499 spaces are taken by rusty, abandoned ones. Anything not secured with a 50 kilo chain will get borrowed and dumped. And I don't think many have a nifty electronic finder, so I'm sure a lot are simply the result of "Where the hell did I put my bike?" situations.

Actually, the Dutch might as well simply nationalize the bike fleet and let folk use them. The municipalities already have little trucks that have mechanical arms to pick up improperly parked bikes. The driver doesn't have to leave his seat to grab and load the bike. Getting those bikes dumped in the canal is a bit more difficult. Some enterprising folks use a grapnel and fish for abandoned bikes, shopping carts, and perambulators.

So why is all this important? Well, all those anti-social tweewielers nearly caused a domestic World War III for me. The much-vaunted public transport in the Netherlands isn't really much different from the newly opened Ottawa LRT. From Voorburg to Gouda, we'd had a "vertraging" of 10 minutes while waiting for a train. Then this "delay" became "rijt niet" – cancelled. Then the next train was delayed too. After we managed to get a very late lunch in Gouda, we needed to get to Alphen aan der Rijn, and boarded an R-

net train – part of the Rotterdam system now absorbed into the national Nederalandse Spoorweg system. This puttered along its single track line to the second from last stop. Leaving Waddinxveen, there was an almighty shuddering as we started. The brakes seem to have stuck on. We got going but in the penultimate stop – Boskoop, just 4 minutes from the end of the run – we sat a while, then the fans stopped, then there was an announcement in strongly accented Dutch that the train wasn't going any further. So we had to wait about 20 minutes for the next one.

All this delay didn't matter until our last journey, which was by bus to Leiden. We arrived a couple of minutes after six o'clock. And across a small road we could see that the visboer – the Dutch equivalent of a chip wagon selling fish, in particular salt herring – was still open, but someone was clearing up the waste bin and the small tables you could stand at to eat your herring.

Now this would not be important, except that we'd been looking all day for a herring for my wife. This Dutch sushi is somewhere between a religion and a cocaine addiction for her. But the bikes were streaming along at what I'm sure was well above the 30 km/hr limit for the area. And they were ignoring the zebra crossing. Finally, summoning courage that I really lacked, I held up my arm and stepped forward. Dings and some curses, but we got across. And my wife was the last, but definitely satisfied, customer of the day.



J C Nash ©2019-10-17

Pete

In most lives there are times we'd rather didn't happen. Perhaps rather forget, though often the tough times are those where you learn and grow. My guess is more divorces and breakups happen in supposedly happy times than tough ones. When the winds of fortune are blowing cold and nasty, folk find common cause and strength.

Even so, there are bad times where we're alone, or think we are. And afterwards we keep to ourselves our stories and our feelings. Pretend they never happened.

That's the essence of my story about Pete. Pete was representing a soldier of the Great War. Nominally Corporal Peter H. Carruthers who died on the Somme in 1916. He was sitting down, legs a bit apart with his rifle across them, canteen on the ground, eating some bread. His back was against the end of a bench in a small park that served as the location of War Memorial services in our town. And he was made of bronze. An unusual cenotaph. A plaque invited you to sit and remember.

The time I'm recalling was several decades ago. I'd managed to get into some personal trouble, compounded with alcohol. Never got too interested in pot or other rubbish. Drink was sufficient, together with some stupid decisions. So this one day I end up partly stewed – no, I wasn't as out of it as I could have been – sitting on the bench feeling sorry for myself. Was sort of planning to not continue, if you follow me.

So I'm getting into thinking of the practicalities, which makes me even more dismal because all of the tidier ways require spending some money, which I didn't have, when this voice says, "Why're you being such a sap?"

And there's nobody around, so I say "Who says I'm a sap? And why that old-fashioned slang?"

"Me. Pete. And "sap" is a word we use for someone who wants to jump in front of bullets."

Now without the booze and the depression and all that, I might have reacted differently. You know, tried to figure out if this is just some sort of hallucination, a prank by some teenagers, or whatever. But I didn't. It had been a while since anyone had seemed interested in talking to me.

"Why are you so interested?" I queried somewhat aggressively.

"I didn't get a lot of choice about how I left the battlefield. But you do."

That was a good point. I pondered it for a while, a long while, before I

asked,

“So what’s my way out?”

“Like Sartre indicated, there’s no exit, fellow. You gotta keep trying ’till you run out of chances. But along the way, you make the best of it, help your buddies and the people you love, try to find the blue sky among the rain clouds.”

“Sounds like a lot of work. Perhaps too much work,” I mumbled, feeling tired.

“Your choice, I suppose.” He didn’t say this in a nasty way. More a sigh of resignation.

There was no more conversation that day, and I can’t say I made a big effort to turn my life around. But over a few months I managed to drink less, eat better, take a bit more effort in keeping my rented room tidy and myself clean. Ended up with a small promotion at work, then an offer of a better job.

At least once a week, I’d sit on the bench. Join Pete in eating my lunch. I sometimes wonder what he’d had to eat. And we’d converse. Probably just my imagination. After that first time, I didn’t have to talk out loud. But Pete’s end of the discussion was often surprising by the ideas he introduced and the thinking he made me do.

Then I got a big break, but it meant moving quite a distance away. Of course, I couldn’t leave without a final visit to Pete.

I didn’t have to tell him about my move. He knew stuff like that, and our conversation was about hopes and fears and also some practical matters. Then, sensing I had to leave, he said, “Real glad you decided to hang in there.”

J C Nash ©2019-10-27

Spirits

The Halloween party was going pretty well up to about 11:30. Then Judy – who had been over-sampling the candy that was supposed to go to the kids who visited in costume – tossed it all up over her date for the evening. That was Doug, a new guy to our group. Wore a suit to the party. We thought at first it was a costume. You know, pretending to be some sort of corporate executive type. Glasses. Well-trimmed hair. Practically chin-polished from his evening shave.

So the suit is a mess, and Arlene, our hostess, finds a pair of her husband's jeans for Doug, and everyone kind of gets a bit awkward.

Just then there's a rumble of thunder. Then a few seconds later a big flash of lightening, and an instant bang. Really loud. The power goes out. We look outside to see if anything's hit and notice that there's some flames on a power pole across the street, and the house over there looks a bit funny. They still have power.

Arlene says "Strange that I never noticed the renovations over there before. Guess you need to have the right light."

But the power pole is still smoking, so we go out and – really strangely – there's no rain and the clouds aren't really heavy as far as we can make out from the glow of the city. There's quite a lot of noise from the house opposite. Their party hasn't sunk in a pool of vomit.

"Hey," I say, "Let's go join their party."

So we grab some drink and snacks so we won't be sponging off the neighbours and trot across. Wow. Neat music. And the folks are dressed kind of strange. Must be their costumes. We mosey in and look to see who seems to be in charge so we can say hello. An attractive woman in a futuristic suit – sort of Star Trekkie if you know what I mean – says "Hi, I don't think we've met."

Arlene says "I'm Arlene and this is Bob. We live across the road. I thought the Samuels lived here, but they must be away."

"The Samuels? We bought this place from Dr. and Mrs. Johansen in 2045. And I don't recall you at all. The Jacobs live across from us."

There was another flash and a big bang. We were all of a sudden sitting on wet grass across the road from Arlene and Bob's. And it was 2019.

Kind of like ghosts. Except maybe we were the spirits.

J C Nash ©2019-10-31 Written during the Halloween Challenge Night.

Hunting

Oscar Wilde called it "the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable!". Fox hunting, that is. People on horseback chasing dogs intent on tearing apart a fox. Now banned in England, Wales and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland, nor, for that matter, Canada. Though I've never seen fancily dressed riders following hounds baying after a fox here. I have, however, seen a fox crossing the road locally. He or she came out of the bush next to my bus stop one morning, politely looked both ways, and crossed the generally busy four-lane road at a brisk but steady trot. I do hope the fox had a good meal of mice to keep them out of my house.

The movies show the upper crust aficionado's of fox hunting as a cliquy set with too much money, plummy accents and a lot of social aspirations. I wouldn't know. I've always been a bystander. Particularly once. A colleague in my first job came from a farm in Wiltshire. Invited me down one weekend in March for lambing. We were out in the field with the ewes and a few lambs had arrived overnight. The peace of the morning had been undisturbed except for the occasional bahs of the sheep, when we heard a horn and dogs barking. A fox darted through a space between the gatepost and the hedge and raced diagonally across the field away from us and the sheep. The horses and dogs got closer and the on the other side of the hedge we saw the master of hounds on his horse in his scarlet tunic.

Mr Harvey, my friend's father, was nearby. He shouted at the hunt-master "The first beast in this field, be it horse, dog or man gets both barrels of this shotgun."

Other riders were coming up as two hounds pushed through a gap in the rails. True to his word, Mr. Harvey unloaded shot and two dogs were dead. The rest stayed back. There was much expostulation, and shouts to "Call the police. Those dogs are worth over a thousand pounds apiece." And this was in the 60s, when that was above a year's salary per dog. However, the hunt-master knew the law. Mr. Harvey might have a claim against the hunt if any ewe aborted or had her lamb attacked. The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953 is quite strong on such issues.

So there was much harumphing and complaining, but the hunt dispersed, no doubt to do as much violence to alcoholic spirits in the local pub as they could. Some flunkies were sent to collect the bloody corpses. And the sheep and their lambs were left alone in the meadow.

J C Nash ©2019-11-21

Trousers

I drew the short straw at today's news planning meeting at the station. That's Channel 19, or "Nineteen for News, all news all the time". Actually we broadcast commercials 55% of the time. So Josie, our News Director, says "Bill, you're on for the meeting of the Anti-sexism Feminist Collective. They've got some manifesto they're planning to release."

"Wouldn't it be better to send a woman?" I ventured delicately.

"Nobody left. I'm sending Antonia to cover the football championship. We've got to ensure women reporters have the same access as men to the locker rooms. Besides, she likes to look at guys – early Christmas present for her."

So I made sure I had my PRESS badge prominently displayed and all the decals for 19 for News plastered on the microphone and camera – I had to operate that too. Glad the new portable cameras are pretty easy to use, and we have a head mount one too.

Well, the ladies – sorry women – of the Collective aren't too happy that 19 has sent a guy, but after some yelling from some of the more extreme members of the crowd, I'm allowed to stand at the back, but told I can't have the camera on. But I make sure I'm catching the audio on my smart phone. May need evidence if someone claims we've mis-quoted them.

So after some preliminaries, this gal gets up to read the manifesto.

"We, the women of the Anti-sexism Feminist Collective, demand equality of terminology for women's clothing articles. For too long, men have inflated the words for their clothing in a sexist expansion of concept. While a woman wears a dress – singular – men wear trousers or pants – plural. Women wear a culotte, but men wear breeches. This has to stop, and we ask for legislation causing all references to clothing that is in one piece to be singular."

There was some cheering, then a succession of supportive statements, each as silly as the rest. I couldn't see how 19 would make much of this, especially with no video.

Then I got an idea. I put the headcam on, but pointed it backwards. Then, as loud as I could, I yelled "KNICKERS".

And ran.

Hats on straight

I like hats, but in this third decade of the 21st century, the only easy ones to find are baseball caps and winter toques. Toques aren't – in my book at least – true hats. They're more head socks. Useful, sometimes necessary, but not true headgear.

And baseball caps? Well, I'll wear them to keep the sun out of my eyes, but they only make their statement by what is printed on them. You know. "Make America Grate Again". Spell that G R A T E to avoid spreading fake news.

Or wear a baseball cap backwards to unofficially join whatever band of unemployed loiterers frequents your neighbourhood. When the cap is backward, the wearer seems to think they have license to upset normal folk with bad language and indecent behaviour.

Mind you, the US Navy has regulations concerning the wearing of official baseball caps. It took some years of violating those regulations before female ratings were allowed to put their hair in a bun through the hole above the strap at the back. And US Army personnel have to wear their Patrol Cap – a boxy version of the baseball cap – according to a set of rules that runs to a page of text. It's KP for any soldier with a crooked PC. Yes, the US Army has taken over the abbreviation "PC" too, and for a purpose only they would understand.

John C. Nash ©2020-02-20

Distraction

Distraction

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

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

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

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

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

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

John C. Nash ©2020-02-27

The Hateful Slip

Mr. Norris was annoyed.

This wasn't unusual. He was often annoyed. His bus was more than ten seconds late. His coffee was too hot, too cold, too sweet, too bitter. He hadn't slept a full eight hours. His favourite socks had a small hole. There were too many passengers on the bus. There were too few parishioners in the church he attended. In other words, he was quite usually annoyed.

But today was a new annoyance.

Mr. Norris taught English as a Second Language. His class had three Haitians, two Mexicans, a Cuban, four Somalis, six Syrians, two Afghans, two Iraqis, three Chinese and two Koreans. A maximal class of twenty-five. But that didn't annoy him.

What annoyed him was that he had been given a request by the administrator of the ESL program to present a class on English words with multiple meanings. And the administrator, with fine ignorance of her particular choice of words, had asked him to, as she said, "slip it in" to the curriculum.

With growing petulance, Mr. Norris realized that she had no idea how awkward it was to teach such a topic to students who were yet to gain sufficient command of vocabulary and cultural context to be able to appreciate that single words could have so many applications and meanings.

Examples:

- a run of bad luck
- score three runs in a baseball game
- a run in my stocking
- a chicken run

He decided he would use her own word – "slip" – and presented the class with the unpleasant nature of multiple uses of a single word. Thus he sought out the Merriam-Webster definition, and was surprised to find more than one meaning he had either forgotten or did not know.

As a verb, it generally implied movement without much friction, as shoes on ice, as well as the extensions of meaning to quietly moving past a sentry, or memories escaping from consciousness, or inadvertent revelation of secrets, or rapid donning or doffing of clothes, or rapid opening, falling, or

disengagement. There were lots of nuances, but mostly based on a common concept.

But as a noun, there were so many unusual meanings, and some did not seem to have any commonality.

- the ramp for launching or landing water craft
- the berth for a ship or boat between two piers
- an act of escape – giving someone the slip
- a piece of paper, possibly with something written on it
- a mistake
- a leash made so it can be quickly released
- the act of slipping, as on ice
- a landslide or avalanche
- an undergarment
- a fall, as in stock prices
- a young and slender person, particularly a female
- a long seat or narrow pew
- a small shoot or twig for grafting
- an offspring
- an undergarment for women made in dress length
- a case into which something is encased, such as a pillowcase
- a mixture of finely divided clay and water used by potters

Mr. Norris found some pictures on the Internet and printed them off and over the course of half an hour was able to show his class how one simple four-letter word could mean a lot of things.

