



# FOOTLOOSE

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RAMBLINGS OF ITCHY FEET

## *PREFACE*

*There was something special about the 1950s, 60s and early 70s. Our parents didn't have a lot of cash lying around. But, as teenagers, we were very independent. Why? Because we could always get a job. A part-time job during school term. And/or a full-time job during school vacations. Welding on construction sites; driving large trucks; slaughtering sheep; whatever. These jobs paid really well. So well that we could do rich-kid things, like go sailing, go skiing, learn to fly small planes. On our own dime. And if you can do this on your own when you're 18, you get to believe that the sky must be the limit when you're older and hopefully wiser. And so it was. Our world had very few limits.*

*There's also something about growing up in a small town, wedged in between mountains and the sea. Especially if you embrace the great outdoors. Come to terms with it. Learn to be independent. And take a passionate interest in the natural world around you. We grew up in a world of dolphins and mountain goats. Of rabbits and Canada geese. When we very young, there was no border between real nature and our fantasies. As we grew older, we learned more about imported predators, poisons and other environmental issues. Most of our generation were "greens" in one way or another. Even today, the future of the planet remains a shared passion among all of my childhood companions.*

*The French explain many things with: "Cherchez la femme" (look for the woman). When in doubt, look for love and sex as driving motives. It works nine times out of ten. A woman led me to France. Then left me for a drummer. A woman very nearly signed me up in Russia. But I woke up in time. And a woman led me to the Middle East. Not just to the geography of the Middle East. But, more importantly, to some wonderful folks who live there. My prejudices were blown away like cobwebs.*

*I tried to avoid getting a "real" job for as long as I could. Doing casual jobs; hiding inside universities; the usual. I lasted until 27, then caved-in and signed up as a*

*bureaucrat. To my amazement, I liked it. Wondered why I'd avoided it for so long. However, for most of my bureaucratic career, I felt like a fraud. Disguised in a business suit and shiny shoes. Making pompous utterances in order to get paid. In order to pay the mortgage. I longed to get out of the suit; let my hair and beard grow back; and generally revert to a Kris Kristofferson look-alike. Well, I had to wait for retirement.*

*Meantime, I tried desperately to convince our children that the guy in the suit wasn't the real me. I even took one of the boys to Timbuktu to prove it. He still wasn't impressed. We took his brother to St Petersburg to see the art collections in the Hermitage. He gave it six out of ten. He hated the Impressionists. Perhaps the only thing that really captured their attention was going bungy-jumping, canyoning and parachute jumping back on my home turf in the Antipodes. There, at least, I was able to bask in the reflected glory of my homeland.*

*Life and work have carried me along like a surfer. I never really knew where the next wave would take me. Or us...in latter years. I'm not an anthropologist. Please don't hold me to any kind of intellectual rigor! Standing back from the globe, what I know and love best is West Africa, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. So here it is: "Footloose--ramblings of itchy feet". Or perhaps more truthfully: stories that our children heard once too often.*

*If you are a native English speaker, you may recall the Durrell brothers. One (Lawrence, I believe) wrote weighty tomes of authorly prose, such as "The Alexandria Quartet". The other (Gerald, a zookeeper) wrote folksy stories, such as "My Family and Other Animals". Needless to say, Larry hated Gerry's books. He didn't mind so much being lampooned by Gerry. Larry's real problem was "being ridiculed in bad prose". It's this same fear that prevents me from writing too openly about my family & friends. Of course, I've made an exception for those who are no longer here to complain. My mother-in-law, for example.*

*Beirut  
December 2015*

## CHAPTER 1

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# INNOCENCE LOST



*It's liberating to have strong roots. No major insecurities about who one is, nor where one comes from. I had an idyllic childhood in a faraway corner of the world. Three Antipodean islands in the bottom right-hand corner of Mercator's projection. So much in the corner that the map-makers often leave them out completely. We don't mind. We know that we're there.*

*Growing up in this far-flung corner gave us all an insatiable wanderlust. I managed to break out of the Mercator corner for the first time when I was 18, to spend a summer in Antarctica. And again, when I was 23, to go to China. After that, I never really looked back. Well, like everyone else, I came "home" from time to time to water the roots.*

SECTION 1

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## NINE GOING ON TEN

It's fun for a young kid to grow up in a port town. Big ships come and go. Merchant seamen roam the streets looking for distractions from their lonely lives at sea. Parents try to make sure that their daughters – and sons – don't get led astray. And, of course, we kids remained blissfully unaware of our parents' concerns.

One day, a lonely seaman asked me to take him home to meet my parents. So I did. My parents invited him to stay for dinner. Conversation was awkward. But we got through it. Afterwards, our guest left to walk back down the hill to his ship in the harbor. Nothing went wrong. But my parents clearly were anxious about something.

I grew up being friends with the girl over the back fence. She was a few years older than me. Tall, skinny, pretty in a tom-girl kind of way. She loved playing doctors and nurses with me in a hideaway spot behind her parents' house. As the years went by, I saw less and less of her. She used to disappear down to the port. And come back with lots of money.

While I was still at high school, I was shocked to learn that she had gone to hospital for a long time and then died. Nobody could tell me why. I knew that it was something to do with the boats. Many years later, I understood that my little playmate had probably died of syphilis.

SECTION 2

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## ODE TO RAIN

We lived in a country where all houses had corrugated iron roofs. We were metallurgically ignorant, so we called them “tin roofs”. Traditionally, these roofs were rusty. Usually with no insulation in the attic. We had a so-called “temperate” climate. That meant it rained a lot. Sometimes just a monotonous drizzle for several days in a row. More often a howling sou’westerly rainstorm for 24 hours.

During the daytime, these rainstorms were a misery. It meant pedaling our ancient bicycles against horizontal rain to get home from school. Arriving home drenched, grumpy and in no mood to do our homework.

At night, it was something else. Tucked safely into our little beds, with the bedroom windows open just enough to let the sound in—and keep the rain out—it was an untamed symphony. From above, pounding/crashing, wave after wave, onto the tin roof like demented cymbals. From outside, landing moistly, soddenly, in the rose garden below the bedroom window, like muffled timpany.

I have no idea why it made us so happy. After all, we craved sunshine, for sunny days at the local beach, at the river swimming hole, on our little sailboats. But no, we also enjoyed rainstorms, preferably at night, preferably violent, preferably with lots of donner und blitzten (as we learned from our war comics).

Years later, I learned to enjoy rainstorms out at sea, tucked safely inside a sailboat. Again, the spontaneous symphony of rain rhythmically pounding on the cockpit. Often with a magnificent sound and light show, thanks to Thomas Edison. With the glorious feeling of being as snug as a bug in a rug inside a little plastic shell dancing lightly/safely on top of foaming waves.

Years later again, a similar feeling in the desert, where rain is rare—and welcomed with open arms when it deigns to show up. There, the rainstorm arrives unannounced, advancing at ferocious speed across the desert from hundreds of kilometers away, wrapped up in a sinister, black whirlwind. The whirlwind strikes with violent, torrential rain. Scenes of the apocalypse for three minutes and then it’s over. The whirlwind departs, followed by an eerie calm. Time to pick up the pieces of everything broken and begin again, as if nothing had happened. Until next time.

## TWELVE GOING ON THIRTEEN

My mother's efforts to save me from being gay started early. Already at 12 years old, I was press-ganged into ballroom dancing classes. Every week, on Monday nights, after school. Foxtrots, waltzes, tango, paso doble, you know the list. With 12-year old girls, who were already five years more mature and sophisticated than us shambling, catatonic, male lumberjacks. All of us dressed up like miniature adults, in elasticized bow ties and patent leather shoes. Scratchy music as the Dance Mistress placed the needle on a well-worn 33 rpm record. It didn't work. I trod on my partner's delicate little toes. I turned the wrong way and collided with the couple behind. It was excruciating for me and for all. Even today, I squirm as I think of it.

Fortunately all things, good & bad, come to an end. To my surprise, Dorothy invited all of the dancing class, boys and girls, to her parents' home for a Xmas party. This was a novel experience. We danced the twist to the Beatles ("she loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah") on sheepskin rugs in front of the fireplace. We felt very sophisticated. And very relieved that ballroom dancing classes were over.

Various parents then drove us all down to the local movie theater to watch a movie together. The pre-movie "shorts" had already started. As we crept in under cover of darkness, the usher asked us whether we were a Sunday School group. Needless to say, that deflated us rock & rollers a little. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Dorothy had taken the seat beside me. I enjoyed the movie.

The next day, at school, Dorothy's best friend, Judith, came to talk to me during the break. She asked whether everything was okay—and why I hadn't held Dorothy's hand during the movie. Well, I was watching the movie. Clearly I was already missing my cues. So far, my mother's efforts were in vain.

SECTION 4

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## SKINNED RABBITS

Rabbits can be soft and cuddly. But they can also be pests. For example, when there's way too many of them. It's okay when rabbits have natural predators. Foxes eat rabbits. And humans shoot foxes (and other humans). Fair's fair. But some places don't have foxes. So, from time to time, the number of rabbits explodes. Quite suddenly.

You can send out posses of armed men. You can drop poisoned carrots from small planes. You can let loose the rabbit version of syphilis. But still the number of rabbits explodes.

They eat every plant in sight. Mountains and grasslands are denuded. Rocks and soils wash away into the lakes and rivers. Farmers become very unhappy. City folks remain blissfully unaware. Except when they drive out into the countryside at night. Unfortunately (for the rabbits), they are suicidally attracted to car headlights. It's impossible to avoid them. Pop, pop, pop...squish, squish, squish as the car runs over them.

We used to stop the car from time to time to load a few rabbits (the not too badly squished ones) into the trunk. In the morning, my father would skin them and cut them up into tasty morsels for the cat. Lance-a-little, his name was (Lancelot, until we had him neutered). We kids had to hold the cat down, slobbering and slavering, until this gourmet breakfast was ready.

It was starting to dawn on me that the animal world was a pretty cruel and dangerous place. Perhaps that's what my father wanted for his city kids. Well, it certainly worked.

SECTION 5

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## CANADA GEESE

As you can probably tell, I'm a bit obsessed about the food chain. Animal AA eats animal BB who eats animal CC, and so on, down to the very bottom of the food chain. I'm okay with plants. I don't really believe that my mesclun salad emits an inaudible scream every time I cut into it. But the animal side of it seems very, very cruel. And our role, as the supreme human animals, seems particularly ignoble. Of course, I'm a hypocrite, because I'm not a vegetarian.

I blame my father for this mild traumatism of mine. I know he had good intentions. He wanted us to see the world how it really is, in all its gory detail. But did he really have to take us out to join the annual gosling slaughter when we were barely taller than the goslings?

Farmers hate Canada geese. These huge avian herbivores munch as much grass as the farmer's own sheep. The Canada geese arrive by the hundreds or thousands in vee-shaped airforce squadrons. Without even checking-in with Air Traffic Control, they land in your precious fields. And start munching. In many countries, they have no natural predators. So who's gonna stop them?

Our farming friends had two techniques. Shoot the adults. And strangle the goslings. In their first few months, baby Canada geese are covered in down, with no real feathers. They can't fly. And they can't run very fast either. Enter the posse of angry farmers. Grab gosling by the neck. Swing it around once, to break its neck. Move onto the next one. A hideous scene if you're at all queasy about these things. I was queasy then. And I still am. But I understood that I had to do my share. So I did.

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## THE FAMILY GENE POOL

My maternal grandfather grew up in a remote part of the country. Coromandel. I would guess that we're talking about the 1880s. He and his four brothers walked several kilometers barefoot through the muddy streets to school every day. It seems that they got a surprisingly decent education. All five of them went on to become bosses of government ministries. Simultaneously. My grandfather was head of the Public Trust Office, a very socialist institution that offered legal services to the public, for wills or whatever.

My grandfather was a very aloof fellow. Wore a blue pin-striped suit and smoked his pipe alone in the living room. Impossible to distract him from the live broadcast from the house of parliament. Quite scary for us young kids. Until he retired. After that, he started showing up quite regularly at our house in a remote small town. He liked being taken on long drives. Out to our swimming hole at a nearby river. Or further afield into the mountains. To our great astonishment, we learned that he liked to sing. Especially Harry Belafonte. He belted out "Oh Island in the Sun", then switched to Frank Sinatra. Clearly crooners were his thing. It got to the point where we almost liked him. This honeymoon period lasted ten years. We learned to sing along, with our squeaky teenage descant voices. It got better every year.

One day my father took me with him to visit my grandfather in the capital city. To my surprise, we did not go to his house. Instead, we went to the hospital. My father explained that my grandfather had had a "stroke". He could see, hear and think, but he couldn't speak. A kindly nurse escorted us to his bedside. Sure enough, he was there, listening to us, but he couldn't speak. Tears rolled down his cheeks. We stayed for as long as we could stand it, then left.

I've often wondered how much information is transmitted in the genes. I too was a public sector bureaucrat for forty years. And I too truly enjoyed it. My children saw me come home every night in a blue pin-striped suit. God knows what they thought. And now that I have reached my grandfather's age, I love singing the crooners, albeit with a modern karaoke backing.

## SEVENTEEN GOING ON EIGHTEEN

My teenage years were not going well. I was seventeen. I had a driver's license. My parents lent me the car whenever I asked. I listened to the Beach Boys. But there was a Berlin Wall between me and girls. A wall topped with razor wire.

Okay, it didn't help that I had three brothers and no sisters. I didn't have a stupid younger sister as a benchmark. Instead, girls were from another planet, maybe even from another galaxy. My parents had some inkling that this might be a problem. One Saturday morning, our father frog-marched all four boys into the bathroom to observe our mother naked in the bath. A well-intentioned ruse, but it didn't have the desired effect.

Later, I recall my mother laughing nervously when I expressed my views about her choice of fabrics and colors for a dress. Now, with many years of hindsight, I realize that my parents were terrified that I might be...GAY. They tried every trick in the book to parachute me into the arms of a comely maiden. Nothing worked. I might have remained forever a virgin. Perhaps even joined the priesthood. Except for one thing... chemistry.

The local high school for girls didn't have enough girls interested in chemistry. Maybe half a dozen. So they sent these very studious young women to our school, the local high school for boys, to study chemistry. Just a few hours every week. During these few hours, testosterone levels went through the roof. The boys in the chemistry lab could barely see their bunsen burners through their steamed-up spectacles. I was one of them. Of course, timidity and ineptitude scored higher than testosterone. So I remained paralyzed and mute behind my steamed-up spectacles.

Let me digress. Every year, the two high schools, boys and girls, held a so-called Leavers' Ball. Americans call it the Prom. Final year boys were supposed to invite final year girls to this dance. Strictly supervised by an army of teachers and parents, of course. Over dinner, my mother asked whether I had invited anyone. Truthfully, I answered No. A few dinners later, my mother took me aside to inform me that she had

invited the girl next door to go to the Leavers' Ball with me. I was thunderstruck. How could she do that to me? The girl next door was prematurely matronly and completely asexual. I went into a coma for 48 hours.

Fortunately, I recovered in time to go to my chemistry class. As I sat there, staring rigidly in front of me, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A GIRL was speaking to me. She was asking me whether I had invited anyone to the Leaver's Ball. And, if not, whether... And perhaps I would like to invite her out this Saturday night, so that... You guessed. We had a great time. The ice was broken. I was very graciously and elegantly initiated into the ways of the world. We both lived happily ever after, although not together. To this day, I'm grateful to my chemistry companion. And, of course, my abysmally conniving, disgracefully shallow parents grinned from ear to ear for the next 12 months.

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## SORTING OUT THE MEN FROM THE BOYS

The headmaster strode up to the podium. A round of respectful applause from the parents. A round of sighs & yawns from the high school students. End-of-year prize-giving time again.

Let me welcome onto the stage the men of the first fifteen. Riotous applause. Thank you, thank you, great job. And now let me invite the boys of the first soccer eleven to come up to the stage. Applause. Thank you, and now, if the others, those who played hockey, could please just quickly file past the front of the stage. Sporadic clapping. Thank you.

Well, that's the main part of the program behind us. Let's turn now to the academic prizes. Some parents started slipping away through the side doors. Could those of you who were top of the class in Science or Math, please come forward in groups of ten. Hurry along now, we don't have much time. Good, thank you.

Now those of you who were top of your class in Arts or Languages, please come forward in groups of twenty. By now, about a third of the parents were left in the hall. Desultory applause.

Oh, yes, Mrs Charteris is just reminding me that we have a special prize for Latin this year, since we won't be teaching it any more next year. I tried to get to the front of the hall to pick up my Latin prize, but was hopeless. I couldn't get through the stampede of exiting parents.

We were silent in the car on the way home, my parents and me. The funny thing is that most of these parents and teachers have no idea why some young people are so determined to emigrate.

SECTION 9

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## THE BIG ICE

What could be better to calm the nerves than ice? Lots of it. As far as the eye can see. A whole continent of it. Antarctica.

We set out for Antarctica on a US Navy oil tanker. Carrying jet fuel from their logistics base in Christchurch, New Zealand, to their scientific base in McMurdo Sound in Antarctica. I was 18 years old. It was the very first time that I had left my home country.

It took 21 days to get down there. Very rough seas most of the way. To get from foredeck (the bridge) to the afterdeck (the galley, for dinner), one had to sprint along an icy catwalk, with split-second timing, in between mountainous icy waves.

We stopped at two sub-Antarctic islands. Wove carefully between mountainous icebergs. Followed an icebreaker through the pack-ice. Admired the orcas (killer whales). And arrived, finally, safe & sound, at McMurdo Sound.