He was feeling satisfied that he had accomplished his goal in fully satisfying the administrator's demand with her own, unplanned, example when one of the Afghan students raised his hand.

It is difficult to quote the question, because the man's command of English was still tentative. It amounted to a query whether the term "First

slip” in the game of cricket – the student had played this position as a boy – were actually English.

Mr. Norris did not know. He looked over the printout of the Merriam-Webster definition. But that was an American dictionary. Americans would have every baseball nuance, but few cricket ones.

The other Afghan student was excited. He came forward to the blackboard and took up chalk and drew a diagram. In few words “Wicket, Bowler, Batter, Slip” he put some crosses on the diagram. The two Afghans grinned. They clearly had an additional meaning of slip.

Mr. Norris was more annoyed.

John C. Nash ©2020-03-05

Educated Guess

Spring of 1977. Just before personal computers became something you could actually buy without remortgaging the house. And a time when 256K of RAM was a big memory for the main computer at a university. Still, integrated circuits were around, and Tandy had announced the Radio Shack TRS 80 using the new Intel 8080 microprocessor. I was in the final stages of finishing a book on using such machines for serious computational problems.

ACM had a Special Interest Group on Numerical Mathematics. *SIGNUM*. Because of the work I was doing, I got invited to their 1-day session that was tacked on the end of another computer conference being held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My wife decided to come along – we'd never been to Santa Fe, or Albuquerque for that matter.

At the time, the main flights were Chicago to Albuquerque and this is in the age where the Boeing 727 triple-engine-in-the-tail machine was still a common airliner. We transfer in Chicago and find we know a good number of the passengers. About 35 are numerical mathematicians from all over the world. Well, the free world. Better hope the Soviets – still the Soviets and not the Russians then – don't take out about a third of the West's computational mathematicians.

Not that they'd need to if the airline's promotional stunt had worked.

Remember, this was before domestic flights had movies and screens and entertainment systems. You took along your book or magazine, or even something educational. But this day the captain comes on and says that, as a diversion, they were going to give away a bottle of wine to promote New York wineries.

And, you may also recall if you are old enough, that New York in the 1970s didn't have any wineries that were recognized as producing wine. Maybe as producing industrial alcohol suitable for cleaning fouled boilers or municipal waste digesters. Still, who doesn't want a free bottle of wine?

The catch is, to get the wine, you have to guess the take-off weight of the aircraft. We were given the fuel capacity of the tank in pounds and the number of passengers as well as the empty weight of the airplane.

Now we have a lot of people used to working with numbers on board, so competition should be stiff. However, I put down 177,000 lbs. Turned out the official weight was 174,000, and the nearest other guess was 164,000. My wife is very pleased. And the numerical types seem happy one of their own

has got closest to the target.

That evening, a researcher from the National Bureau of Standards, now NIST, with the entirely appropriate name of Sweet, who my wife henceforth called Sweet Roland by reversing his names, had a party in his room. We took the wine as a contribution. It was duly poured into various paper and plastic cups. We all took a taste and almost without words poured everything in the toilet. Even the most determined alcoholic wouldn't be able to get the foul fluid past their tonsils. If they did, it would probably be the last beverage they imbibed.

Fortunately, my colleagues knew the source of the bottle. And there were other liquids available to get the taste out of our mouths.

J C Nash ©2020-03-12

The Start

Many stand
Before the line
To wait the starting gun.
An end to training. Waiting. Hoping.
Success a distant ribbon.
Many will run -- some will finish,
Proud, not in victory
But the joy of the race.

John C. Nash
c. 1984 revised 2020

John C. Nash ©2019-05-30

Next?

We're keeping to ourselves these days, amid a frenzy of concern about a microscopic bundle of protein and nucleic acid that cannot be seen even with a powerful microscope. This has changed all our lives.

People probably think such an occurrence is novel, like the virus. But humanity has had to adapt before.

Or not, as in the case of those living in Pompeii in October 79, since nobody who stayed for the big Vesuvian bang had a tomorrow.

But mostly, someone survived. Even a lot of Canadians in 1918. My grandfather got through trench fever, gonorrhoea, a gunshot wound, two hospitalizations with the 1918 influenza and a near miss from the Kimmel mutiny that killed 5 and injured many. I guess I should be glad. There was a "next" for him – and ultimately me!

Though war and pestilence didn't stop there. A V-1 had a go at my mother, falling well within the 200m fatal blast zone. Except the house – indeed public house – in which she lived was built in 1584 and turned out surprisingly resilient to blast. So she had a tomorrow, and once more, so did I.

Today's challenge will likely justify the stern measures governments are taking, even if the death toll will be minuscule compared to the 50 to 100 million who died in the 1918-1919 'flu pandemic. One, we know more about viruses. Two, we aren't in the middle of a war where it is felt important to hide problems and pretend they don't exist. Some historians have said it is called the Spanish Flu only because neutral Spain reported it. Too bad they seem to have been a bit slow this time.

But even they will – collectively – have a "next".

The annoying bit about it all is that not quite everyone will.

John C. Nash ©2020-03-26

The Darkroom

When I was a student, I joined the staff of our university newspaper. It was, of course, well-supported by journalism and political science students, but only a few of us from the science and engineering programs. However, I'd a couple of cameras and knew my way round a darkroom, especially for black and white photography, and the newspaper needed pictures. Never did get into colour developing.

My interest continued after I finished my studies and started working as an engineer. When my wife and I bought our second house – the one we're still living in – I put it in a small darkroom, complete with sink and a modest enlarger. Got a couple of decades before the tidal wave of digital photography displaced film and chemicals.

I hadn't been in the darkroom for a few weeks. I use it now more or less as a store-room for memorabilia, and – like all such rooms – it acquires untidy piles of assorted bits and pieces that one is going to tidy up real soon now. My wife has a sewing room where she has her own peculiar collections and piles. Every so often, we make an effort and things look a little more ordered. We have a long-standing armistice that stipulates that each of us is allowed the courtesy of a few piles of valued rubbish about which the other will not complain.

In a time when I could not get out much, I decided that maybe I'd give tidying a try, so I went down to the darkroom. Originally I'd not had a chair, but now there was the last survivor of our first kitchen set. The arborite table and the other three chairs had long since succumbed to age and misuse.

Once inside, I closed the door. Wonder if the seals are still good? I turned out the light and waited for my eyes to accustom to the dark. Not a glimmer. I'd built it well. I turned on the red safety lamp out of a sense of nostalgia. There was the developing tank. If you didn't have or didn't like using a dark bag, you had to work with the developing tank in the dark.

Took me back. First make sure all was dark, and the "do not enter" red warning light outside the door was turned on. With my wife, that didn't work, and we lost the pictures of our house-warming party when she opened the door with "Oh, I thought you'd left the light on." Even after five decades, she still turns the lights out on me. With LED bulbs, the wear and tear on the electronics costs a lot more than the 7 watt power. I put a latch on the darkroom door, a latch that has never, of course, been needed since.

Once all was dark, unless, as I said, you were using a special dark-bag, you took the film out of the cannister, held the 35 mm cartridge with the male end down and rapped it sharply on the counter to pop off the end. Or you could use a bottle opener, but that bent the cartridge top so you couldn't re-use it with bulk film. When you had the cartridge open, you had to be careful not to touch the film except by the leader and edges. So find the leader, cut off the uneven part, then feed the end into the jaws of the spiral spool. Once that was done, you could jiggle the two halves of the spool back and forth and the special grips at the edges would advance the film along the spiral, keeping space between each orbit for the chemical solutions. There was another spool that was manual, but that took more dexterity.

Put the spool in the tank, put on the lid and lock it carefully, and then you could turn on the light. I always used the red safety lamp. Not necessary, but I liked the dim light. You could then add the chemicals, which you had to prepare from powder and check for temperature. First the developer, agitating gently and regularly to avoid bubbles that will ruin the image. As soon as the chemical was in, you started a timer. When time was up, pour the developer back into the bottle since it can be used a few times, then add the stop bath, swish, empty, then add the fixer for the appropriate time. Once the film was fixed, you could also open the tank and turn on the light. Finally wash with water, possibly with a wetting agent added. After a couple of washes in the tank, I always liked to take the film out and put it in a shallow tray in the sink and allow the tap to run gently for a while. At this point, you could take a look at the film to see what you have, though you should really hang it to dry first. Some people would hold the film up to the light, but I had a small slide sorter which had a nice back-light and I always had a magnifier handy to check the images.

You had to go through this process again with the prints. The enlarger would project the image onto photo paper – now the red safety light let you see what you were doing. You'd work out how long to expose the paper, then put it in a tray of developer, watch the image come up, stop the process in the stop bath, then put the photo in the fixer for a time. Finally wash and then dry. I had a small drier that would take two 8 by 10s, but the university darkroom had a big drum drier that was a lot faster.

Memories. My eye fell on a corner of newsprint poking out between some piles of other things. I eased it out and discovered pictures I'd taken of an anti-war demo. The Vietnam war was on. American boys were crossing into Canada to escape the draft. In Canada, we were mostly still in Centennial mode. Happy and a little smug before the FLQ crisis and the Laporte murder brought us down to earth.

One picture brought back special memories. A girl in a Stop The War sweatshirt and jeans, her hair tied with a colourful scarf with the knot below

a pony-tail. An angry face.

As I looked at the photo, I remembered that I'd taken another picture of her later that day. She'd approached me as I took the first picture – her anger was because I was taking pictures.

“Working for the pigs?” she asked accusingly.

“No, I'm with the student paper. See my badge.”

She looked at it, and said “Still doesn't mean that you're not passing them to the RCMP.”

“Well, they probably pick up copies of the paper, but I don't give them any pictures, and I keep my own negatives. After all, the student paper doesn't pay us, except for materials, so we get the rights to the photos.”

This seemed to mollify her, and as the demo broke up, she came over and said “Sorry if I barked at you.”

“No problem. You want a coffee or a coke?”

“Yeah. The shouting makes you thirsty.”

Her name was Nancy. She was studying in Toronto. Had hitch-hiked up for the demo, despite the dangers. Said she'd go back the same way that night. I'd felt awkward about that, and persuaded her to stay until morning and put her name down on the ride list in the Uni-center and she could put down my phone number. No cell-phones then. She could crash on the sofa of the apartment I shared with Tim, my room-mate.

So we got to know each other. She wasn't pretty, at least in a conventional way. And so angry, which I found out was because her boyfriend had, in contrast to the American draft-dodgers, actually gone and joined the American military. It was difficult to know if she still considered him boyfriend or ex-boyfriend.

Over a few hours, I suppose we got to know each other really well, in that way that we were focussed on the things that were of most import to us. As the sun set, I took a picture of her on our balcony. Rummaging through my negatives, I found the set and put it in the enlarger. In reverse, I saw her image. The print was, as they say, “somewhere safe”. I should look for it, else print this negative. Maybe my scanner would let me do that digitally. The anger in her face was gone, and there was something between sadness and resolution in her expression.

I sat for a while remembering. We actually fell asleep together on my bed. In the parlance of everyday slang “nothing happened”. But in reality, two people connected on a different plane. In the morning she left, a ride having materialized in a phone call at 8 a.m.

We never met again. I saw an image of her in the late 70s at a rally against something or other, and she became a local politician noted for her activism. Then later, sadly, an obituary noting “after a long illness”.

I wondered what happened to the boy / man who left the safety of

Canada to join a monumental stupidity in Asia. Whether his actions led to Nancy's activism, or if that were pre-existing.

I slid the newspaper back between the other things. Tidying could wait.

J C Nash ©2020-04-30

Max's Lost Millions

When I knew Max, he drove a big rig, moving supplies and materials around Alberta and Saskatchewan and sometimes bringing them in from the northern States. He was one of my mother's cousins, and when she talked about him, there was always a hint that he had the devil in him.

In the time when he and my folks could meet up, I was a youngster. If I kept quiet I could sit un-noticed behind the sofa while the adults socialized. Some drink. Lots of smoke. And lots of stories. My folks had a few, as my Canadian-born mother had lived in South-East England through the War, and my father had been in the RAF as ground crew, in particular through the D-day to surrender period on the Continent. Max had been in the Calgary Highlanders. They'd gone into Sicily and fought up the boot of Italy until early 1945, when they were moved to fight in the Scheldt Estuary and then liberate occupied Netherlands in early May.

Perhaps it was between Italy and Holland that Max, on a motorbike he'd acquired, managed to lose control going down River Hill near Sevenoaks and ride through a garden party set up for some cause or other, causing some chaos in the process. He didn't wait to explain, apparently, but gunned the motor and left in a hurry.

He must have been in the thick of things for much of his time in the service. In Italy, he told of a situation where a machine-gun emplacement had a lot of men pinned down. There was some sort of small artillery piece sitting in the road and one of the men carried a shell to it, loaded it while bullets whizzed around, and fired.

He missed.

So he came back and got another shell, repeated the exercise and eliminated the opposition. Max said the report recommending a decoration was lost in channels.

He didn't mention the Scheldt to my recollection. He did remember Amsterdam. After the May 5 surrender in Wageningen, the Germans still occupied the western part of the Netherlands. It was not until May 8 that the Canadians got to Amsterdam. In fact, a number of people died when German troops fired on celebrating crowds in the Dam square on May 7.

At some point Max, who was then a Sergeant, was leading a small team of men to ensure a part of the city where there were jewellery workshops was clear. An American – and who knows why Americans were in Amsterdam

then, so it may have been a deserter – called to the Canadians.

“Quickly you guys. Bring that bazooka here.”

Max said he thought they were being asked to deal with a tank or armoured position, but their target turned out to be a safe. Inside were cut but unmounted diamonds. Each of the troops got a small pouch.

The Canadians had lost a lot of men along the way. Max said his battalion was down to 27 men, and he was the senior NCO. Because they were a small group, they somehow were assigned to be repatriated with an American troop-ship via New York. It may have been that their losses gave them priority in return to Canada.