I say “finally, safe & sound”, because I was very unnerved by a small technical incident along the way. One pitch-black starless night, when the seas were doing their very best to tear us apart, we had an electrical fault up on the bridge.

I happened to be up there on duty at the time. Giant white electrical arcs appeared out of nowhere, lighting up the bridge like a fireworks display. Needless to say, this is super scary on a tanker full of highly inflammable jet fuel.

The Commander shut down everything that might generate electricity and ordered everyone to find their way in total darkness to their lifeboat stations. Meantime, we pitched and wallowed helplessly in giant seas while the engineers tried to figure out why we had suddenly turned into a Guy Fawkes display.

As you can guess, it ended well. I believe it was the first occasion on which I thought about whether there was (or was not) a deity somewhere. Someone who is supposed to be looking after us.

## ANIMALS FROM OUR CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Everyone knows that there are seals & penguins all around the coasts of Antarctica. But the fauna of the sub-Antarctic islands gets much less press. Giant sea elephants wallowing around on the rocky beaches. Skuas, enormous birds with 2-meter wingspans, distantly related to the Albatross. Skuas can be vicious, particularly if one inadvertently strays within 100 meters of their rocky nest or their brood.

Nothing worse than being dive-bombed by an angry Skua, aiming to split your skull open with its cast-iron bill. The lonely guys from the local weather station learned to protect their skulls by walking around with long stout staves tucked vertically down into their down jackets and sticking a good half a meter above their fur hats. I would do the same if I lived there.

Well, you can always escape from these violent shorelines by walking up the steep trail behind the weather station towards the trig station at the top of the nearest peak. Obscure sub-Antarctic birds twittering happily in the bushes. The endless wind of the roaring forties (or is it the fifties?) swooshing through the undergrowth.

But, suddenly, a scary barking noise close at hand. Out of the undergrowth surges a very angry sea-lion, looking rather agile on its powerful flippers. Clearly defending his (or her?) territory against this thoughtless intruder. I fled down the trail, hotly pursued by this angry mammal. After a few minutes, the crashing and flapping noises receded. And I took the risk of stopping to catch my breath.

I was rather surprised to have had such a scary encounter with one of those loveable creatures from my children's picture books.

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## ANTARCTICA, SHAKEN, NO ICE

I was in Antarctica for the summer. I was ecstatic about being there. I was willing to clean the toilets if that's what I had to do to stay there.

Every day the sun circled lazily overhead. It never set. Midnight was like midday. One day, near the end of the summer, the US navy guys from the nearby base in McMurdo Sound offered to take me to the Dry Valleys. A routine trip to clean up the scientists' huts over there and close them down for the winter.

We took off from McMurdo in a navy chopper. Flew a couple of hours across the Sound and up into the Dry Valleys. Spectacular scenery all the way. Grandiose glaciers. And narrow, barren, wind-swept valleys, totally devoid of ice or snow. They gave me a scientific story about why there was no ice or snow on the ground. But I can't say that I found it very convincing.

We landed. Unloaded the chopper, which then went back home to McMurdo. Then spent three days happily cleaning up garbage, screwing plywood sheets over the hut windows, and generally making the camp shipshape for the winter. In our spare time we visited a couple of glaciers and climbed some nearby peaks. Truly paradise for a testosterone-laden teenager.

After three days the chopper came back. We loaded it up, closed the door, and took off. A hundred feet up, there was a very loud alarming noise, and the chopper bumped clumsily back down onto the landing pad. No harm done. No-one was hurt. Just some rattled nerves.

The engineer decided that we would need to fly-in some spare parts from McMurdo. Meantime, the weather had closed in. Radio reception was bad. Couldn't get through to McMurdo. But then we heard a distant crackly voice from the US base at the South Pole. Our polar friends then got through to McMurdo.

A day later, the weather cleared. A friendly navy chopper appeared out of the blue. The engineers changed the burnt-out magneto. And we all returned safe & sound to McMurdo. No big deal for the navy guys, all in a day's work.

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## “ZEN & THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE”

It was the title of a cult philosophy book that we guys all had to read if we wanted to get laid by clever university girls. I think I really never got to grips with the plot. So, needless to say, I went through a terrible drought for several years.

Well, I had my own first-hand experience of motorcycle maintenance. Perhaps it was the Zen part that I didn't get. Eventually, I graduated from engineering school. There was a tradition in our country that university graduates would teach as substitute teachers in high schools in the six weeks or so between the end of university exams and the end of the high school year. Usually in high schools in remote areas. Tough kids, tough parents, low academic standards, low morale, high turnover of teachers. The usual vicious downward spiral.

I signed up. It took me three days to get there on my bike. A Triumph Bonneville 650 with an orange metal-flake painted gas tank. A glorious bike, my all-time favorite. I still tear-up a little when I see one. Not too many bikes like that in the boonies where I was going to teach.

I arrived at the high school on a Sunday afternoon. Checked-in with the headmaster, just out of courtesy. Clearly he was not too impressed, neither by the bike, nor by the Che Guevara look that we young aspiring studs all had in those days.

The teaching turned out to be hell-on-wheels. The students were from poor, broken homes. The only game in town was to break the teacher. I tried to teach them a tiny bit of math, general science, geography, whatever. It was hopeless.

One day, one of the worst teenage provocateurs asked me a question about the Triumph Bonneville. The question seemed surprisingly sincere. I gave her a straight answer. A small light bulb lit up in my tiny brain. The next day I appeared in class with the Triumph Bonneville maintenance manual. On the blackboard, we stripped the bike down to its component parts, then rebuilt it. Slowly, with good diagrams. They fought among themselves to come to the blackboard.

Along the way, I tried to sneak in a little bit of physics, chemistry & math. Not much, but just enough to feel that it hadn't been 100% an exercise in baby-sitting. They lined up to watch me leave, heading back down south. I felt good about it. I hope they did too.

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## HOW I LOST MY JOB AT THE ABATTOIR

My home town lived by providing services to farmers in the hinterland. Those services including killing their sheep, freezing them, and sending them off to faraway places.

So every summer, after university exams, I would work in our abattoir. Not actually killing sheep, but oiling machines & fixing things. In navy blue overalls, with my long hair in a hair net. The guys on the killing chain would wolf-whistle as I went by. Who cares? I just smiled back. They paid us good wages. And those wages paid for my university studies. And for lots of fun in my spare time.

One summer I came back to the abattoir with my blue overalls over my shoulder. I was puzzled to see that the guys who used to be on the killing chain were now doing my job—maintenance. A completely different bunch of guys were working on the chain. Rather foreign-looking guys, joking among themselves in some strange foreign language.

The maintenance foreman confirmed my worst fears. I had lost “my” job. They were now sending the frozen carcasses to the Middle East. Neither of us was quite sure where that was. The new guys on the chain were from “over there”. Apparently they held the knife a different way. So the meat could be sold as “halal”, whatever that might mean.

The foreman and I stared at each other blankly. I took off my hairnet, put on my motorcycle helmet, rode home and looked for the family’s atlas of the world. Later someone told me they were from Kuwait. They’re still there. Globalization had arrived in our small town.

## THE JOYS OF PARACHUTE JUMPING

I can't remember why we decided to do it. Three of us from the same student group house decided to do a parachute jump. One jump, just to see what it's like. No pressure to carry on after that.

We decided to do a "crash" course. Perhaps that's not the best word. Our safety instructor's name was Morrie. A short chap. He hadn't always been short. But he had had a wee accident. His parachute didn't open properly. It "candled" as they say. So he went into the ground at about 80 mph. That's how he became shorter. And he was our Safety Instructor.

That wasn't the only thing to worry about. One day, not long before we three were scheduled to do the jump, I met a guy in a plaster cast. Right up one side, from his toes to the hip. I asked him what happened. He told me it was a parachute jump. He got out of the plane okay. His 'chute opened okay. Nice gentle ride down. But then he landed with one foot in the ground (that's good) and the other foot on the top of a farmer's fence post (that's less good). So it shattered his leg from top to bottom. A bit discouraging.

Then, dammit, if I didn't meet another guy with a parachute story. A friend. His face was kind of lacerated. What happened? Well, the Safety Instructor had noted that the wind speed was a little too high. It makes the landing difficult. But, what the hell, let's do it. So my friend piled out of the plane. His 'chute opened okay. But when he landed—on one end of a military runway—the wind caught his 'chute and dragged him face-down to the other end of the runway. At about 20 mph. There, the 'chute finally got caught in a fence. Not a pretty story. Not a pretty sight.

Well, the big day came. We rode our motorbikes out to the local airport. Got our gear on and got into the plane. As beginners, we were allowed to have a static line. It's a

wire cable hooked into the belly of the plane. You fall. And when you get to the end of the cable, it snaps open your 'chute. You just have to be facing downwards at the time. Quite simple really.

I was first to jump. I really didn't want to let go. All I can remember is the sound of my terrified breathing (screaming, really) as I waited an eternity for the 'chute to snap open on my back. I've never felt so relieved.

The rest of the ride was blissful. Drifting in & out of cloud. Of course, Morrie shouldn't have let us jump through cloud. Hanging there with a little whistling noise until the ground started to rush upwards. No fence posts, no wind. So a happy landing.

The last thing I remember as I lay on the ground, thanking an unidentified deity for being alive and unscathed, was the sound of one my friends sobbing three thousand feet above me, after her 'chute had (finally) opened. The three of us celebrated that night. And we never did it again.

## “LORD OF THE RINGS”

I had just finished reading the Lord of the Rings trilogy. My subconscious was overloaded with mythical creatures, magic mountains, tree-beards, you name it.

We decided to go sailing for a long weekend. Three of us. Experienced sailors. Remote area, but the weather forecast looked okay. By nightfall the wind was starting to howl. Had to make a run for it against a head-wind down a long narrow harbor leading to a sheltered anchorage. A couple of navigation lights coming into the harbor, then nothing.

Everything, water & sky, slowly turned pitch-black. The waves started to froth at the mouth. We could hear them, but we couldn't see them. Every few minutes, the crashing of the waves would get much louder, breaking on the nearby rocky shore. Time to go about and zig-zag out of harm's way. Very strange to be surviving by hearing alone. Exhilarating but exhausting.

After an eternity, a tiny red navigation light started flickering at us from afar. The anchorage at last. We limped blindly into the sheltered part of the bay.

Then the Lord of the Rings joined us. Poured a magic potion into the waters. And suddenly all the waves were outlined in brilliant hues of green. Phosphorescence. Our eyesight was restored. It lasted for an hour so. We sat in the cockpit gratefully admiring the supernatural show. Then crawled into our bunks to sleep deeply until late morning.

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## THE STARLIT SAUNA

At one point in his twenties, my youngest brother decided to make a living from market gardening. Growing and selling vegetables and fruits. He rented some land just outside a small town. And got down to work. It was a stunningly beautiful area. Great climate. A ski field nearby for the winter and a lake nearby for the summer. Nonetheless, it was back-breaking work. Not an easy way to make a living.

We lived on different continents, my brother & I, so I didn't get to see him very often. As usual, we were late for the rendez-vous. We were a little bit lost, wandering around small rural roads, trying to follow our directions. It was already twilight, with the promise of a brilliant starry night to follow. Finally, in the headlights, we saw the sign on the gate. Under the starlight, we could vaguely see an unlit cottage a few hundred meters down the track.

We abandoned the rental car and walked down the track. Off to the right, we could see some embers glowing in a field. And a faint halo of steam rising above. We turned on the flashlight and headed towards the embers. I heard the familiar tones of my brother's voice. It had been a hard day "at the office". He was relaxing.

He had set up an old-fashioned cast-iron bath on concrete blocks. He had lit a log fire underneath it. And there he was, happily steaming away in his home-made sauna. The smoke from his roll-your-own cigarette gave off a distinctive aroma. Looking at my brother in his happy purple haze, it occurred to me to wonder whether joining the rat-race had really been the best way to go.

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## FEARS AND PHOBIAS

Apparently it's fashionable to write about our fears and phobias. Shrinkers encourage it. It's difficult to explain why we are afraid of some things but not of others. I am terribly afraid of heights, for example. No amount of rock-climbing would conquer this fear. So I gave up rock-climbing. But I did enjoy parachuting (admittedly only once) and I do enjoy flying. Why is the brain partitioned in this way?

I find it helpful to put my faith in statistics. We're much more likely to get hurt on the roads than in a plane, for example. Or very unlikely to be eaten by a shark. Actually, I do find meeting sharks truly terrifying. Deep down, I know that they almost never attack sports divers. Yes, sharks will attack someone who has speared a fish and tied it (still bleeding) to their belt. But, even if I don't go spear-fishing, when that evil shark snout appears out of the depths, my faith in statistics is sorely tested. I expect that I'm in good company on this one.

How about claustrophobia? That's seven on the Richter scale for me. Truly debilitating. Can't go down inside the pyramids. Might freak out. Can't pull the tie cord around the opening of the sleeping bag. I once destroyed a sleeping bag trying to fight my way out of it during a nightmare. That's another thing about claustrophobia—it can grab ahold of you even when you're asleep.

How about flying? The greatest part of learning to fly small planes is the learning part. Once they've given you your private pilot's license, it's less fun. Then you fly from A to B. You abide by the rules. And you do what Air Traffic Control tells you to do.

But when you're learning, you're "obliged" to practice doing all sorts of dangerous things, time and again, until you're comfortable with getting out of trouble. You're alone in the plane. Practicing steep turns, spiral dives, recovery from stalls, and other nerve-wracking things.

You're allowed to fly the plane solo. But you're not yet allowed to take passengers up with you. So this is the time when you can take risks that you'll never be allowed to

take when there are other people in the plane. I truly enjoyed that time. I guess that most aspiring young pilots enjoyed this once-only opportunity to be responsibly reckless.

Of course, sometimes things went wrong. One of the things that you had to do was to practice cross-country flying—from A to B to C to D and back to A. Hopefully the weather would stay good. But if the weather went downhill, it was very easy to get into trouble.

On one of these fly-about, the clouds decided to sink rapidly from the heavens towards the earth. In fifteen minutes, the clouds came down to 500 feet (maybe 150 meters) above the ground. Small planes are not allowed to fly that low. So I set about trying to find the nearest landing strip.

I could see it on the map. But I couldn't see it out of the window of the plane. Meantime the cloud was getting closer and closer to the ground. Panic set in. I swallowed my pride. Took the radio. And called the nearest Air Traffic Control for help.

A very calm gentleman replied. Told me that a Flying Instructor was just a few miles away in another plane. Told me to circle over a well-known bridge until the Flying Instructor caught up with me.

The Flying Instructor found me five minutes later. It was a very long five minutes. We got onto the same radio frequency. He told me to fly alongside him down the river towards our home base. By this time, the cloud was almost on the ground, but with a small tunnel of clear air over the rocky river bed. We flew back towards home base, skimming just a few meters above the river.

We landed safely, shut down, shook hands and walked back to the clubhouse together. I didn't have much to say. It had been painful and very, very scary. I resolved to be a lot more prudent in future. My instructor friend just smiled. I guess he knew exactly how I felt.

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## NIXON IN CHINA

Nixon's visit to China (in 1973, I believe) was widely touted as China's opening up to the rest of the world. It's true that, before then, tourists could only go to China on tours organized by the China-Country "XX" Friendship Society. Fortunately, in my country, our national university students' association at the time considered itself Maoist, based on the guiding principles of Mao's "Little Red Book". In return, the students' association had the right, every second year, to send a delegation of 25 students to China for three weeks.

The only glitch in this scheme was finding 25 bona fide Maoist university students willing to skip three weeks of classes not long before final exams—and who also had a spare \$900 to pay for the air travel. Needless to say, in order to fill the quota, the student association bosses sometimes had to compromise a little. So, after scoring 3 out of 20 for my knowledge of the Little Red Book, I was nonetheless allowed to join the delegation. In return, I agreed to keep my mouth shut, so as not to humiliate the bona fide members off the Maoist delegation.

It was a mind-blowing trip. There are more books about this period in China than you could hope to read in a lifetime, so I'll skip the details. I befriended the two native Chinese speakers on the delegation. Both Chinese Malaysian students studying engineering in my home country. We three escaped from our minders and took buses into the 'burbs of Beijing & Shanghai. We were greeted like Martians. The conversations were surreal.

Unfortunately it ended on a slightly unhappy note. As we were leaving China, my two buddies found copies of Malaysian newspapers with "REDS GET OUR BOYS" in banner headlines. Malaysia had had a communist insurgency in the 1950s, led by Chinese Malaysians. So when the delegation got back home to our friendly Maoist university, they were both given political asylum. Later, I believe, they got citizenship.

CHAPTER 2

ESCAPE TO EUROPE &  
BEYOND



SECTION 1

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## MORAL FLEXIBILITY

Different cultures deal with things in different ways. A banal statement of the obvious. Where it gets exciting is when you have to learn to play by someone else's rules.

I was brought up in a puritanical culture. The truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. All that prim & proper stuff. No little white lies to help everybody feel okay. The whole story—not allowed to leave out the inconvenient bits.

I was a student in my home country. I desperately wanted to go to France. My girlfriend introduced me to a Frenchman who was teaching at our local university. He said quite openly that he had “connections” with the people who awarded scholarships to go study in France. And then he started negotiating.

Can't get you into Paris, so where else would you like to go? Grenoble. Can't get you into an arts program, so what would you like to do? Economics. Do you speak French? No. Let me try that again—do you speak French? Ummm, I guess the correct answer is Yes? Yes is correct!