Max and his small group had four or five pre-war cabins for their bunks. About a day out of port – I think they went from Antwerp or Cherbourg – the klaxon sounded and there was an announcement that all personnel were to report to their lifeboat stations for loot inspection. While the men were inspected there, it was likely teams of Military Police would look through the kit in the cabins.

Max said the ship hove to for this activity. I’m not sure why that would be necessary. Maybe the MPs thought the noise of the engines would cover up activity to hide loot.

Anyway, before reporting to the lifeboat station, Max put three of the diamonds from his pouch between his toes, then opened the porthole and jettisoned the pouch.

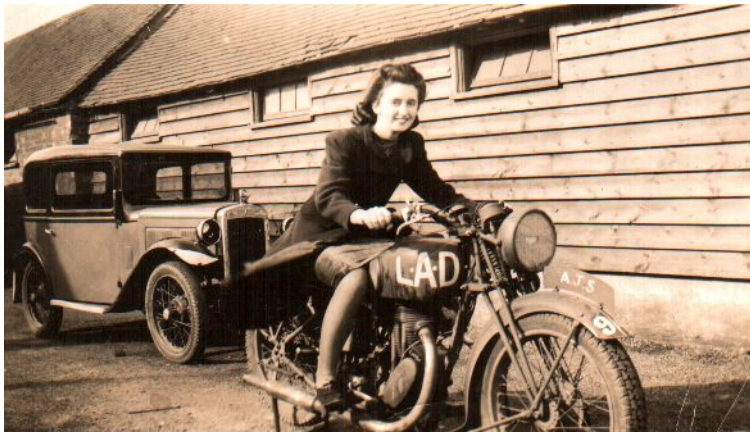
On deck, the Canadians lined up beside some Americans with whom they would share a lifeboat if the ship went down. A multi-star general officer approached, and there was saluting before this officer stated “Sergeant Moss, you are the senior representative of the Canadian forces here. Inspect your men!”

Max said he found as much liquor as he could and spent the rest of the voyage drunk. He did get a ring made of one of the diamonds and gave it to his wife Sylvia. But he still wondered for the rest of his life where that pouch of diamonds is resting at the bottom of the Atlantic.

John C. Nash ©2020-05-09



Don, Ray, and Max Moss (three brothers) during WW2.



Peggy Nash-Moss on Max Moss' motorbike.

Silent Leaper

It was Betty who introduced the name “Silent Leaper”. This was half a century ago, around the end of the swinging sixties when it became the norm for young folk to go to university or college. Four girl students sharing a pretty grungy two-bedroom inner-suburbs apartment. “Grungy”. The word itself is quintessentially 60s.

Four girls sharing, so lots of talk about boys. We were supposedly the vanguard of the sexual revolution, but there was always a lot more talk than action. We wanted men and boys – the distinction was unclear – to find us attractive, and we wanted romance. We were insanely curious about sex, but if I’m an honest observer with the picture of that time coming down a wire of memory, we probably were more interested in knowing about it than doing very much.

Betty got our interest one evening as we prepared one of the usual uninteresting – read cheap – dinners.

“It’s the silent leapers that annoy me,” she said.

Three other voices simultaneously questioned “Silent leapers?”

“Yeah. You know. A fellow asks you if you’d like to come for coffee and he’s not too bad looking, so you figure OK. And you get to his place and he’s got one of those funny Italian coffee pots with two parts that goes all hissy to make espresso. And you drink his coffee and listen to him rabbit on about his lab experiments or his job last summer with a factory making coins and how there’s this special word – scissel, sounds like scissors and probably is related – that means the metal left after coins are punched out. It’s all very respectable, but you sort of run out of meaningless topics to discuss and BANG, he leaps at you and tries to kiss you and you slam into the back of the sofa and are trying to push him away. I mean, you wouldn’t mind if he asked nicely. So I call them Silent Leapers because there’s no warning and they’re often pretty quiet when they can’t talk about work or weather. And they avoid religion or politics because they don’t want to start a long debate that might last until the landlady’s curfew precludes any snogging.”

This was quite a discourse for Betty. She wasn’t really much for words, at least on the philosophical front. Food, clothes and money were 99 percent of her conversational content.

I forget what followed as we made the dinner, but I do remember thinking that I, too, had had the silent leaper treatment once or twice.

Then sometime in the summer after I finished my undergraduate degree and was working for the professor who was going to supervise my higher studies I met this nice guy in the science library. He was a new hire and responsible for fetching materials that were in the storage collection. You put in a slip and the books would be ready the next day. I guess we got talking – he'd done some courses in the subject area of the journals and books I was requesting. Then we ate lunch outside together a couple of times, and I invited him for coffee. Though I was the only occupant of the flat temporarily, I wasn't too worried about things getting out of hand. Or maybe I would have welcomed at least some movement in that direction. I'd had some troubles with my monthlies not being monthly, and a lot of cramping. The college doctor had put me on some medication, of which she said a side effect was contraception if you took it as directed. Thus the Pill. So if things got steamy, I'd at least be safe from one hazard.

Adrian wasn't movie-star handsome, but kind of cute. He came about 7:30 and I made coffee and served some of the Peek Frean chocolate digestives that were really considered special back then. I yapped a lot about my studies and my plans, where I'd grown up, my hobbies, then things went quiet. Then I lunged and tried to kiss him.

He was polite enough to give me a small peck on the lips before taking evasive action. After that, things went rather awkward, and he said he had some things to do before he went to bed and made an exit that was about as swift as he could without being outright rude.

From then on, our interactions at the library were fraught with polite discomfort. I'd been the silent leaper.

Some years later I realized he could have been gay. At the time, even the word had not taken on its same-sex meaning. Even later, I recognized that he may have simply wanted to take things a bit slower, and my sudden actions scared him off. I console myself by noting that I was in the forefront of women's liberation by making silent leapers gender neutral.

Thanks to Helen for sharing the origins of this story.

John C. Nash ©2020-05-17

Navy Days

When you're eight-going-on-nine, a full day out with your Dad is a big occasion. Even more so when he takes you to Navy Days at Portsmouth. That meant a trip in the car. At eight, the distance seemed huge, but we lived in Southampton. The distance was a modest 20 miles.

The Navy went all out to impress. There were lots of both active and passive displays, and you could tour a number of ships. The active events included a mock attack by HMS Stickleback, an X class midget submarine of the type that broke the back of Tirpitz. This was only a decade after World War II ended, and many of the vessels were veterans of that conflict.

There was a demonstration of using a breeches buoy to transfer a sailor from one ship to another. A jackstay between the two served as a sort of zip-line across which a canvas chair was pulled on a pulley.

Our biggest problem was one of selection. There were too many events and exhibits to fit in the approximately six hours we had for our outing. But we tried. Memory is tricky, but I believe the image of companionways painted pale yellow and lit by the also-yellow incandescent bulbs of the era is true to the reality. And there is the memory of the tightness of the space – even for a small boy – inside Her Majesty's Submarine Sea Scout, commissioned in 1944. In the control room, I got to look through the periscope. Could it get better?

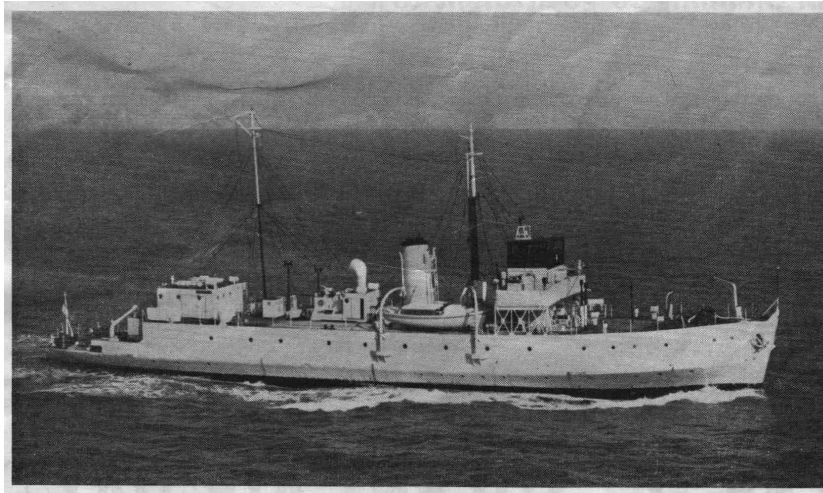
The dog-eared programme mentions that Her Majesty's Fast Patrol Boat Gay Charioteer would fire torpedoes at 2:30 and 4:30 daily. I don't remember that. And until I re-read the program, I had no inkling that the Royal Navy once had a whole program called the Gay class patrol boats in the immediate post-War years. Such is the shift of language and sensibilities over time.

Perhaps my favourite memory is of one of the ugly-duckling ships, HMS Plover, an 800 ton coastal mine-layer built in the mid-1930s. The crew claimed that she laid the first mine within 20 minutes of the declaration of war in 1939, and had managed to deposit over 15,000 of these diabolical devices during the six years of conflict. At the time, I didn't question whether this was good, bad or indifferent. It just seemed that there were men – at the time women did not go to sea – who served diligently on modest and unassuming warships with little glory or distinction, though I have since learned more German U-boats were lost to mines than any other cause.

Looking for a picture of this little ship, I found Plover had a predecessor

that gained some fame in 1870 when, based in Canada's Maritimes, she twice captured the American fishing schooner Clara F. Friend. The first time for fishing inside the three mile limit. The second time after the American owner and friends overpowered the guards and stole her from Charlottetown harbour. At eight, I might have found that an exciting story, but I wouldn't have been able to experience the sights, sounds and smells of an aging, rather greasy little warship that had been able to, in the expression of the time, "carry on".

John C. Nash ©2020-05-28



HMS Plover

Sticks and Stones

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

When I was a little kid, that ditty was chanted in opposition to catcalls and insults of other kids.

But it isn't true, and it never was.

In this, our current era of the first part of the 21st century, we find generally respected newsreaders suspended for apparent careless use of words that may be offensive. That is a sea change in society and language over the course of one lifetime.

When I was about five, I lived in the rather stodgy and provincial town of Tunbridge Wells. If you were formal, Royal Tunbridge Wells. Middle-class ladies wore tailored jacket and skirt tweed suits to go shopping at grocers who were “much obliged” for their custom.

One day in walking with my grandfather, who had spent his youth in Canada, I saw a family of people with black skins. This was totally new to me, and I asked him if there was something wrong with them.

He replied that no, that was just how they were. He called them by the dreaded N-word. I will use “black” rather than his term. But this was a man born in 1889. A decade after my grandfather was born, Joseph Conrad used the word in the title of one of his books. The title of that book was even changed for the USA, but only because it was felt American readers would not buy a book where the titular character was a person of colour. The use of the word was inconsequential otherwise.

Then my grandfather surprised me. I had never known him to be more than considered and sober. In my family, expressions of passion were unknown. But my grandfather said that in Canada he loved travelling on the trains because of the black conductors who looked after the passengers so well. And with a seething anger, he said that these black men worked really hard and really well and that it was absolutely not right that they were restricted to working on the trains, and that they should be permitted to work elsewhere because they were such good workers.

The only other time I recall my grandfather expressing such anger was when he talked of being told in 1917, in the trenches in France, that he was to vote in the constituency of Valleyfield Quebec rather than his real home in Gleichen Alberta. It was only later that I learned that this election was the great conscription election of World War 1. Prime Minister Borden

managed to get the Military Voters Act passed, which allowed serving soldiers to choose their constituency. My grandfather made clear he was not allowed such a choice.

In my teens, we often used words now regarded as offensive, and we did not recognize their origin. Current dictionaries even note that the word “gypped” for “cheated” is often not understood to be a slight on Roma or gypsy people.

In a time at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, when large numbers of immigrants came from various parts of the world, but particularly many parts of Europe, there were a number of slang names used. Eventually school authorities became concerned. One afternoon the school loudspeaker crackled and the principal made an announcement that teachers had heard students using words that could be considered ethnic slurs. After he concluded his message, one of my fellow students, Al Scrobogna, who if he had not been born in Italy had entered the world soon after his parents came to Canada, said “Guess that means us wops can’t call ourselves wops any more.”

Al may have found a good way to disarm the weapons of insult. Similarly, the Dykes on Bikes motorcycle clubs have blunted a derogatory term for lesbians.

But these are minor victories. Sticks and stones may be all that’s left after the wars that words start.

J C Nash ©2020-06-09

Navigation

One side-effect of looking at old photos is that you can be very abruptly confronted with memories. Some of those are pleasant, some are sad, and some, you realize with the benefit of some decades of worldly experience, have a curious mixture of both.

In the very early 1950s, my cousin Ralph lived in a new council housing estate called Ramslye Estates. A pompous name for some council semi-detached houses and two-story apartment buildings with two upper and two lower flats, though each had its own doorway entrance. As council housing projects go, this was one of the very best, and much later the tenants eagerly purchased them when Mrs. Thatcher's Conservatives decided they could be sold off.

They were not, of course, large. If the weather were in any way tolerable to being outside, children were sent out to play.

My cousin had a new tricycle – a quite good one – and a scooter. I think one was a Christmas present and the other – his birthday was in March – was for his fifth birthday. I was six months older. One Spring afternoon – I think it was a Saturday – I was somehow delivered from our grocery store home in a nearby village to the upstairs flat of my Uncle Don and Aunt Betty, and my cousin and I were sent out to play.

We rode up and down the road, then to the bus stop. My cousin and I knew there was a pond about 250 yards along the Eridge Road where boys and men sometimes sailed model boats. I don't know which of Ralph or I suggested going there.

We were disappointed, as I recall. Nobody was there.

I don't know which of us suggested it would be nice to see Grandma and Grandad, but agreement was immediate and unqualified. We, or at least I, knew the way, having travelled the route many times by car, bus and even on foot. Google Maps says it is between 2.4 and 2.9 miles, depending on the chosen route, of which none is completely direct unless you are willing to walk among motor vehicles. We stuck to the side-walks, to us the "pavement" or "path".

My grandmother seemed a little surprised to see us, but only much later did I realize she must have been quite astonished. My grandparents and my parents, both in independent business, had telephones, but my Aunt and Uncle did not. Somehow my father showed up in our battered delivery wagon

and took us back to my Aunt and Uncle.

I do not remember any strident warnings. Perhaps a slightly pointed “You should have said where you were going.”