So here's the deal. I'm going to sign this piece of paper saying that you speak French. People back home in France will take my word for it. I know that you don't speak French. But we have four months before you take the plane to Grenoble. I want to see you with headphones on in my language lab, five times a week until you leave. And if you make a fool of me when you get there, I will hear about it. And then you will hear about it from me. Deal? Deal! No-one in my puritan home country had ever spoken to me like that. It changed my life.

## SECTION 2

# OLD EUROPE

We landed at dawn in Zurich. A beautiful sunny, crisp morning in September. Our first time ever on the Old Continent. Cradle of western civilization from our high school textbooks. We basked in the symphony of unknown languages as we looked around for our connecting flight to Geneva. Found it and stood in line. Our backpacks and Birkenstocks stood out from the line of neat gray suits. We soon realized that that this was a Gnomes' flight—an early morning flight taking Zurich bankers to Geneva for a day's work. A short flight with a glorious sunrise out the porthole over Lac Léman.

We must have looked lost. At the airport, a young Indian guy invited us to spend the evening at his friend's chalet in the mountains near Geneva. With his charming international jet-set of polyglot friends. They were very surprised that we had never seen an artichoke, nor knew how to prepare one for eating. They very elegantly invited us to set the table instead of helping in the kitchen. A truly hospitable evening of excellent food & wine. And a magical first night in Old Europe. The next day, our newfound friend dropped us off at the Geneva train station. The innocents abroad continued on their magical mystery tour.

What is it about Old Europe that grips us, those of us who didn't grow up there? Northern Europe is often barely visible under low cloud and endless drizzle. The sky is gray. The houses are in gray stone. All is in tones of gray on gray, like old photos. But when it clears up, it's magic. Lives up to every cliché that we've taken in from European movies. A take-your-time foodie culture of slow-food & fine wines. Street markets that assault all of the senses. Church bells chiming charmingly on the hour. Simple village pleasures in live-able cities. Unspoiled alpine scenery a few hours away from the world's greatest inland sea, the Mediterranean. Diversity, diversity, diversity. And a genuine respect for the natural environment.

Is Europe in decline? Commercially, yes, of course, world leadership long ago passed on to New York and now on to Shanghai. And if population growth or population size is the barometer, then Europe is rapidly heading towards the bottom of the continental rankings.

As we speak, in late 2015, there are worrying signs that the European Union and the Euro might both fall apart. The influx of refugees is also driving politics in an unpleasant direction. But look around our beleaguered planet—where else can we find roughly thirty countries, of very diverse cultures, living in relative harmony, with each other and with nature. I give Old Europe top marks for this happy contribution to the fifty years since World War II. And I pray that it will keep going for the next fifty.

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## CONDOMS IN MY BUTTER

I'm not a talented linguist. I had trouble getting my brain and my tongue around the French language. I made some terrible faux pas along the way. The French were very tolerant about it. Especially since it was often quite entertaining—for them.

One of the girls in my class took pity on me and invited me out for a date. Well, a sort of a date. Let's have a quick lunch at my place after class and then go up skiing in the afternoon. Bring something for lunch.

I went to the supermarket. Checked out various cheeses, lunch meats, pâtés, etc., and decided to go with pâté. Not the small cans on the left. But the big cans on the right. Much better value for money.

My hostess-date glanced at my contribution to the shared lunch and disappeared into the kitchen doubled-up laughing. It seems that there's a difference between small cans of pâté (with one "e") and big cans of pâtée (with two "e"s). The latter is dog food. Needless to say, although the skiing was good, the dating didn't really go any further.

The next day I saw a guy from our class walking a huge dog in my neighborhood. I popped up to my apartment, brought down the cans of dog food and gave them to him. I also explained why I just happened to have some spare dog food. The next day in class, I was greeted with big, friendly smiles from my classmates. Clearly the dog food story had done the rounds. It was a great icebreaker. The rest of the class went just fine.

That week was a bad week for spelling issues. A few days later, I had a small misunderstanding with the little old lady behind the counter at the corner dairy. At that time, I was going through a brief health food phase. No coloring agents in the food. No preservatives in the food. Just plain, natural ingredients. France was pretty good about these things. You could usually find natural foods if you asked for them.

So I asked for butter without preservative. There was a flicker of a smile on the lady's face. With great restraint, she said, I think you mean "without conservatif". I said yes, paid for the butter, and returned home to my apartment. It occurred to me to ask a friend about this minor nuance in the French language. Like my lunch-&-ski date, he too nearly choked on his baguette. When he recovered, he patiently explained that I had asked for "butter without condoms in it".

SECTION 4

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## CULTURAL COUSINS

Is the UK part of Europe? Who knows. But when in Europe, one usually visits the UK. I was taking a ferry across the so-called English Channel from France to the UK. As usual, it was rough. I was fighting sea-sickness. So far, so good.

I ordered a cup of tea in the cafeteria and sat down at a table with a bunch of Aussies. From Adelaide in South Australia. Maybe they too were fighting sea-sickness. By exchanging stories of derring-do in their homeland. Quite an insight into the cultural life of our cousins, the Australians.

A sample. You can add the accent. So one Friday night, we drove out of Adelaide, heading north. For the first few hundred kilometers, there's a road. After that, you follow the telephone poles. In your headlights, you can sort-of see car-tracks in the sand.

By midnight, we had reached the end of the road. Parked the Utes (pick-up trucks) in a wadi. Unloaded the beer. Twenty crates. Knocked off the twenty crates. Pissed as newts. Fell asleep in the wadi at two in the morning.

At three, it started to rain—somewhere. Out of nowhere, a tidal wave came down the wadi. Just had time to crawl out of our sleeping bags and drive the Utes out of the wadi. The next morning we drove back to Adelaide. Horribly hung over. What a great weekend...!! I smiled as best I could and sipped my tea thoughtfully.

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## BATTLESHIPS & CRUISERS

There was a sort of pecking order among global backpackers. Who had been to the most exotic places? Who had had the most hair-raising adventures? They would swap stories around the campfire or in the Youth Hostel.

The all-time champion in my books was a guy called Julian. A compatriot of mine whom I'd met in France. He had done all the must-do's, Machu Picchu in Peru, Afghanistan (in the days when it was more or less safe), an ashram in India, Mandalay in Burma, you know the list. But more than that, he could beat everyone hands down on Africa, especially southern & central.

On one of his more epic trips, Julian worked his way north from South Africa through several countries, ending up in Tanzania. Of course, Julian crossed borders in the middle of the bush. So he had very few visa stamps in his passport.

At that time, the Chinese were building the Tanzam railway from Tanzania to Zambia. For some reason—I can't remember why—it was top secret. So it really wasn't a very good idea for Julian to sneak into the port of Dar es-Salaam to admire the unloading. They picked him up within minutes, took his backpack off him, and locked him up in a very spartan prison cell. They let him rot there for a few days while they checked out the contents of his backpack.

They came into his cell for a wee chat. How come there was an entry stamp for South Africa, but no entry stamps between there and Tanzania? Was he a South African spy? It was a fair question. After all he was blond with blue eyes and could easily have been an Afrikaner.

Then the interrogators pulled out their trump card. Notebooks full of encoded information. Found in Julian's backpack. Each page had a grid, labeled from 1-10 on one axis and A-J on the other axis. Lines of crosses in straight lines or diagonals. You guessed it. Julian and his fellow backpackers had been whiling away the campfire hours playing Battleships & Cruisers (or Bataille Navale, as the French call it).

Clearly the Tanzanian interrogators did not play Battleships & Cruisers in their spare time. And they were not at all convinced by such a far-fetched explanation. Julian's home country didn't have a Consul in Tanzania. So he appealed to the British Consul for help.

It took a month to get him out. By then he was a skeleton. They expelled him from Tanzania, Zambia & Uganda, since these three countries were in a Customs Union at the time. They wrote in his passport that he was not to set foot in any of these three countries for the next ten years. He complied. And in year eleven, he went back. On principle, I guess.

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## HOW TO GET A GOOD EXCHANGE RATE

After just one academic year at university in France, we crumbled. We had to go to Africa. Julian had done it, so we could do it. We were surrounded by fascinatingly diverse African students from every francophone corner of the continent. And we had two good student friends, André and Ségolène, who planned to go visit their brother-in-law in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, for the summer break. Fast-forward through Abidjan to Ouagadougou to Bobo-Dioulasso in southern Burkina Faso.

We paid the bill for our night's lodgings and walked out into the dusty square. We were looking for a ride down through southern Burkina Faso and across into Ghana. Half a dozen bush-taxis were there, waiting for customers. Every one of the drivers said he would take us to the Ghanaian border. By now we knew that this was a phishing tactic to get us to pay up front. Most of them were going someplace else. Okay, no hard feelings, business is business.

Eventually, we figured out that driver #5 really was going to cross into Ghana. We climbed onto the tray of his beaten-up Peugeot 404 "bachel" and settled in for a long & hellishly bumpy ride. Legs crossed, packs behind our backs to protect our vertebrae. Ten other local folks crammed in, together with very cute infants on their knees, plus a large number of chickens, gourds & baskets of produce.