I’m not even sure if we’d been missed. At the time children were allowed more latitude and freedom to explore. Indeed, I was already taking the municipal bus to school, nominally on my own but in a mob of mixed-age children. If the provincial English society of the time were safer or more dangerous than that of the present day, I have no idea. On a Spring afternoon of the era, my cousin and I did not feel unsafe. There were two of us together. We knew our way. We had been well-trained in how to cross roads and avoid traffic. And Ralph and I were proceeding with purpose and dispatch from one point to another, with no intent of talking to strangers.

If only all my journeys were so simple to navigate.

John C. Nash ©2020-06-18

Recycling

If you were, like me, at the front end of the baby boom that followed the Second World War, and especially if you were born on the eastern side of the Atlantic, you are almost certain to be a keeper of anything that might, just somehow, be useful later on. I'd guess most of us from that group, say born between VE Day and Queen Elizabeth's Coronation in the UK or continental Europe are programmed to hold onto just about anything that has even a minuscule chance of being re-deployed.

Every so often I have to take myself to task and get rid of some of the clunkier items that require too much work to re-use. You know, old 26 inch or bigger cathode ray tube TVs. They're even dangerous. The main tube can hold a charge of better than 25 kilovolts for several years after being turned off and unplugged. On the other hand, some of the early computer printers had really nice steel rods that the print head slid on from side to side. They make great axles for a dolly or a garden cart. With a decent electric drill, you can salvage several hundred machine screws too. And some power cords, plugs, and switches. Of course, the plastic case is a real nuisance. Big, bulky and with mixed plastics so it can't be processed by the blue-bin folk.

Government used to have special envelopes with a matrix of places to put the address of the recipient. They were designed for internal use, and had a string fastener with simple flat disks that you wound the string around. When you needed one, you scratched out the last addressee and wrote the new one in the next available box. Often they were used for items that had to be circulated to a group. Then you'd staple the list of recipients to the envelope and when you'd finished reading, you'd scratch out your name and put it in your out-box. I know one prankster in the 70s found a pretty raunchy porn magazine, unstapled the cover of a report entitled **Sewage Disposal in Northern Climates** and restapled it to the porn rag, attached a distribution list, made sure his name was scratched out along with a couple of others, and waited. Took about two weeks before it was noticed.

A lot of folk re-used envelopes they'd received. My doctoral prof. had been a new-hire at the start of World War 2. One day at coffee in 1971, another student came in with his mail, of which one envelope was from the Prof., with the Prof's name and address struck out and my colleague's name below.

“Look at this!” he said. “It’s postmarked 1941.”

Yep. Envelopes. Bits of string. Scraps of cloth. Old knitwear to unravel and re-knit. Wood blocks from sawing waste. People kept them all. Some of us still do, especially if we’re not paying attention. Of course, you do have to make use of it. And maintain the things that can be maintained. My mother got an electric mixer in 1958. One of the type on a stand with a turntable for the stainless steel bowls that came with it. We acquired it in 1972 as a hand-me-down. I fixed it in 1976 when the motor stopped working. Turned out to be that the springs for the motor’s carbon brushes weren’t flexing any more. A couple of pen springs did the trick. Good job I had a small jar of springs to choose from. Had to rewire the power cord in 1985. Then the gearbox seized – one of the plastic gears cracked – in 1992.

“I can’t fix it,” I told my wife.

The reaction was as if the world was ending at midnight (or half an hour later in St. John’s). I’d **always** been able to fix things. Well unfortunately not this time. However, at that particular time she had taken on a job to print some index cards from a large data file. Our dot matrix printer had a tractor feed and the card stock was folded continuous material. However, the printed cards were not always falling away properly and folding themselves neatly. Then there’d be a printer jam, which could be costly if the mechanism burned.

We’d been manually easing the cards towards the catchment box, but that was a time consuming and boring job. I had some rubber wheels and some foot-long shafts and made a pinch roller to grip the cardstock at each side. Then I took another wheel and put it on one end of one of the shafts with some disks to provide guides for a rubber band. Same thing on the motor shaft of the old mixer, now minus its gearbox. The mixer had a speed control that could be set slow. Choosing an appropriate rubber band that matched the distance between the motor and the pinch rollers, we could get the band to slip, acting as a clutch so the pull on the cards was just right to keep things moving and avoid jams. As I recall, we watched a whole movie one Saturday night while the printer earned us a good rate of return.

Not everyone in my age group recycles. My neighbour on one side is my age but grew up here in Canada where things weren’t so short. She thinks my collection of stuff is junk, but I do keep it scrupulously tidy. A couple of years ago, some kids moved another neighbour’s barbecue off their deck and onto the golf course. A couple of the men of our street lifted it back. The victim – a lady in her upper eighties – was upset and wondered what she should do. I happened to have kept some discarded aircraft cables that had been made to secure shopping carts at a supermarket, The plaza had been redeveloped and someone tossed the cables, so I picked them up from the pile that was about to be taken to the dump. The cables were about 10

to 12 feet long with a loop at each end.

“Try this,” I suggested to the elderly lady with the barbecue. “You’ll need a padlock, but you can loop this round one of the beams of your deck and through the frame of the barbecue.”

The lady had a lock and was all smiles. My neighbour who comments on my so-called junk said “That’s a really smart idea.”

“Wait there,” I commanded, and ran to get another cable. When I returned and gave it to her, I said, “From my tidy junk collection.”

To her credit, she laughed and thanked me, and hasn’t said anything about my collection since.

But though I’m an ardent recycler and re-user, I think another neighbour down the street has outdone me. Betty was divorced when in her twenties. She calls that “the big mistake”. Fortunately no kids. A few years later she married a man somewhat older than herself, and they had over two decades that she says were happy until he suffered a fatal coronary. She’d been widowed most of a decade when we notice Jim has moved in. He’d been married to a gal who liked her house just so, and wanted it accessorized with a husband who complemented the decor. When he was working in a local hi-tech firm, Jim wasn’t around much to disturb the picture, but after retirement, especially in casual attire, he didn’t fit in. The divorce was quick, and for the most part without rancour. Betty knew the couple, and also had a niece who wanted to sublet her apartment for a few months because she had a new job out of town. When the sublet ran out, Jim moved in with Betty.

Betty says “He’s kind. He’s handy. And he treats me like a queen. And I don’t mind that he’s divorced – I was too. Call it recycling.”

J C Nash ©2020-07-16

Writer's Block

Writers often worry about being unable to think of something to write about, or of being unable to figure out how to express their ideas. And we all know it's called "writer's block".

Not that it ever seems to happen to me. I've a different writer's block. It's been with me for over four decades. A piece of polished oak a bit bigger than a sugar cube, in fact 2 cm on a side, like a die. Instead of dots, it has simple images burned into the wood with a hot pointed tool. There's a heart, a diamond of the kind used on playing cards, a stylized flower like a tulip, a pentagram, the five sided star, a flying bird – well a sort of pair of wings at a great distance, and the outline of a hand, though whether the upper side of a right hand or the lower of a left is not clear. So six icons, burned deep enough that you can feel the depression in the varnish. And all I have to do when I need inspiration is to run my thumb over one of the icons and ideas will flow.

Now where did this strange cube come from, you may wonder. Well, back in the late 70s I was on holiday. Actually, I was, in that euphemism so common to the army of service and entertainment workers, "between jobs". Fortunately, I'd had a contract writing TV ads and promotional announcements for the provincial government, except the people in charge were all hacks of the party in power. The messages were blatantly partisan. Some folk quit in disgust. I took the opposite tack and made the messages so strong only the truly brainwashed wouldn't recognize them for what they were. Given I didn't want to spend too much money and it was August when not much hiring is going on, I packed up my few belongings that were with me in my boarding-house room. I was polite in my farewell to the landlady who I hoped never to see again. While I'd have loved to tell her about all the faults of her moth-eaten, over-priced room, you never know when you may be desperate for a roof. My station wagon was recently serviced, and though old was reliable and had enough space in the back with the seat down to sleep. I simply put my things on one side and left my sleeping bag ready on the other. I headed north, wandering the by-ways and visiting the little towns and lakes and rivers. I had a cooler for some food and found places to swim to get clean.

I'd brought along a bunch of books to read. Being August, the "back-to-school" sales provided some cheap spiral notebooks and pens so I could

write. I'd some pipe-dreams of writing the great Canadian novel, or at least a few decent short stories. But I wrote nothing. While I'd been able to churn out the political rubbish by the truckload and had earned some bonuses, I couldn't put one word behind another without scratching it out. At least I didn't need to waste any time searching for material to start a camp-fire.

Then about ten days into my rural wanderings I came into a hamlet where there was a small shop. It had a few – a very few – grocery items but seemed to have quite a lot of craft-made bric-a-brac. Wind chimes, driftwood art, dream-catchers, bird feeders, many displaying the pentagram. Then I saw a box with a bunch of papers in the bottom, on top of which were nine or ten of the wooden cubes like mine. There was a hand-made card taped to the back of the box – “Writers' Blocks”.

I was immediately attracted to the blocks, but while other items had a price, there was no indication of how much the blocks cost. Since I'd gone in to the store to replenish my food supply, I gathered some tins of beans and some packaged bread and cookies, some pop, some chips, along with a couple of small cans of condensed milk for my morning cereal. Then I went to the counter.

The guy behind the counter was probably in his sixties, but somehow had a still-youthful face. His features were such that he was likely at least partly indigenous. As I put my items on the counter and got out my wallet, a woman of a similar age came from the rear. Her face had the same mix of age and youth. Her hair was grey and long and plaited, and her clothes were brightly coloured. She had a large pentagram pendant round her neck.

“How much are the Writers Blocks?” I asked.

“They've not got a price, as such,” the woman said.

There was an awkward pause, and the man asked “Are you a writer?”

“It is how I've been earning my living,” I answered. “But the writing I've been doing has been political advertisements. I'd like to do something better.”

The woman said “The blocks are special. They each have six symbols. All of them have the same symbols, but they are all arranged differently. We made a full set – all 30 permutations that are possible.”

She let this sink in. I hadn't realized that cubes like dice had so many possibilities. The man added “Regular dice have the spots adding to 7. That reduces the possibilities to just two and they are usually called left and right, or clockwise and anticlockwise. If you hold such a die with the 1, 2, and 3 faces towards you, and the pips are increasing in a clockwise direction, that's a left handed die, since when your thumb points towards your nose, your fingers go clockwise. Most Asian dice are like that, but western dice – Los Vegas for example – are generally right handed or counter-clockwise.”

“So all the blocks in the box are different?” I queried.

“Yes,” said the woman. “My husband and I made them – all 30, which we had to do carefully. Then at the winter solstice we both cast spells upon them that are to provide inspiration to writers. I’m wiccan, descended from a long line of Welsh wise-women, and he is an Algonquin shaman. We met many years ago and immediately knew our combined spirits would be very strong, but only if we worked for good and creativity.”

I wasn’t sure I bought the magic, but I was really drawn to the blocks like they were magnets and I was iron. So I asked, “So if they aren’t for sale, is there a way to acquire one?”

“Of course,” said the woman. “You write a story or a poem and, as long as it is a proper piece of writing with something of your own soul in it, you can choose a block. Go and take a look at the writings that are there. When the blocks are all gone, we plan to put the items together and sell them, with all the money going to buy land around the lake here to protect it from the developers.”

I paid for my groceries and said I’d be right back after I put them in my car. Then I sat on the floor and read the pieces. There were about twenty, which agreed with the number of blocks remaining. I had to move the blocks to pick up the writings. One of them felt strangely cool to the touch, so I moved it apart from the others, though I now realize I’d have been able to find it easily by touch.

The writings were good. Some were by authors whose names I recognized. A couple of GG award winners, one Booker Prize recipient. Wow! This was a strange and wonderful discovery.

After about half an hour I got up and went to my car – the couple didn’t bother me at all, nor did they watch in case I shop-lifted one of the blocks. Somehow I knew that sort of thing just would not be possible. There were forces at work I couldn’t quite understand.

My car was in the shade, there was a lake behind what would, if the place were bigger, be the main street, and there was a small park-like area with a picnic table. I grabbed a pop and some chips and a notepad and sat at the picnic table. In the quiet of the summer day, I wrote two sonnets, *The Lake* and *The Shore*. Somehow the words came to me, not without some thought, but also not strained or forced.

I took my pages inside the shop and placed them on the counter. The couple came out from the rear – they’d been sitting drinking tea I think. We exchanged no words as they read my pieces. Then the woman said “You’ve written about the lake and its shore. That is just what we want in our book.”

“Yes,” said the man, “the spirit of the Lake has come to you.”

“Choose your block carefully,” said the woman. “They each have a writer for whom they are intended.”

It took me no time at all to pick my block as I put my poems in the box.

“It’s this one,” I said. “It feels different to me.”

“That is how all the writers find their block,” the woman said. “May your writings all be as good as your poems today.”

So that is how I got my writer’s block. The couple never asked for a permission to use the stories, but I do know they managed to produce a slim volume that did quite well. Of course, “quite well” wouldn’t buy much land on a nice lake, but the publicity attracted some decent donations, and the lake is now protected as a provincial park.

And whenever I need inspiration, I reach out and touch the block.

J C Nash ©2020-7-22

Shadows in the Gloom

It was in the summer after third-year engineering that Lawrence and I took a week at a cottage that an elderly aunt owned on Georgian Bay. She was in a retirement residence, and the cottage was mostly rented, but she asked me if I'd like a week there in exchange for making a list of anything that needed fixing and taking some pictures of them. She'd arrange for repairs in the Fall so she could sell the cottage next Spring.

Law – he never liked his full name used – and I were happy to do this. It was a few years ago now, before the really good fish finders were available, but we'd got hold of a couple of transducers and some circuitry we could plug into one of the relatively early laptops. Law had a clunky laptop that had a serial port on a DB9 connector. At least we were past the DB25 stage. We wanted to see if we could do some sonar, both active and passive, along with some swimming and lazing about. Maybe see if we could make our own fathometer or depth instrument.

At the time, we were considered a team. Given my name is Forest, people often shortened it to "For", then used the number 4. Law and 4. Big joke. Actually I always gave my name as Forest, but I didn't mind if Law called me 4.

We left town early and got to the cottage mid-morning. We decided to do Aunt Ethel's check on the cottage right away. There was a ladder in the boat shed and Law got that out and went up on the roof and checked it and the chimney. I went under the cottage and checked the supports, which were on concrete piles that had been poured into post-holes good and deep and seemingly down to the rock. I had a 24" level. Things were all good, which was a bit of a surprise.