We reached the Ghanaian border as the sun was setting. Passed through Burkinabè border control into no-man's-land. Inexplicably, the driver stopped. Within seconds, the 404 was surrounded by a dozen money-changers. We knew that Ghana had a thriving black market in foreign exchange under the military regime. But we were too

scared to change our valuable hard currency (West African francs) illegally. So we didn't.

The 404 moved off towards the Ghanaian border post. Then stopped again—one last chance to change from West African francs into Ghanaian cedis. Reluctantly, we caved-in and changed our francs. Our fellow travelers congratulated us. Apparently our “sang froid” (read: cowardice) had given us by far the best exchange rate of anyone on the 404.

We approached the Ghanaian border post. By now twilight was upon us. Suddenly, a violent altercation broke out in front of us among the Ghanaian soldiers on the border. It was about us. We had arrived after sunset. The border should be closed. And so it was. We pitched our little tent in no-man's land. The inner tent was sealed with mosquito netting. It was also sealed against passing snakes. We slept fitfully until dawn and then continued on our merry way. Ghana, here we come.

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## THE BRITISH EMPIRE HAS A LOT TO ANSWER FOR

Most reasonable historians of the imperial period in Africa—we're mainly talking about the British, French & Portuguese (let's set aside the Germans, Belgians, Spanish, Italians & anyone else that I may have overlooked)—will agree on the following.

The Brits did not integrate at all. All they did was to whisk a few promising African kids off to boarding schools in the UK. Not enough to create an educated class ready to run the country after independence. The French did integrate—to a much greater extent. Whatever we might think of the relative merits of the Westminster system versus the Napoleonic code, the end result is clear. Governance in Anglophone Nigeria & Ghana was catastrophic for many decades after independence. And some of the worst cultural values of the UK were directly transmitted to their empire—let me come back to that below. Meantime, governance and culture in the former French colonies were noticeably better.

The Portuguese are an interesting case. They did integrate—and they even created a mixed-race ruling caste of descendants. However, they ran some of the most brutal colonies in Africa. Of course, the Portuguese had their own dictatorship versus democracy issues back home at that time.

Let me come back to our travels. We woke up to a brilliantly sunny morning; packed up our tent; and crawled back onto the 404. Passed through Ghanaian immigration & customs with no hassles. And drove on south towards the Akosombo dam on Lake Volta. Once again, we arrived at twilight.

By the time we had checked into our digs, night had fallen, and we were famished. There was only one place in town that had food for sale. We entered, peering into the candle-lit shadows. And there, true to British tradition, we saw: men (no women); drinking (not eating); drinking Beefeater's gin or Guinness stout (no other options); in total silence (no local music). Like their colonial role models, they would go home at midnight, hungry, drunk & broke. We asked what food was available. Eggs.

Okay, so we ordered fried eggs. What could be safer? It took a while. Finally, they arrived. As far as we could tell, they had taken boiled eggs and then fried them until they had a black, fried exterior. Clearly we needed to improve our communication skills. We ate what we could and crawled off to bed. Several decades later, our friends told us that Ghana had thrown off its British imperial cultural heritage to become a thriving center of West African culture & cuisine. Happy ending.

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## SLAVERY AND PRICE CONTROLS

The journey of the young-&-innocent in Ghana continues. We arrive at the Ghanaian coast, turn right, and head towards the border with Côte d'Ivoire. We consult our "Guide des Routards" (backpackers' guide). The best & most affordable accommodation is in former Portuguese slavery forts that have been renovated into bed & breakfasts. Okay, let's give it a shot. Absolutely fabulous & very affordable. My guess is that these forts are now (40 years later, in 2015) 5-star resorts.

After a couple of days we arrive at the border with Côte d'Ivoire. Looking forward to crossing into francophone territory. Good food, wine, women & song. But first we have to cross the river on the border between Ghana & Côte d'Ivoire. It's on a small boat that takes about 20 people, plus their animals and their baskets of vegetables & fruits. Thank god for Ghana's price controls. We go first onto the boat. The boatman takes our money for the price-controlled crossing. Very reasonable.

He then demands ten times that amount for our backpacks. I lost it, called him all sorts of names (racist, etc.). Of course, I should have known better. The boatman smiled, gently squeezed my arm, and asked me to wait & watch. He then proceeded to extort vast amounts of money from each & every one of the Ghanaian/Ivoirian traders boarding the boat. I understood; gave him his money; and apologized for my insults. Yet another lesson learned.

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## THE ORIENT EXPRESS

She ran away with a drummer. A cliché from an airport potboiler. It shouldn't have hurt so much. It needn't have. We had been together for only three years. In two continents. We were young. Puppy love. No children. No money. No jobs. Who cares? Plenty more where that came from.

But being “left” is hard on the self-esteem. It's much better to be the one who leaves. I discovered that much later. Losing self-esteem makes it harder to find new friends. Let alone new lovers. One accepts mediocre company just to fight off loneliness. It's a kind of vicious downward spiral.

For a while I chose loneliness as the better option. It lasted quite a while. Much longer than I expected. Like most things it had a happy ending. I'll save that for later. Meantime, she married the drummer, had three children, and they all lived more or less happily ever after. A funny thing was that my mother continued to visit her. I never really understood why. But that's water under the bridge now.

No good sitting around moping. I picked up my rucksack & bought a 3rd class ticket on the Orient Express. Of course, it was neither oriental nor an express. But we eventually made it to Istanbul. Checked into a youth hostel and made friends with a couple of other backpackers.

Istanbul was—and still is—a wonderful vibrant city. Delights for all the senses. The souk, the mosques, the food, the music. My first-time there, so doubly exotic. I went looking for other first-time things to do. Went with my two newfound lifelong friends to a nearby Hammam. An enormous Yeti-like man soaped us; poured oceans of hot

water over us; massaged us vigorously (but expertly); and then...walked along my spine. For a few seconds I thought I was going to die in Istanbul. Of punctured lungs. But, no, he knew exactly how far to go. I survived. A nice thing to add to my first-time checklist. I was feeling better already.

Shortly afterwards, another first-time event took shape. Slowly but surely, it dawned on us that the three handsome young men in the next steamy booth were very interested in making friends with us—and they were surprisingly insistent. We three extricated ourselves and beat a hasty retreat. A little confused. Quite honestly, at that time, in my mid-20s, I wasn't quite sure what it meant to be gay. Unbelievable, in retrospect.

## CHAPTER 3

# SWEATING IN THE TROPICS



*On a whim, I went to visit another one of my intrepid brothers. Yet another who did not wear a blue pin-stripe suit. What was he doing? He was setting up enormous mainframe computers in the copper and gold mines on Bougainville Island, in the eastern part of Papua New Guinea. A more remote location would be hard to find. I was on vacation. But while I was there, I saw an advertisement for a job. A job that suited me well. I applied and was accepted.*

SECTION 1

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## FIRST CONTACT

Sometimes the first contact between two wildly different cultures can lead to surprising results. Not necessarily good or bad. Just unexpected.

In the 1930s, Australian gold miners made their way into the remotest corners of the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG). They arrived on foot from the coast. And they decided that they needed to bring in heavy mining equipment—by plane. So they needed to build runways.

Somehow they managed to convince the local tribes to build runways for them. These Australians were not social anthropologists. They were rough & ready adventurers. Yet, for some reason, they had brought movie cameras with them. And filmed everything they did. Yes, in the 1930s.

They shot many hours of footage of hundreds of tribesmen, in full traditional regalia, stomping & chanting as they built runways. And that's just the beginning. Our gold miners explained that a large bird would come out of the sky, land on this runway, and disgorge lots of "cargo".

Sure enough, the large bird did exactly that. A Junckers it was. Out stepped impeccably dressed white men in white uniforms with pith helmets. And the cargo was unloaded.

The biggest hit among the local tribesmen was the gramophone. His Master's Voice coming magically out of the speaker like a snake charmer.

Some people say that these events were the beginning of the Cargo Cult. People would build runways and wait for the cargo to come out of the sky.

The most amazing thing is that all this footage survived intact and was edited into a video called "First Contact". It's a priceless gem. Google it and buy it.

## SECTION 2

# TOWER OF BABEL

Popular wisdom has it that Papua New Guinea has over 700 separate languages. Not dialects. Languages. Linguistic anthropologists can argue about the exact number. In a population of about five million. Imagine if we had the same ratio of languages to population in Europe or the US.

It seems that it has something to do with war and trade. Okay that's a bit geeky. The folks who live around the coast trade with each other and don't fight very much. They speak a common lingua franca all around the coast. A language called Motu.

The folks who live in the mountainous PNG highlands didn't trade with each other. And they used to fight each other a lot. So each village lived in autarky within its limits—let's say 30 km max—and their only contact with the next village was war.