I did see a couple of tracks where it looked like mice had been getting in. I made a note of that when I got back on the porch and went inside to see where the holes were. Ah, a dead mouse in a trap – it was just a skeleton, so been a while. There were some scouring pads in the kitchen, and I had some string caulk that I keep in my car to hold down wires or fix vibrations. Great stuff, but the hardware companies want you to buy the cylinders that go with a caulk gun. Several bucks for each, and you use a blob the size of your little finger and the rest is solid when you need it a while later. The string caulk is sometimes called draught excluder or rope caulk. One time had to tell a fellow at Home Depot what I wanted. He said he was sure they

didn't have it. Then he looked up the inventory on their fancy new computer system – well it was then – and “Hey, I never knew we had that stuff. Really good to know”. Comes in a square box and feels like plasticine. Probably is plasticine pressed with cotton wool.

Anyway, I clean up the mousetrap and the floor and plug the mouse holes with bits of scouring pad and string caulk. Then Law calls me and tells me things up top are pretty good. Roof will need replacing in a few years, but not right away. There's a bit of a gap in the chimney flashing, so I toss up the box of string caulk and we fix that for now, but I mention it on my notes. The plumbing is old, but Aunt Ethel has a guy who is an unofficial plumber come Fall and Spring to close and open the water system, and he always replaces worn parts and doesn't let things go, so the water stuff is good. The guy also checks the electrics, which are not fancy but in the top 5 percent for a cottage system.

We tighten some screws on hinges and I sew a patch on one screen, but we were done our walkabout in time for a late lunch. Mainly the place could use a good clean-up and throw out. That is, have a bonfire of the dilapidated furniture, do a good wipe down of the place with TSP and give it a couple of coats of paint inside and out.

We devote the rest of the day to a nice swim and assessment of the virtues of a good wine. We're engineering students, so the virtue of interest is low price subject to the condition of being drinkable. We did manage to barbecue some burgers, so we weren't totally bombed.

The next morning we are up surprisingly early given we'd each downed a bottle of the finest red plonk. And we decide that we'll try out our transducer. After breakfast we go down on the dock and set up. With great good luck, we find we can essentially see the lake bottom beside the dock. Law holds the laptop and I hold the broom-handle with the transducer on the end. We walk along the dock and we can even capture the two concrete cylinders that are extra anchors for the dock. They were made twenty years ago by putting concrete in a steel drum with a loop of steel re-bar. A 55 gallon drum to Americans, 44 gallon drum to Brits, but now a 200 litre drum in Canada. Like I said, we're engineering students.

Of course, the novelty of crabbing up and down the dock holding a laptop and a transducer on a stick with wires between soon wears off. We take a break for a swim, then get the idea to see if the system will work horizontally. So we turn the transducer 90 degrees. Law says “Let's clamp the handle to the post at the end of the dock and one of us will swim by and we'll see what the results show.”

This doesn't take too long to set up. I get to be first swimmer, but before I go in, I go get a digital video camera I have along with a tripod and I set it up so it can be recording at the same time. We even take the trouble to

synchronize the time on the camera with that on the computer. Well, to the second. We're not trying to get a research prize. I just wanted to be able to figure out how good the range was. You know, how far out before our setup couldn't detect a swimmer.

Surprise, surprise. I swam out about 200 metres and Law could still get an image. I came back and he went out with the kayak we had in the boat shed. I could get an image only to about 100 metres because it floated so high on the water. I did pick up a big fish swimming by. I spotted it as I turned on the transducer. It skedaddled fast, even jumping out of the water. Guess it didn't like the noise from the transducer.

Law came back and we took in the laptop to recharge it. I brought in the battery for the transducer setup too. We had lunch and read for a while on the porch. Law had some old Playboy magazines, but the centrefolds were all missing. I was actually reading *Pride and Prejudice*. Law is a good enough buddy that I don't have to hide the fact I'm reading that from him.

Around two we see a pontoon boat ease into the bay and anchor about 200 metres away to the right. Some fishing rods go over the side. Odd timing. The place they were parked was probably not bad for fishing, but normally at sunset or sunrise, not middle of the day.

"Think we can pick up the pontoons or the outboard on that?" I ask, partly to myself. Law says, "Let's try."

We grab a couple of beers with the laptop and the battery. We get the umbrella and a couple of deck chairs out of the boat shed. Don't want the boaters to think we're too nosy. Then we're set up, and indeed, we can get an image of the pontoons and the outboard pylon. There's a splash as one of the boaters takes a dive into the lake. See him swimming. As he goes behind the boat we can even see his legs below. I've got the camera running.

"Wonder why he's swimming between the pontoons," I mutter, half to myself, which causes Law to look up momentarily. When he looks back at the laptop, which is literally on his lap, he says quietly "Odd. Something's hanging down beside the guy swimming. Oh. Now it's dropping to the bottom."

The swimmer comes out from between the pontoons, swims around a bit, then gets on board. Pretty soon the anchor's hauled up and they putter away.

We'd shut down the sounder by this time, and we'd not said much. Voices sometimes travel across the water. When the pontoon boat is out of sight, Law says "What do you think that was about?"

"Dunno, but it looked kind of suspicious. Sort of like they were dumping something."

"Or somebody!" Law said what I was thinking.

"Should we call the cops?" I said.

“We’d look pretty silly if they’ve just put down a marker or something.”

“Guess we could go take a look, then decide if the cops should be involved.”

So we got our swim gear back on. There was a mask and snorkel. I’m the better swimmer, so I drew the short straw to dive down. It wouldn’t be super deep.

“I’ll handle the boat,” Law said, heading for the aluminum 12 footer we had.

“No. Take the kayak and tow the sailboard, but without the sail. It’ll be easier for me to get on and off.”

We get out to where we thought the boat had moored. I had a sealed pop bottle tied to about 20 feet of string, and I tied an old rusty wrench I found to the other end. Took about four tries before I found a large heavy plastic bag – it sure looked like a body bag – lying on the bottom. I had the wrench with me to help stay under. I’d let it drop as I surfaced each time, then follow the string to start my next search. So now I plopped it down next to the bag and came up. The pop bottle could drift away a bit, but we’d still be able to find the bag.

We went back to the dock, I dried off, and we had a cup of tea to discuss what we should do. Finally decided to drive into town and show the video and the sounder images to the OPP. We figured they might want them, so before we went, we made copies in case they kept them.

The cops actually got really interested. And they did keep the video cassette, but were happy enough to accept a copy of the imaging. We were glad we had the time synchronized.

We were asked to return to the cottage and meet an OPP patrol boat. While they made it seem like it was rush-rush, we were thinking of preparing a late supper by the time the boat showed up. Apparently some drunken party down the lake a bit took a while to sort out.

The police diver took less than five minutes to assess the situation – the pop bottle made it easy. The cops pulled up the bag. We were watching from the dock. I just happened to make sure my camera was running. Not that we could see them open the bag. But they came over to the dock and showed us. It wasn’t a body. It was lots of purses and wallets and money boxes. All empty, of course, of cash and valuables.

One of the cops said “There’s been a whole rash of thefts, particularly from big parties. The thieves probably were dumping anything identifiable. We got images from your video sent to us, and we think one of the guys was at the party we just broke up, so we’d better go see if they’re still around.”

It was getting toward dusk, and Law and I were hungry, so we did some beans on toast, washed down with a couple of beers and a bag of chips. We satisfied the gods of good eating by having a carrot on the side.

“Think the cops will want us to testify?” Law asked.

“Hope not – it’d be a pain to have to come up here during term.”

Turned out we didn’t have to. The cops ran into the pontoon boat and caught the thieves with their fresh haul. A cop car came round the next morning and told us the story and gave us a video cassette that was a copy of the original, not that we really needed it.

Later that afternoon, another pontoon boat with four nice-looking girls docked at the next cottage. In the evening we used the sounder and could get an image of them swimming. The morning after, we were swimming and so were they, so we drifted over towards their dock. Law took a flyer and said, “Did you enjoy skinny dipping last night?”

One of the girls said “What! How could you see us?”

I decided to be honest. “Actually we could only see that there were swimmers in the water with our sonar device. We can show you the images if you’d like. And the ones that helped the OPP catch the theft ring.”

The girls looked interested. That week just kept getting better.

J C Nash ©2020-7-30

Dogs and Horses

Gambling on racing of animals has declined drastically in this age of the virtual experience, though race tracks were already closing in earlier decades as casinos became legal – and less investment intensive – alternatives for gambling.

As a kid, I knew more than most others about horse and dog racing. My father had found a quite lucrative alternative income while in the RAF as a bookmaker. This was a happy combination of a love of gambling and highly developed ability in mental arithmetic. When in his 20s and 30s he could mentally sum a column of pounds-shillings-pence amounts by running his fingers down the column. This wasn't some special power, but much practice, and his skill declined when calculators were available.

When there was a suitable event, we'd pile into the car and drive to a "fixture", that is, a scheduled set of races. The racecourses had various options for spectators. The grandstand – either seats or a standing area – were two options, but the course was cheaper, so we were there. By and large, I was left to my own devices, including a few funfair rides. It was assumed I knew to come back to the car regularly where my mother would stay for much of the time. My father would go off to the bookies before most races to place bets. He rarely came home without at least breaking even.

As a kid, the astonishingly bizarre nature of a racecourse and its denizens was an environment I accepted as normal. In an age before cell phones, the nearest telephone box would be commandeered by someone from the bookmaking circle. When a bookie had a large bet that might be a huge loss, the risk would be shared, just as in the reinsurance business, by being *laid off* to other bookmaking firms over the phone. To communicate the odds, the man at the telephone and the bookies, who might be up to half a mile apart, used the services of tic tac men, who semaphored the information with white gloved hand signals.

There were, of course, various beer tents, tea stands, the aforementioned rides, candy floss, and private toilet tents, along with horses on the course and in the paddock, and assorted dogs and owners. There might be cow or sheep droppings. As races started, there would be the noise and excitement of the crowd.

At Plumpton racetrack, which ran National Hunt races from the late 19th century to today, the sound of horses swishing across high hedge fences

as they thundered along, snorting as they went, added another dimension. That track was on the side of a hill, with the finish line on the uphill stretch. I was told some horses died of heart attacks in the last furlong.

Ah, *furlong* – abolished for official measurements in the UK in 1985, and probably never used in Canada except for horse racing. 220 yards or just over 200 metres. If you prefer, it's 10 chains.

Of course, horse racing uses a jockey or, for harness racing, a driver. Dogs run alone, chasing a mechanical rabbit. A colourful insult to the risk averse I once heard from an investment adviser was “Canadian investors go to the dog track and bet on the rabbit to show.” Yes *win, place or show* are also archaic expressions, so the insult might not register with its target today.

I was essentially an adult when I went with my father to Catford dog track in south London. It opened in 1932 and closed in 2003. The stands were just that – steps on which you stood to watch the dogs race.

If there is cheating in horse racing, greyhounds offer much greater opportunity. A thirsty dog can be slowed by giving him or her a good drink of water, a perfectly legal substance. Or, as my father once witnessed when a dog whose win would be inopportune for the bookmakers, a few sausages might be thrown on the track.

Over a period of decades, I've come to miss the seedy, smoky atmosphere of race tracks with their peculiar culture and characters. On the other hand, the same kind of ambiance afflicts casinos, but doesn't involve the use of animals who might better be given lives of humane purpose and dignity.

John C. Nash ©2020-9-15

Underneath the Lamplight

November 13, 1947

F G B Hutchings
City Librarian
Leeds, Yorkshire

PERSONAL

Dear Fred,

I was very gratified to see you were appointed Librarian in Leeds. I know you'll do a good job. Hopefully the Luftwaffe didn't destroy too many of the books and other records, nor the buildings and equipment. That's probably too much to hope for.

Since the time when we used to go outside for a smoke in Sheffield of a morning, me from the city engineering office and you from the library, I've had a small promotion myself, though I doubt anyone outside the half dozen in the office will have noticed.

The announcement about your appointment means you survived the war. I hope that Grace also came through. So many didn't. A great sadness.

When I saw the notice about your new job, it gave me a funny turn, reminding me of something that happened in 1938. I really wanted to talk to someone about it then, but was under promise of secrecy. Well, enough time has passed and it wasn't about British secrets anyway, and I know you were aware something was going on because you asked me a few times that year if I was all right. Of course, I said yes, but really I was a bit rattled.

You may recall that in early May '38 I went to Dusseldorf for a conference about street lights. I was responsible for Sheffield's street lights then. Sheffield was fairly advanced at the time, using low pressure sodium ones in a few places, along with the standard incandescent bulbs that don't give much light and a few gas lights near the steel works since their coke ovens provided plenty of gas.

In March '38, the Germans had gone into Austria – the Anschluss. Later in May old Goebbels ran a big Germanic music festival, the Reichsmusiktage. It was a pretty strange time, and the conference I was to speak at was just before this. My German wasn't great, but it was up to the standard of giving a technical talk. Just hope nobody asked questions in slang.

Anyway, a few days before I had to leave, two men came into the office asking for me. We were all in a big room, and they asked where we could talk. They said they were from the Ministry of Labour and had some questions they were told I could answer. This was just a cover so my colleagues wouldn't know who they really were. They even gave me a sheet of paper with some innocuous questions on street lights and public safety I could leave on my desk to throw off the inquisitive.

They were actually from the intelligence part of the RAF, and they'd learned I was going to Dusseldorf. They asked me to observe how fast street lights turned off in the morning. While they didn't say why, it was pretty obvious they wanted to know how fast Gerry could black out the city.

I asked them how I should go about this. They suggested that I take an early-morning constitutional. Moreover, they said I could ask the hotel for a street map so I could avoid getting lost. However, they gave me a map to memorize with some key streets labelled, but I should leave it at home, so anything found on me would be consistent with my playing tourist.

Fortunately, Mavis and I used to do a lot of rambling on the moors, so I had a good walking outfit – sturdy shoes and plus-fours. I took the train to Harwich and then the ferry to Hook of Holland and train to Dusseldorf. Had to be up really early and got to my hotel about five o' clock. The hotel was very fancy. In normal times I'd say a bit of all right. The staff were helpful and supplied a tourist map and when I asked them to suggest some possible sights they put Xs on the map. I suggested a walking route that covered what the intelligence people wanted me to look at, and asked if that route would be feasible for a walk of between three-quarters of an hour and an hour and was told that it was. So I had a good cover story. I was glad of that later.

The intelligence men had told me they thought the lights would go out about a quarter hour before sunrise, and they gave me the time sunrise was expected for Dusseldorf. I must say they were prepared, except they just assumed I'd do what they'd asked. In retrospect, I'm not sure I would have done, especially knowing now how the Germans behaved to unwelcome guests or even unwelcome citizens.

I set my alarm, and got up and dressed. I took along the tourist map. As I exited the hotel, which was still lit by gas lights, I saw the gaslighter turning off lights one by one. Well, I could remember that.

I'd planned my route to use long streets so I could observe a lot of lights at once. Because of my route, I missed the time when many of them went off, but it was clear they didn't all go out at once. I took a look at my watch a few times, and it seemed there was almost a 20 minute period over which they went out, and even a single long street went out in sections.

While I had a notebook and pencil, I decided I wouldn't write anything

down that looked like times of lights. However, I did note the time on the map when I reached different landmarks. If anyone asked, I could say it was to work out how fast I'd managed my walk. Of course, it would serve as a reminder, as I underlined the times when lights were still mostly on, and didn't when they were off.

After I returned and had breakfast, I packed and got out my talk. I left my luggage with the desk as I was taking the night train home.

My talk went quite well, and I had a couple of questions. At 4 o' clock I came back to get my suitcase and there were two men at the desk, one in a black leather coat. He had a monocle and a very severe face.

"Mr. Ashburn, please come into the Manager's office. We have some questions."

Well, you can imagine I wasn't too pleased or comfortable. They wanted to know why I'd been walking the streets at sunrise. I told them the same thing I told the hotel staff. They'd already gone through my luggage and had it spread out on the hotel manager's desk. There were my walking shoes and my plus fours.

When they asked why I'd gone where I had, I told them how the hotel staff had provided a map and some suggestions. They asked about the notations on the map, and I could say honestly that they were the times I'd arrived at the different places. It was clear that I'd been followed, because I heard the second man – they'd said police, but I think they were Gestapo – say something in German I was just barely able to understand that someone had confirmed the timings. The senior man seemed annoyed, but simply said

"Thank you for your cooperation, Herr Ashburn."

Given the delay, I was fortunate to get a taxi to the station and make my train. It was a night trip, but I didn't sleep and kept an eye on the door of my compartment.

In the morning at Harwich before I could board the train, and indeed before Customs, I was accosted by the military intelligence men who'd visited me in Sheffield. They had a Customs agent with them and after we came into a small office, one of the intelligence men said to him "We think there's a woman with a black hat and veil following Mr. Ashburn. Can you arrange that there is something wrong with her papers or luggage? And let it be overheard that you've apprehended a smuggler. They might just swallow the bait."

"Right O', Governor," was the reply, and the Customs agent left.

The intelligence officer then said, "Given the interest in you, I think we'll leave quietly right away."

They had a car and drove me all the way back to Sheffield, though we did stop for a good breakfast and a very nice lunch. Along the way, they asked questions, but rather gently, allowing me to recollect my walk and

anything else I'd observed. The map and times were helpful. They seemed quite pleased. I thought of complaining how they could have given me a bit more warning not to write anything down that might be incriminating. But that was water under the bridge.

When I got home, I went straight to bed even though it was before teatime. Didn't wake up until the next day. When I got into work, I got my assistant to start working on ways to get the street lights off in a hurry. Didn't help us that much. When the blitz came, we just never bothered to turn the damn things on until May 7 1945. By then more than half were broken or the wires were cut.

Mavis wonders if you and Grace might be able to come our way around Christmas time. We know that times are still hard, but I've managed to hang onto a bottle of single malt, and our Joan keeps chickens and a couple of them will not be celebrating the New Year.

Our best wishes,

George and Mavis

Fred Hutchings, who became a personal friend in the early 1970s, really was Leeds City Librarian, and told us the bare bones of this story. However, the details are from my imagination.

John C. Nash ©2020-11-17

Bomb Shelters and Bullets

What things are the fabric of terror? In the movies we see bombs and bullets. And you may think that small children would be particularly susceptible to these same stimuli. Not so.

I was six when my family moved from Tunbridge Wells to Southampton. I was enrolled in what in Canada is known as Grade Two in a school cobbled together from a mix of old Victorian school buildings, some wooden temporary buildings and some corrugated iron Nissen huts. 1953 was a year when there was still some rationing – candy for example, known as "sweets" – and there were still many bombed out buildings. They were a common and familiar part of the streetscape.

For a few weeks we boarded in a single room of a bungalow with an elderly widow named Swannell before we moved a few houses away to a bungalow my parents bought. In the yard of Mrs. Swannell's house was a brick bomb shelter with a concrete slab roof. This was an above-ground shelter of a type that fairly quickly fell out of favour because a near miss could fracture the brick walls and allow the roof to fall. The structure, probably 12 feet on a side, had an entrance with a wall in front of an opening to protect those inside. There were no windows. I recall a dirt floor and a smell of urine. It was a place to be avoided, but not a source of fear.

Our new house had a garden shed that had been an Anderson bomb shelter. These were essentially miniature Nissen huts six feet high, six feet long and 4.5 feet wide, provided at cost to those who wanted them in the form of 14 pieces of flat or curved galvanized corrugated iron. They were intended to be constructed in a trench then covered with soil and possibly turfs. These were shown to be surprisingly effective in protecting the up to six occupants from all but direct hits. Comfortable they were not.

I don't recall ever seeing the later Morrison shelter, which was essentially a very heavy dining room table and apparently could be used as such, though pictures imply there was a wire mesh on the sides to protect from flying debris. Possibly the sides were removable.

The Andersons were just right for re-deployment as garden sheds, especially if dug up and set on level ground. Ours was painted a sickly pale green colour. Inside someone had set up some crude shelves.

Little boys explore, and I was no exception. In the hustle of moving in, I found time to look all over our new domain. On a shelf of the Anderson

shelter shed I found a tin box that had at one time held Oxo cubes, used to make bouillon, also known as beef tea. This tin must have been used to supply a restaurant or caterers.

My parents were mightily surprised when I took the tin in the house to show them its contents – it was completely full of .303 ammunition. Probably several hundred rounds. My father turned them in to the police, at the same time taking advantage of a gun amnesty to turn in a Browning pistol and ammunition he had taken from a German administrative officer. My father thought the gun had never been fired. I remember how small the bullets were next to the .303 ones. My guess is that they were .32 calibre, so larger in diameter, but with much smaller casing.

As a boy, I found these things interesting. Gradually the beaches that were off-limits due to possible land mines or stray marine ones were re-opened to tourists. Bombed out buildings were demolished and new ones built. Food improved in range and quality.

Looking back, there were many things that should have presented opportunities for fear and terror. But with all the hazards left over from conflict, my nightmares came from the possibility I might try to swallow a fish bone.

J C Nash ©2020-11-22

Polishing Silver

Probably initial version 1978. Minor revision 2020.

I rubbed away the tarnish
On a long-forgotten purpose
And saw your face
Reflected among the broken dreams.

I washed away the soil
From long-abused ideal
And heard your voice speak
Clear above the noise of anger.

I blew away the dust
From a long-neglected hope
And found your friendship
Strong against uncertainty.

J C Nash ©1978, 2020-12-16

Snakes and Ladders

You may remember when Facebook went bankrupt back in late 2021. They were making a mint – about \$28 billion in revenue per year – until the snake fiasco. Joe and I might have been able to profit by short selling, but that takes some capital, and he and I were just a pair of grad. students in computer science at the time.

It started as a prank. Joe's ex-girlfriend was crazy-scared of snakes. A lot of folk are. Even the fictional Indiana Jones. Alana – that's Joe's ex – was also nutty about collecting cat and kitten videos. She didn't actually have a cat herself. Of course, the videos don't impose the regime of cleaning up the litter box, or laundering cat piss out of your bedspread, or any of that annoying stuff.

So this one evening during the pandemic and Joe and I are on a Framatalk chat – we like to use the open source stuff, and it worked kind of well – and yet again he's moaning that Alana had left him in the lurch just at the start of the first Covid wave. Even took all his stash of Cadbury Fruit and Nut bars. That was uncalled for. He'd special ordered a big box. And he used to hand me one whenever I was over at his place, so I had a bit of resentment towards the bitch too. Probably my only real complaint about her, since Joe is an awkward kind of person. Not nasty, just socially awkward. And he gets preoccupied and forgets about stuff like meals and regular hours and things like that.

So here's Joe moaning on, and I try to shut him up by saying
“Pity you can't turn all her cat videos into snake videos.”

We both had a bit of a laugh and tossed around what we thought Alana would be like when the snakes popped up on her screen. I'd seen her leave the room once in a real hurry during a National Geographic documentary.

The next day, Joe sends me a text with a link. He says it's Alana's Facebook page. So I go online and sure enough there's an item called "Cute Kitty 24" and when I click on it, up come the writhing snakes.

So I give Joe a call and we have a chuckle and then I get back to my thesis work on database search mechanisms.

Around 6 p.m. I start preparing some food – well, I opened a can of beans and started some toast – and the news comes on with a breaking story that Facebook has shut down all its servers in Canada, then the U.S., and now worldwide due to a massive security breach. But the reporters were onto

it, and had all kinds of hysterical grannies telling how their video with little Anna and her cat have got a snake round the girl's neck.

I think for a minute – well about 10 microseconds actually – and recall that Joe's thesis is on merging video images. So I give him a call and ask if his prank has gone viral.

“It shouldn't. I only put the actuator software into Alana's box.”

“Do you think it managed to breach her account boundary?”

“Must have. But I put only local owner permissions on it. It should only have been able to execute there.”

We decided to set up some web-crawlers to look for his actuator software. He'd called it Zuckerberg2021. About two days later we found some geek sites that were saying there was a net worm by that name. Apparently Facebook had set up such a worm to mine people's postings and videos and files for anything Facebook could sell to advertisers or governments or insurers or ... well, anybody who'd give them money. How do you think you make \$28 billion a year otherwise. But now there was speculation that Facebook wanted it to get into any account, so they refactored their own software to give that particular file superuser permissions. But Joe's little program took over.

The NSA thought it was a Russian FSB probe, so they started an investigation. Normally they'd keep that secret, but one of the investigators was really pissed that his grandma had a heart attack when her kitten pictures were pythons and cobras. There were about ten such grandmas just among the NSA investigators so the leak to the Washington Post and NBC was never traced.

The class action lawyers were onto the case like whiskers on a cat – or scales on a snake as it happens.

Alana and Joe got back together. She figured it had to be him and had Amazon deliver a box of Fruit and Nut bars and texted him a message saying they should talk. She was savvy enough to realize he had real potential to make it big in the computer graphics game, and she was right.

Joe even got the IT prize for best thesis. He'd already put the software to do the video merging on Github and there were some people toying with it, so he could write up a chapter in his thesis where he ostensibly reverse engineered the actuator and show it used his software.

I got my degree too, but database search can be a bit of a downer, so I'm thinking of getting out of IT and opening a chocolate shop.

Thanks to Mary Nash for aiding the realization of this story.

J C Nash ©2021-02-16

Magnet for Trouble

When Mary and I got married in Oxford, we decided we would have small motorbikes rather than a car. Fuel economy and ease of parking outweighed personal risk and English weather. We acquired the necessary helmets, gloves and rubber pants and enjoyed easy mobility in the congested urban setting of Oxford and freedom of access to the picturesque lanes of the Cotswolds.

Our helmets led to our friendship with Rene Hampshire, who arrived as the wife of the new Warden of Wadham in 1970. Mary and I sometimes attended Sunday Evensong in the college chapel, which was not electrified and therefore lit by candles when necessary. Wadham College at that time had a young chaplain with the fitting name of James Makepeace. His services were light on dogma and doctrine and long on welcome and fellowship. I would guess a very high proportion of the participants were not even Christians by background.

After one particular service, we retired to a basement room for the chapel supper. We had our helmets and gloves on the bench beside us and they were noticed by Rene, who had recently taken up residence in the Lodgings with her husband, Sir Stuart. She came over to ask us about our motorbikes, and we learned that she had a great love of such vehicles.

Her father, Thomas Orde-Lees, was unconventional, having been part of Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition of 1914, which was several years after Rene was born, so the family was left behind for the period August 8, 1914, to May 29, 1917. Later during World War I he pioneered and became an advocate for the use of parachutes. In the early 1920s he went to Japan to teach the Japanese Army this skill. From this he moved to working for the British Embassy and reading news in English on Japanese radio. Rene was not attracted to parachuting. Her mother died in July 1930, and her father married a Japanese woman. Rene appears to have been educated in Britain, but took regular trips to see her father. Regular in frequency, that is. One time her route was via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok. This was across Stalin's Russia. One return journey was by sea to San Francisco where she bought a second-hand early-model Harley Davidson from an ex-policeman and proceeded to ride it to New York. A small woman, she must have had considerable physical strength at the time of her late teens. Her journey across the USA cemented a love of motorcycles. Unfortunately she never managed to acquire another, though when Stuart and Rene were

leaving Princeton to return to Oxford, the New York Press Club gave her a fine motorcycle helmet, which she showed us displayed prominently in the Lodgings as a statement of her aspiration to ride again.

On the strength of our pair of motorcycle helmets we were immediate allies and confidantes, though truthfully as a married graduate student I was less present in college than most members. However, we began to understand that she was a woman of great spirit and kindness, though practicalities would far too often give her much difficulty and pain. The Warden did, on at least one occasion, wear an expression that mixed tenderness with extreme apprehension of the latest escapade Rene had managed to fall into.

Later in life, we acquired Ben Rogers' biography of A. J. Ayer, who was Rene's first husband. She left him for Stuart Hampshire, though it is by no means certain that the breakup was unfriendly. Rogers account shows Rene could be expected to provide surprises, so Stuart, for all his gravitas as a philosopher and academic, should have been prepared that life with Rene would bring more than its share of the extraordinary.

About a year after the chapel supper, Mary and I were both at the porter's lodge when we encountered Rene in a state of high anxiety. As I recall, we took her to the garden so she could explain her predicament.