Apparently one doesn't chat much during a war. The main goal was to capture women and to take them back home to the village. To keep the gene pool moving along. To avoid inbreeding, with all the problems so well-known to European aristocratic blue-bloods. Needless to say, the victims of this wife-snatching had to learn the language of their raptors. So, again, no coming together of neighboring languages.

Starting in the 1950s, the PNG highlands began to open up. Wars calmed down, became more symbolic, just to keep up the warrior traditions. Villages started trading with each other—and with the colonists. They needed to talk to each other in a common tongue.

And so was born Melanesian Pidgin. A fascinating language. The grammar is Melanesian. The words come mainly from English. But also from German. Why? Because Germany was the colonial power in the northern part of PNG until the end of the First World War. The spelling is phonetic. Looks easy, but it takes a while to get on top of it. So that's the story (street version) of the 700 languages plus the lingua franca—or two, if you count Motu around the coast. Language academics have been busy on this for quite a while now.

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## BRAIN-FILE MANAGEMENT

Learning other languages can lead to unexpected pleasures. Over & above just being able to talk to other people about their culture or whatever. Which is pretty nice already. The English tongue is great, but it's very basic. Not too many words. And most people find English grammar easy. Mainly need to learn those pesky little exceptions.

Russian, on the other hand, has an enormously rich vocabulary (ie, lots of words). Plus a very rich grammar (ie, difficult)—maybe a third more complex than German. Lots of “richness” about time & motion built into each word. That probably explains why Russians enjoy their own literature so much. Endless scope to fool around with words to give them delicate or clever nuances.

Most times we can find a way to express the same nuances in English. But sometimes we can't. So you stare at your Russian dictionary & grammar books. They're trying to explain to you a concept that simply doesn't exist in your mother tongue. Sooner or later, with a bit of practice, the concept dawns on you. And, hey presto, your brain takes on board a totally new concept. Outside the strait-jacket of one's mother tongue. A magic mind-expanding experience.

The scary part is that so-called “acquired” tongues are less robust than one's mother tongue. They can fritter away with age or be totally deleted by a stroke. Brainologists believe that acquired tongues are stored in a different part of the brain from the mother tongue. A part of the brain that is more liable to “retrieval failure” (something I learned from Wikipedia, as one does).

Not only that, but all acquired tongues appear to be stored in the very same part of the brain. Suppose you have acquired two new languages and you're working on your third. You open your mouth to say something in acquired language #3 and out pops something in acquired language #2. In my case, Melanesian pidgin popped out while trying to buy fruit & vegetables in a Moscow street market. Kind of embarrassing.

Some learned folks draw parallels between the brain and managing their hard disk drives. I like the analogy. I'm hoping to translate that idea into better ways of managing brain-files. It might take a while.

SECTION 4

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## DAWN CHORUS

Continuing on the theme of brain-file management. Every now & then one has a mind-changing experience. Doesn't need to be a big deal. Just needs to change one's perceptions in a permanent way.

These obsessive folks who bird-watch (the Brits call them "twitchers") also LISTEN to birds. A friend taught me to do this. No big deal. Just the basics—20 songs or calls of common birds around the neighborhood, in the park, along the banks of the local river.

It was a revelation. These twitcher folks wander around with eyes half-closed, happily noting that there's a woodpecker nearby. Can't see it. Too many leaves at this time of the year. Not only is it a woodpecker, but it's a certain kind of woodpecker. Then a certain kind of warbler. And so it goes on. The forest is a veritable symphony of little avian jazz musicians.

Lots of brilliant solos. A few choruses. And then a fading away as the sun goes down. Leaving only a few owls and others to take the stage until sunrise. Walking through a forest will never be the same again.

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## FLYING IN THE MISTY MOUNTAINS

Papua New Guinea is a wild and mountainous country. The Polynesian part of the population, the Motu peoples, live around the coastline. They speak their own Polynesian language. And they live in huts near beaches, with coconut palms, fishing on nearby reefs. Like anywhere in the Polynesian parts of the Pacific.

The majority Melanesian part of the population lives in the Highlands. Mighty peaks rise to 16,000 feet. What's that in meters? Must be nearly 5,000m. And in between these peaks lies one long valley, stretching from the northern coast up into the highlands. Hot and humid in summer. After all, we're within six degrees of the Equator. But distinctly cool, even chilly, in the other three seasons. Perfect for cultivating coffee and similar cash crops.

Roads were a luxury in Papua New Guinea. Some coastal locations were connected by short 4-wheel-drive roads. More importantly, the Highlands Highway ran from the town of Lae on the northern coast up into the coffee lands of Goroka and Mount Hagen and then on into the wild Southern Highlands.

Foreigners first made it into the Southern Highlands in the 1960s. There they found tribes that were wracked by an earlier version of Mad Cow disease. Caused by the practice of eating the brains of conquered enemies. So, apart from the towns on the Highlands Highway, most places were accessible only by small plane or, in extreme cases, by helicopter.

Let's start with small planes. We took off from the capital, Port Moresby, and climbed for an ear-poppingly long time. Through swirling mists, with practically no visibility. Eventually, we made it over a high-altitude ridge and focused in on a tiny village,

glued precariously onto a steep jungle slope above a cliff. I looked around for the runway. There it was, a small, short dirt strip, starting on the top of the cliff, running up a steep slope, then ending in a rock wall at the far end. Clearly it would be a good idea to land our plane above the cliff face and then bring it to a halt before getting to the rock wall.

The pilot managed to do this. I believe that, secretly, he was sweating just as much as we were. We all got out of the plane, very cool, but we all knew that everyone was very relieved to be alive. We did what we had come to do. Basically maintenance work on solar lighting kits that we had installed around the village. And then headed back home to Port Moresby.

For the take-off, the pilot seemed even more tense than for the landing. He positioned the plane as close as possible to the rock wall at the top of the steep downward-sloping strip. Locked the wheel-brakes and held the plane at full throttle for a couple of minutes before launching us down the strip. Clearly he was very keen that we should be airborne before falling off the end of the cliff. Fortunately, that's what happened.

Let's move on to helicopters. We were doing a survey of potential sites for small-hydro dams. Of course, this means that a good volume of water must be flowing down a steep slope, which could be dammed. And it also means that there should be a village nearby to take advantage of this miraculous thing called electricity.

We walked out onto the tarmac at Port Moresby airport. Climbed into the helicopter. A beautiful new French "Squirrel" helicopter. The pilot had just completed his training on this wonderful hi-tech machine. We were a little unnerved to see that he had to radio-in to his boss to ask him how to release the throttle control. But, after that, it all seemed to go according to plan.

We took off effortlessly and headed off into the misty mountains. First stop, the potential dam site. The pilot put us down into a tiny clearing on a river bank. We measured stream flows, did some surveying, took photos and fought our way back through the luxuriant vegetation to the helicopter.

The pilot was anxious. He was worried that the blades might clip the trees on the edge of the clearing. We hacked around with machetes. But still there was one tree that seemed particularly menacing. In the end we agreed that one of us would climb into the tree, and hold the offending branch down to the ground until the helicopter had taken off. This person would then climb up a rope ladder into the hovering helicopter. It worked.

We moved onto the next task—visiting the nearby village that would use the electricity. As we approached the village, dozens of small, naked children appeared out of nowhere, dancing and waving ecstatically to welcome the big bird from the sky.

The big bird was one thing. But what they really couldn't believe was that the pilot of the big bird was one of them. A Papua New Guinean. Every one of those kids went to bed that night dreaming of becoming a helicopter pilot. The pilot smiled. And happily flew us back to Port Moresby. It had been a good day.

## TARANTULAS ON THE REGULATORS

Well maybe they weren't tarantulas. Just humongously large, hairy spiders. The size of your fist. They would climb on top of the voltage regulator. And pouf...!! One dead mega-spider, lightly fried. One dead voltage regulator, shorted out. And, a few hours later, one dead car battery. All in all, one dead solar lighting kit just a few days after it had been installed.

Okay, the photovoltaic panels on the hut roof were still usable. And the fluorescent lighting tube inside the hut was technically okay. Except that the family had also abandoned the newfangled efficient, smokeless wood stove. Not quite sure why. But, in any event, the family had gone back to cooking over an open wood fire in the middle of their hut. And, within a couple of days, the smoke had completely blackened out the fluorescent tube.

To be fair, some social-anthropologist fellow had expressed doubts about whether this brilliant renewable energy project would really deliver the goods. Primary school children happily doing their homework under the fluorescent light. While their mother cooked yams outside on the newfangled stove. And sure enough, it didn't work out that way. Quite a lot of scarce aid money down the drain. And quite a few red faces. Development projects are not an easy business.

## BIOLOGICAL WARFARE IN THE SEPIK RIVER

The Sepik River is to Papua New Guinea what the Amazon River is to Brazil. An immense river meandering from the mountains to the sea. Slow-moving, through hundreds of ox-bow lakes, flooding thousands of square miles of swampland. A vast ecosystem of plant life, fish, birds. And humans, with a rich culture, mainly known to the outside world for their fantastic wooden masks.