In 1970, wives and children of the college dons were rarely seen or acknowledged. The men dined in college, the wives and children stayed at home for "tea", to use the lower-class English term for the evening meal. Within five years, the Hampshires oversaw the admission of women to all levels of the college hierarchy. This was underlined in 2015 when Felicity Jones and Rosamund Pike, who both read English at Wadham, were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress in the same Oscar season. And Wadham is a modest college of about 300 students.

To try to give some recognition to the wives and children, Rene decided to have a garden party. Somehow, in the way in which trouble always sought her out, she found a donkey to rent to give rides to the children. The garden party was, it seems, a success, but ran rather late. In fact, too late to get the donkey back to its stable in east Cowley. After some deliberation, it was decided to put the donkey in the cloister, which was really just a corridor with unglazed windows behind the dining hall. Apart from the likely necessity of clearing up donkey droppings and washing away his or her liquid emanations, this was not an unreasonable choice. Except – and Rene was forever exceptional – there was a set of steps from the cloister to the Library, which held a particularly good collection of law texts. The Library was locked and in no danger. However, a junior fellow of another college had been doing some research in the Library and had absent-mindedly left his notebook on the stairs.

If the absent-minded academic is a cliché, then the subsequent link in

this story is another. The donkey ate a portion of the notebook. Rene was beside herself. Should she hide the notebook and pretend it never existed? But then the scholar's work might be lost forever. Should she offer to try to copy the notes and help find the material? But would that be feasible?

We suggested that she calm down and simply put the damaged notebook in an envelope and send it to its owner in the inter-college mail system, a finely tuned operation that allowed one to write a note around lunchtime inviting a friend to dinner and get a reply in time to inform the Steward. Inter-college mail has no doubt died with the arrival of text messaging and email.

Rene asked what she should do if the scholar asked what had happened to his notes. Tell him the truth, we said. That is, a donkey ate them. Rene seemed unconvinced at first. We pointed out that a) This was the truth. b) Would a junior don challenge the word of the wife of a college warden, especially given the evidence of teeth marks on the notebook?

This seemed to calm Rene. She retired to the Warden's lodgings. We went about our business, which I recall took us into the covered market. A recent showing of the series "Endeavour" on television had some scenes there, supposedly from 1969, that is, contemporaneous with our Oxford sojourn. For a few moments when I watched these scenes, I was transported back in time and space.

We never heard the denouement to the story of the donkey. Probably the notes simply went back to their owner. Embarrassed by his own forgetfulness, he very likely did not ask the cause of the damage. And we, as will happen when studies have been completed, boarded an airplane back to Canada.

J C Nash ©2021-04-28

Fugitive Carelessness

“Careless” is a misleading word. Merriam-Webster gives no less than six definitions, though the last is labelled as obsolete:

- UNTROUBLED, FREE FROM CARE
- INDIFFERENT, UNCONCERNED
- NOT TAKING CARE
- NEGLIGENT, SLOVENLY
- UNSTUDIED, SPONTANEOUS and, lastly and apparently obsolete,
- UNVALUED, DISREGARDED

The first meaning is the one that memory pushed into my consciousness: a recollection of a short, intensely happy time my wife and I shared when we were, in all sorts of ways, “in between”.

Grammarians will object that I have provided no object for my prepositions. If I am more precise and use “in between X and Y”, there are multiple candidates for the variables.

The most obvious choice is that of time and date. I can place the X quite precisely to just after 4 p.m. British Summer Time on April 14, 1972, when I learned that I had successfully defended my D.Phil. viva. With great relief, I ascended the stairs from the basement of the Mathematical Institute to the tea room where Mary and my colleagues were waiting. In fact, there was concern, as the viva had lasted well over the usual time. In the system of the era, the examination was conducted by just an internal and an external examiner, and my thesis supervisor was excluded. Other members of the University could, I believe, ask to be present. The internal examiner, Christopher Bradley of Jesus College, had dutifully invited the external examiner, a professor from a rather new Yorkshire university, to lunch with him in college. Apparently, given colleges generally kept very good cellars, a couple of bottles of claret were consumed, the preponderance by the external examiner. I had the awkward task of keeping my mouth shut for about 10 minutes during the examination while the internal and external examiners had a blazing row over whether I had answered a question correctly. While it is clear that I had done so, the effects of the wine led the

external examiner to think otherwise. Fortunately, things settled down and I was allowed to escape with a direction to add a sentence to my abstract. This avoided the disaster of having to unbind the copies of my thesis, which Oxford demands be in the form of a properly bound book. No loose-leaf allowed.

With huge relief, I was now free to enjoy a period where my responsibilities were extremely light. I did, of course, have to fulfil the modest requirements regarding the thesis, but on the night of April 14, some friends insisted we come with them to Burford where a stylish old pub provided a very pleasant meal. As we did not have to drive, nor conduct an examination afterwards, we probably imbibed more than usual, as there was at least one toast to my success.

The Y of the "in between" time brackets was definitely before July 16, 1972, when Dan Air flew us from Gatwick to Vancouver, unfortunately with a significant stop in Greenland due to a hydraulic fluid leak, some of which ended up on our luggage. There was also a failure of the Boeing 707 yaw control. That aircraft, because of the under-wing engines, had a tendency to sway from left to right at a frequency pilots could not easily control, so there was a yaw-damper to correct this. We swayed from London to Vancouver. In addition, our seats were next to a chain smoker. After the long flight we still had a shorter one to Edmonton.

Between April 14 and some time preceding July 16, however, we could be carefree if not truly careless. A period of up to three months with very few obligations. Mary had quit her employment while I was in the latter stages of my degree so we could take advantage of our time to see as much as possibly of the UK. By virtue of some care with my scholarship, and a good dose of that frugality that came with both of us growing up in immigrant households, we were never overly constrained financially in what we could do. So, after the corrections were made to the thesis, which I believe I did on the Saturday, we arranged to rent a Mini 850 and departed on the Monday for a tour of Scotland.

We had the luck of fine, if cool, weather, the delight of newborn lambs, and accommodation and meals that we have never matched in value for money. In that era tourists were very fixed in their holiday timetables. We had the Highlands to ourselves, a nimble vehicle that was fun to drive, and no imminent responsibilities except to enjoy ourselves safely.

While we did not return to Canada for almost three months, those first couple of weeks around Scotland had an unmatched quality of freedom from concern. I confess we largely ignored events in the world nearby or far away, or, since the Apollo 16 was driving the lunar rover on the moon, in space. The Vietnam war and the Burundian genocide were swept under the carpets of heather we shared with the sheep and their lambs. The fight between

Edward Heath's conservatives and the coal miners that had made it difficult for me to get my thesis copied were forgotten, even as the underlying disputes festered. Muddy pages in my thesis remain as evidence of voltage fluctuations in the electricity supply because the power stations had insufficient coal.

The Scottish bed and breakfast hostelries often had no television. I believe that near Oban we did ask if there were a radio so we could listen to a BBC dramatic series, but I don't recall seeking out a newspaper. Did we check the weather? I doubt that we did – we would accept Scotland with whatever weather it chose to give us. Fortunately, this weather was mostly fine, or fine enough.

Evenings usually consisted of a three or four course meal of generally excellent though unpretentious food. If we were able to walk to dinner, we had wine or cider – neither of us drink beer. Calories went entirely uncounted. Our collection of photos of the trip is remarkably sparse. Perhaps it was more important to live the present moments and not try to capture them for the future. We also seem to have few souvenirs. Oddly, we still use a Welsh wool bedspread we bought earlier when we took a motorbike journey round the principality. We did have the bedspread mailed – the motorbike had very limited baggage space. So we weren't averse to souvenirs. Indeed, on a later trip to see some of Mary's family in the Netherlands in early July we actually bought a folding bicycle and managed to bring it back on the flight from Schiphol to Gatwick. Then we had to arrange to get it home to Canada, where it served us well for many years.

Our responsibilities gradually asserted themselves and we made our preparations to return to Canada. We packed books and had them mailed through a service that trucked them to Rotterdam, since the Dutch Post Office allowed 30 kilogram book parcels rather than the usual 10 kilo limit. I doubt we thought of the poor postal workers trying to lift the boxes. We packed china in a trunk with bedding and clothes and a small printing press in a much smaller but heavier trunk. I paid a friend with an old Mini delivery van some petrol money to drive me to Heathrow to air freight the trunks to Edmonton. Air Canada managed to puncture one of them and put a hole in the case of our typewriter, a fully manual one we still have, as the damage was repairable.

Late in June, we invited some friends to my doctoral ceremony and I was harangued in Latin, first while wearing my ratty old advanced standing gown, then later while wearing the royal blue and scarlet gown as fitted my new status. Given Oxford's bizarre regulations, I still had to apply and pay for a very unimpressive paper certificate for the degree that appears to have been prepared on a machine using a ribbon from before the Second World War. The University considered publication of the names of the candidates awarded degrees in the University Gazette the true record of our achievement.

Perhaps that I bothered to get the paper certificate signalled that the careless time was ending.

J C Nash ©2021-04-28

Dishes

Most people take dishes for granted. Unless you don't have any, which can be a great nuisance when trying to eat a meal. Especially soup or stew.

When I was small, there seemed to be a hierarchy of dinner plates. My grandmother – for me my maternal grandmother as my father's mother died five years before I arrived – had a selection of octagonal Willow pattern plates and bowls. The ensemble was likely somewhat uneven in numbers of each type of dish, and there were several unmatched items in the crockery cupboard. Somehow food didn't seem so appetising when served on the oddments.

Crockery! There's a word that isn't common these days. Somehow it doesn't cover metal, paper or plastic plates. Perhaps a better definition of crockery would be dishes that are breakable, used by my Australian friend Kevin Price most memorably in writing to describe a domestic confrontation a colleague precipitated. This colleague had been offered and had accepted a job in apartheid era South Africa. He did this **before** he went home to tell his wife. My friend wrote that there were "shouts, crying, and crockery aviation", which I propose as a contender for a prize for most succinctly eloquent narrative.

When Mary and I married, it was considered mandatory to have a "good" set of dishes, and my father and stepmother subscribed to this doctrine to the extent that we were given a letter to see my father's buying agent, Dean Warburg Limited, at 38 Savile Row in London's Picadilly area. They provided us a formal introduction to Thomas Goode and Co. of South Audley Street in Mayfair. Mary's father was a mechanic who had started working on cars at age 10 and who knew every make and model intimately, but Mary does not normally notice cars. However, as we descended from the Dean Warburg office to Savile Row, Mary said "what a nice car". I had to inform her it was an Aston Martin, actually a model similar to that driven by James Bond in the eponymous films. When we arrived after a modest walk to Thomas Goode and Co., we noted that the vehicles parked outside seemed to be either Rolls or Bentleys. I think that was the only day in our entire marriage where cars captured our mutual attention in this way.

Having answered our sales agent's question as to whether we wanted an English or Russian service by guessing that "English" was appropriate, we chose a Royal Doulton pattern called Lace Point, and it has served us well,

if increasingly infrequently as we have had fewer dinner parties compared to eating on the deck or in buffet fashion. Still, the dishes are our "good" ones: "Goode" in purveyor, in quality and in elegance. And Thomas Goode is the longest-standing holder of a royal warrant from the monarch as purveyor of china and glassware. That is, they are an official supplier of such goods to Her Majesty and also to the Prince of Wales, and have been since 1863. Indeed they were founded in 1827 and have been at the South Audley Street premises since 1845. Perhaps they are permitted a measure of pomposity.

Our wedding guests were generous, and we also got a very nice set of painted glass dessert plates that come out only on special occasions as they seem, and almost certainly are, fragile.

If you have "good" dishes, then you must also, by necessity, have some for everyday. Thus the wedding gifts weren't sufficient to all our needs. As soon as we could, we looked for items that would not give anguish should they suffer breakage. In our search, we visited the Oxford Wednesday Market, a noisy street market that offered a wide range of products, some of which were undoubtedly of dubious provenance. One hawker with a strong cockney accent was surrounded by towers of plates and bowls and cups. He had a rapid-fire patter where he asked rhetorically what you'd expect to pay for a good dinner plate, and gave a price. I think it was 17 shillings and sixpence. Then he said that today, why don't we say four of these dinner plates – they were a fairly common earthenware or ironstone with a simple pattern – for that price. Oh, but you'd need four bread and butter plates. But also four bowls for soup or pudding. While he said this, he was adding the items to an arrangement held on his other palm. Then he finished with a flourish that you'd also need four cups and four saucers, all for 17 and six, and all perched on his hand. We decided this was a good value. Indeed, the show itself was worth the price. The hawker wrapped the items in newspaper and arranged them almost in the same pile as he had used to display them on his hand, and we put them in our bag. They served us for several years until we tired of the pattern, which, given they were obviously "seconds" was imperfectly executed in places.

In later years we've always had an "everyday" service, generally bought when the Hudson's Bay Company or Canadian Tire has some special offering on a set. More recently, we have favoured Corning's Corelle ceramic ware, purchased from factory outlets along one or other of the Interstates.

We never bought into the Melmac fashion. The relatively thick plastic plates were certainly durable and clearly intended to survive trips to the floor initiated by children who did not like peas or carrots. We did use them once, on a cabin cruiser holiday on the Rideau Canal in 1982. Two boats, nine people. I was designated egg cook, and one morning prepared poached eggs, which I learned at an early age from my great-aunt Esther could be cooked

without benefit of special poaching pan if you get the water temperature right and crack the eggs carefully. The plates supplied with the rental cruisers were Melmac, and there was one member of our party who was avoiding bread in a losing battle with body weight. However, bread or toast provides friction, and Melmac, even years old and dull of surface, affords poached eggs no friction. The egg slid off the plate and, according to a Scrabble-champion member of our crew, awarded the unfortunate lady the order of the poached egg when it landed on her chest.

Fashions change. Particularly, phrases like "dishwasher safe" and "microwave friendly" have diminished the appeal of fancy china. The rise in popularity of various pasta and rice dishes, especially when eaten in front of a TV screen, has led us to start using dinner bowls – shallow bowls that minimize the chance of slopping sauce on laps or furniture.

Street markets in Canada don't have the colourful hawkers of housewares. But then the Wednesday market clientele would likely have wondered what "organic" meant when applied to fruits and vegetables. We do, however, have our modern Canadian alternatives. A few years ago we wanted some salad bowls to replace some of the lacquered shaved-wood ones that were common in the 70s. We tried different housewares merchants and even McIntosh and Watts, Ottawa's attempt to emulate Thomas Goode. We could find no dishwasher safe offerings, save in expensive sets that included many items we did not need or want. Our salvation was Dollarama, where we found a wide selection, each piece for sale individually at reasonable prices.

The good Doulton china? It's still expensive to buy new, but often difficult to give away. We have a niece who wants our set – at over 50 years old it could be called antique though the pattern looks surprisingly modern against a dark tablecloth. When the pandemic subsides we'll drive it out to British Columbia. Crockery and aviation really don't go together.



John C. Nash ©2021-05-17

Waterborne Thievery

At one point in my university career I found myself, to use an expression of the time “caught short”. I’d managed an exchange session in the UK. However, some sloppy arithmetic along with some extravagance with a girl whose favours evaporated when my funds were low meant I was going to be very hungry unless I had a job. Even more embarrassing, had it been known, was that my situation resulted from my own sloppy arithmetic in translation of dollars to pounds using the reciprocal of the conversion factor. A few years later the Gimli Glider was the outcome of a similar mistake.

Working in Britain was, naturally, not allowed under my exchange rules. However, I had a very strong aversion to starving. Richardson, a fellow I’d met at the local university during term time and who I sensed was active in all sorts of possibly suspect commercial activities on campus, provided an introduction to a certain Captain Jones – nobody used his first name, but I suspect it was Davey – who needed a deck hand for his dredger.

I never was particularly big, but at that time I was physically quite active, and from Captain Jones point of view I combined the qualities of needing to work "under the table" and having some knowledge of boats, both sailing and motorized.

Jones had a contract to dredge around some moorings along a river near its mouth into the English Channel. The setup was that a mechanical shovel would drop its clamshell bucket beside a mooring and grab a load of mud, lift it and swivel to dump it in the hold of a modest barge-like boat. This boat was, I think, similar to a Norfolk wherry, and had a sail. The mud was to be dropped a couple of miles upstream on the other side of the river where some pilings had been set up to narrow the river so it would scour and keep the channel clear.

My job was to do anything and everything to assist Captain Jones. There were no other employees save his nephew George, who ran the bright orange mechanical digger, but who would come along with us when we had to dump the mud. Generally on these trips George managed to smoke half a pack of Woodbines and drink a quart bottle of beer.

The boat had a very old, very awkward, single cylinder two stroke motor, directly connected to the propeller. It had no gears. There was a pedal like a kick starter. If you wanted to go in reverse, you fiddled with the timing of the spark and there would be an almighty shudder as the engine fired before

it reached top-dead-center. The motor had one speed conditioned on one rotation per second. For this reason, we used the sail as much as we could.

Of course, the nearby coast had a road, and this road crossed the river between the mooring and the place where mud was to be dumped. And we had a sailboat. However, it was equipped with a lutchet. This was a box, open at the back and just wider than the mast. The mast had a pin at deck level through the sides of the lutchet, and there was even a mighty counterweight on the bottom of the mast below deck. Altogether a rather elegant solution to the problem of bridges and sailing vessels.

Apparently an alternative would be an open-front box on the deck with the pin at the top of the box rather than the bottom. The open front would allow the mast bottom to swing forward, but it would not then be easy to have a counterweight. This alternative system, as I learned over several pints of beer with Captain Jones and George, was called a tabernacle. Apparently some Mormon missionaries tried to proselytize to the Captain one day and were so busy preaching they missed the fact that the boat had cast off and was heading to the mud drop. Captain Jones said he enjoyed preaching to the righteous about the true definition of a tabernacle. And he said that it was a day of fickle winds and a decidedly more fickle engine that the Mormon boys got very dirty trying to get running. Very difficult indeed when Captain Jones had the spark wire in his pocket.

Somehow, possibly because I was working illegally, I was let in on a little scam Captain Jones and George were running. Or maybe they recognized me as a fellow conspirator when I asked about the mud doors. I had noticed that when we left the mooring, I'd see George lean back on the lever that allowed the doors in the bottom of the boat to open for dropping the mud. And I could see that while he raised his bottle of beer, his other hand allowed the lever to move just a bit.

I didn't say anything right away, but when I went to the back of the boat to start the engine, I checked over the stern and could see a bit of a trail of silt. After three days, we were drinking at the Boatman's Arms – my funds kept me to a half pint a time, but I enjoyed the pub nonetheless – and I asked if the dumping doors needed some maintenance. I figured about 30% of the mud was being jettisoned on each trip.

Captain Jones said not to worry. Only a bit of mud would be lost. The current would drop it on the river bottom possibly near the mooring. Maybe the river authority would have to extend the contract.

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The Silver Vault

The London Silver Vaults opened in 1885 as the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit. Now there are 29 shops, each inside a large bank-style vault. These shops all specialize in silver goods, both antique and modern.

Silver does, unfortunately, tarnish. And when a new shipment came in to one dealer – we'll call them Smith – an unassuming middle-aged woman named Jane had the job of rendering the items spotless and shining. Mr. Smith Senior, in his old-fashioned and somewhat obsequious manner, constantly reminded Jane to wear rubber gloves when handling the silver polish to avoid what he termed “ungual discomfort”, by which he meant the stinging irritation if the polish got under a finger or thumb nail.

This new shipment had been recovered from a narrowboat that had sunk during World War II. An old canal was being restored for recreational use and the wreck was discovered blocking the channel. A local historian found a record of some stray bombs that fell in the village in late 1940, and the woman living on the boat was killed. When the barge was raised, the salvage team found a collection of quite nice silver items in the remains of a tea chest. The lawyers for all and sundry were going to have a field day deciding who was going to benefit. Well, they already knew that they would get the lion's share in fees, but procedures had to be followed. In the meantime, Smith's would clean and appraise the materials and would likely handle the sale of the items to convert them to cash.

The muck of three-quarters of a century caused Jane to have to scrub a good deal before she could polish. Inside one sugar bowl with a cover, she found a small glass bottle with a screw cap. Fortunately, the cap had been made of bakelite, an early plastic, otherwise it would have corroded away.

Jane carefully washed the little bottle and then could see there some folded paper inside. After drying the bottle carefully, she took some rubber grip sheets and was able to open the bottle and extract the papers. Unfolding one, she read the clear copperplate writing, clearly done with a fountain pen and black, permanent ink.

June 2, 1940

Dear Annabelle,

I know how disappointed we both are that we must postpone

getting married now that I'm to join the new 247 Squadron. I can't say where we'll be, but it's likely I'll be flying Gladiators, both day and night. We've done some training on Blenheims, but they are now getting close to obsolete as operational aircraft.

We've talked about you moving to the narrowboat. I really think you should, since London could end up getting pasted like Warsaw last year or Rotterdam a fortnight ago. You'll be safer on the boat. No doubt Freddy Arkwright will need help on the farm and prefer to hire you rather than put up with some Land Girl he has to educate.

I've already written to Seymour, my solicitor, to let him know you are to have the boat if anything should happen to me, and to have all rights of ownership while I am in the RAF. Please do go and keep safe so we can have a future together. If I get leave, that's where I'll want to come to be with you.

With deepest love,

Tommy

There was another piece of paper folded in the bottle. It was tan coloured and quite small, with strips of white paper glued on. Well, now they were coming loose. One of them fluttered to the floor. Jane picked it up and read
DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT

The rest of the telegram said that Flight Sergeant "Tommy" Thomas flew his Gladiator into a hill on a night patrol on October 21, 1940.

*"Tommy" Thomas of RAF 247 Squadron did indeed crash as described, and this is recorded in **Rise from the East: the story of No. 247 (China-British) Squadron, Royal Air Force**, by David John Marchant, published by Air Britain: Tunbridge Wells, 1996. However, the rest of this story is fictional.*

John C. Nash ©2021-07-12

RJ

There are people whose influence on our lives is highly significant, even though we can't put a finger on exactly the mechanism by which they do so.

As members of the Stittsville Creative Writers Group who made a conscious decision to join, we clearly intended to do some writing. But did we expect to write so much, or so well, or find common cause with others that spurred on our efforts?

The base activity we can put down to our own choices, but the "extra" is surely due to RJ. He coordinates the group. We know WHAT he does. We have a good idea HOW he does it. The secret sauce is in the continuing and delicate herding of disparate the cats of library administrators, strong eccentric personalities, and publishing enterprises. It is a light but sure touch on the keys of the creative instrument. Our response is not forced. Somehow we do better, do more.

Thanks RJ.

Members of the Stittsville Creative Writing Group ©2021-09-27

Car recall

Challenge 2021-10-28

I didn't intend to be here. The phone call was really for Jane. She, however, had a medical appointment, and her car dealer said the part for her Toyota had finally come in to do the recall repair.

Something silly to do with the radio. Fortunately she had taken the bus to her doctor's because it's easier than chasing scarce parking, and we have a pretty direct route too.

The dealer had a waiting room and I had my e-reader so I settled in to my book. I was re-reading Mary Wesley's "The Camomile Lawn" and had got to the part where Calypso is having her baby under the kitchen table in the middle of a Luftwaffe bombing raid.

Suddenly I seemed to be actually inside the scene as the waiting room ceiling seemed to come down on me. Fortunately I only got knocked on the head with a small strip of gyprock. And somehow, despite Jane's constant complaints, I was still wearing my cap, my winter one that is pretty well padded.

There was lots of dust everywhere, which took about half a minute to clear enough to see more than a few feet. What loomed out of the dust was a mess of plaster and broken glass and plastic on the floor and on the other patrons. I like a corner, so had more or less escaped much injury, but there were two guys – looked like office workers or public servants when they came in – and one youngish woman who was in a uniform of some sort like a dental hygienist, and they were more or less lying on the floor where they'd been sitting.

Looking up, I saw what looked like the landing wheel of a small aircraft. And now my mind was clearing, I could smell fuel. Not good.

I checked that I had my phone, but with fuel about decided not to use it. Instead I put calling 911 on temporary hold and gingerly stepped over the ceiling rubble to the young woman who was trying to get up. I said "Are you hurt?"

"Don't know for sure. Perhaps you can help me up and we can get out of here."

I held out my arm and pulled her up. There was some blood on her face from a scalp wound, but she seemed to be mobile, so we made for the door. Outside I helped her away from the building. Turning round, we could see

that a small aircraft had crashed on the roof. The pilot was slumped in the cockpit.

I could hear sirens, and before I could call 911, saw a fire engine and a police car coming about a kilometer away. No sense adding to the load of the emergency services. So I texted Jane “Am OK. At car dealer when plane crashed on roof.”

Dinner conversation might be rather interesting tonight. Given the state of the service area of the dealership, it might also be rather late.

John C. Nash ©2021-10-28

Humanity

Challenge 2021-11-25

The road we were walking along was dry and dusty. That wasn't really a concern. The smoke was. A forest fire had popped up on the far side of the hill behind the ranchhouse we'd rented for a getaway. Just two of us – Judy and me. The RCMP officer banged on the door, yelled for us to get away quickly, and departed up the valley to the next place. That was when we saw flames coming over the ridge.

It wouldn't have been too much of a direct threat, but as we drove out of the woody part of the hills onto the valley bottom, an elk came out of nowhere and we hit him. A full sized elk. The air bags went off with a bang and we got a bit of fabric burn that we'd want looking at later to see if we could be made a bit more comfortable. But for now it was walk, and walk quickly. The fire might not go beyond the edge of the trees, but the grass was dry.

We'd remembered to take our wallets and valuables and some water, but the dryness and heat, along with the smoke, slowed us down. Still, we managed a fairly ungainly but rapid trudge, if you follow that mixed explanation.

Then we heard a vehicle behind us. Looking round we could see a wake of dust behind a very old pickup truck. It slowed as it came up to us. The truck was full – two adults and two kids in the front. Three teenagers in the back with two dogs and two cats and a bunch of suitcases. There wasn't any room for us. Still the man behind the wheel yelled "Better climb aboard. Jody! Set the clothing suitcases on the side of the road in the ditch where there's no grass, but make sure we have the one with photos and birth certificates."

So we climbed in and were rescued. An act of humanity.

That night in a rather decrepit motel room, I thought how seemingly small but important acts of humanity define the record of events. The concentration camp guard who tosses a lump of bread to a starving prisoner. A young nun who hides a kid from a predator in a residential school. Little moments that, like Christmas lights, shine to illuminate a sliver of time, and in doing so amplify the extremity of danger or cruelty.

I got the family's name and where they live, or rather lived. Judy and I will make sure they have clothes, and help them if we can, much as they helped us.

John C. Nash ©2021-11-25

Stay away from that toddler!

Challenge 2022-01-20

Estimating risk is a big business. Suited guys and gals get paid big bucks on Wall Street to figure out the dangers and rewards of different investments. Actuaries try to nail down when the average 74 year old will enrich the undertakers, and the route by which that will happen. Or how much damage a tornado will do to an Ottawa suburb. Perhaps not the damage – just the dollar cost to the insurers.

The goal is to sell the customer the insurance based on their fears. Create a worry, make a bundle. One of the episodes of The Goon Show had the nefarious Moriarty selling Neddy Seagoon insurance against the English Channel catching fire. A tanker accident then causes the insured peril to be realized.

In real life, the insurance adjusters would then hire a few busloads of lawyers to argue that there is no English Channel because France is on one side and owns half of it. And so on.

Risks are usually viewed from one point of view. Hence parents are almost always worried about their little nippers. I'm not sure that's the best perspective. Toddlers are, in my view, pretty dangerous. They move and are low down, hence a trip hazard. As, of course, are the multitude of toys they discard in places where one will step on them.

And don't get me started on germs. I think a good case could be made that toddlers can spread germs faster than the most dangerous Russian bio-weapon.

Moreover, toddlers are quite tough. A 2-year old girl in Australia some years ago was left in her playpen in the living room. The patio door was open, being that the particular location in Australia was of mild climate. I think it was Queensland, which is like the Deep South in the USA, but of course is in the North.

Mother came to check on toddler and discovered that a small but very poisonous snake had managed to slink over the door-sill and into grabbing range of the toddler. The toddler was most unhappy that Mom wanted to take away the headless snake gripped firmly in the little girl's fist.

No wonder snakes are endangered in Australia.

John C. Nash ©2022-01-20