Dugout canoes were the main form of transport. Slowly paddles were giving way to small outboard motors. Nonetheless, long after its discovery by foreign explorers, this precious ecosystem remained largely intact & unspoiled. Until the dreaded *Salvinia Molesta* arrived.

Ironically, the enemy arrived from the Sepik's sister river, the Amazon. No doubt it sneaked in undetected as a stowaway on the hulls of visiting boats. *Salvinia Molesta* (let's call it SM) is a very robust & prolific floating weed that can very quickly choke a major waterway.

By the 1970s, SM was threatening to kill the Sepik, along with its inhabitants, both animals and humans. War was declared against SM. Weed-eating barges, nasty chemicals, you-name-it, all is fair in love & war. Nothing worked.

Until some genius scientist in Australia found the perfect biological enemy. A modest little weevil that loved dining out on SM roots. 10-15 years later, problem solved. Weevils defeated SM, one to zero, in the Sepik stadium.

But that's not the game that I wanted to tell you about. These isolated regions were full of fascinating little technological quirks. Often they leap-frogged from basic subsistence into the modern age in one move.

In 1982, the World Cup final was being held in Madrid. That night, I was in a village in the Middle Sepik. What was the village doing? They were all sitting cross-legged around one small television set perched outside on top of a chair. Of course, it didn't matter that the commentary was totally drowned out by the noise of the nearby generator. We all watched Italy defeat "West" Germany, 3 to 1. In Madrid. By satellite link. I was amazed then. I'm still amazed now.

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## NIGHT DIVING ON A SUNKEN COLLIER

Near the end of the Second World War, it was very intense in the Pacific. Papua New Guinea (PNG) was the epicenter for a while. The Japanese fought their way across PNG from north to south on the Kokoda Trail. They wanted to set up a beach-head in Port Moresby to attack Australia.

The allies pushed them back, but with terrible losses. Meantime the Japanese were already bombing Darwin in the Northern Territories of Australia. Lots of ships were sunk around the shores of PNG at the end of WW2. Including a coal transport ship (a collier) in shallow waters on the southern coast of PNG near Milne Bay.

We had anchored not far away. A dozen of us, divers & snorkelers, wandering along the southern coast of PNG in a comfortable dive-boat. The sun went down early, as always in the tropics. At 7pm it was already pitch black. We decided to do a night dive on the collier.

It's a bit freaky at night. The only light is from the diver's lamp on your forehead. So if you want to see what's happening behind you, you have to stop, turn around and refocus your lamp. I'm claustrophobic, maybe I've mentioned it already.

So if one fin (flipper) brushes against my other leg, I need to see whether it's a great white shark or whatever. Ditto if some friendly floating kelp brushes against my leg. So the snorkeling from the beach to the collier was very stressful. In the absence of bright sunshine, my imagination pulled up a dozen evil creatures from the deep. Every one of them capable of swallowing me whole, like Pinocchio.

It was a great relief to arrive at the collier. It started at sea-level, run aground on the beach, and went down to thirty meters. The whole ship had turned into a swim-thru aquarium. Brilliant corals of all possible hues and tones had grown on all the metal surfaces. Tropical fish of all sizes & colors had made it their home. Unperturbed by passing divers with their noisy bubbles and headlamps. A submarine rainbow paradise of nature's most fantastic creations. And well worth the hellish, paranoid trip from the beach out to the "aquarium".

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## “HOLIDAYS IN HELL”

If you haven't read “Holidays in Hell” by P.J. O'Rourke, you might want to add it to your summer reading list. It's a bit out-of-date. But it's still an excellent introduction to the joys of working in hellish places.

If ever Mr O'Rourke puts out a revised edition, I think he should include a chapter on Port Moresby, capital of Papua New Guinea. A charming place in many respects. But with a few major drawbacks. Like violent crime that would make Rio's favelas look like a children's playground.

The rainy season was particularly bad. A tropical downpour on a corrugated iron roof makes a deafening noise. So loud that you can't hear them beheading your faithful guard dog on the way in. Nor do you hear them axeing their way through your front door. In fact, you don't hear anything until you see them standing over you with glinting machetes.

At that point, you know the drill. You try to stay calm and passive. You empty your pockets of cash. Maybe you help them to take the TV and the stereo out to the broken-down door. And you find a suitable bag so that they can conveniently remove all the beer cans from the fridge. It's a bit nerve-wracking. But at least you're alive and in one piece.

There were other incidents, less life-threatening, more surreal, and much more humorous—at least in retrospect. One night we woke up in our little bed at 3am. Choking; eyes streaming; worried that we were about to perish. Crawled to the door, staggered outside. It was just as bad. Got in the car, drove away from the house. A block away, we timidly opened the car windows. And breathed normally. One more block away, we saw a police car. “Ah, yes, is that your house over there? Yes, well, we were trying to stop a stolen car. So we laid down quite a bit of tear gas around your house. It's probably safe to go back in about ten minutes.” Ah, okay, thanks...

## CHAPTER 4

# COMMUNISM IMPLODES



*Sometimes you get lucky. I watched the death agonies of communism. First hand, close up, from the front row, and in several countries. I had worked in the communist countries before they fell—or rose, depending on your point of view. So I had some small inkling of how painful it felt to be held hostage for so many years. I feel privileged to have been there when they finally broke loose.*

SECTION 1

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## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

His name was Mihaï Petcu. He was Romanian. But, for the longest time, he was stateless. It was in the bad old days when Ceausescu was the ruthless dictator of Romania. When someone left the country, a member of their family was held in Romania. Just to make sure the other family member would come back home. So, for many years, Mihaï worked on power projects in Algeria and West Africa. Meantime, either his wife or his son would always be held hostage back home in Romania.

One day, the Romania bureaucracy screwed up. Inexplicably. They let all three of them out of Romania at the same time. Needless to say, they jumped ship. And applied for asylum. France kindly gave them travel documents. They could move around. But they were stateless. And many years after that, France agreed to make them full French citizens. Their agony was over. Meantime, Mr Ceausescu and his wife Elena had come to a sticky end. Not that that was any consolation. Since he had well and truly wrecked the country.

The big day came. Mihaï went to the local Préfecture to swear allegiance to the tricolor flag and pick up his new French passport. The Prefêt kindly explained that France liked to give French-sounding names to their newly minted citizens. So the Prefêt had chosen “Michel Patou” as his new name. Patou was the name of a famous French couturier. So it had a very nice ring to it. Mihaï accepted the renaming offer with open arms. A happy ending to a long and unhappy story.

PS: while this may or may not be relevant, Petcu, pronounced in French, comes across as fart-butt.

SECTION 2

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## DOWN AT THE COAL-FACE

Coal mining was part of the backbone of Poland during the communist period. They tried to reform the mining industry while it was still communist. And we tried to help.

We put on our miners' kit. Walked timidly into The Cage. And went down. And down. I don't recall how far. Let's say 800 meters. Seemed to take an awfully long time.

Got out in a floodlit cavern. Met some more miners. And got in The Train. Two abreast in a tiny fairground train. The train then took us another kilometer horizontally to God-knows where. By now the only light we had was from the lamps on our helmets. So far I had managed not to think about my lifelong claustrophobia.

We emerged in a much smaller cavern, with bare bones lighting. Our interpreter (Polish to English) knew what was coming. He read us a list of safety rules. Rule #1 was no turning back. It's a one-way street. And it's 250 meters long. On your hands & knees. With no chance to stand up before you get to the end.

One after another we squeezed through a hole the width of our hips. And Hell was revealed—the coal face. Suffocatingly hot and airless. Very little light. And an ear-splitting screeching noise from the coal cutting machines. The shaft was about 1.5 meters high and two meters wide. Sloping steeply downwards. To the right of the milling machine and miniature railway tracks was a tiny space between the roof props. Just enough space to crawl down.

I don't know how any of us made it down to the end of these 250 meters. One of us had a full-on panic attack. Two burly miners grabbed him, trussed him up, and dragged him bodily out to the end. I felt terrible for him. It could so easily have been me.

It took us about an hour to get out of there and back up to ground zero. I've never been so glad to see the sky. It was a gray, leaden sky. A foul soup of coal-dust, smoke and acid-rain. Who cares? It was the sky, the holy grail of all us claustrophobes.

I had often wondered how you could get anyone to become a coal miner. Living and working in this hell for six days a week, year in, year out, for a short lifetime. No amount of money would persuade me to do that for a day. The only people willing to do this are the sons of miners. They grow up in isolated tight-knit mining communities. They listen to their dads & uncles telling stories from the mines over the dinner table. And they follow in their footsteps.

SECTION 3

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## BOTTOMS-UP

Miners are warm, hearty folks. They like to eat, drink and be merry. And after a group of visitors has been down the mine, the miners like to put on a very hospitable banquet for them.

There's a fairly standard ritual. After coming back to the surface, everyone goes & scrubs up in the communal showers. Rivers of black coal dust pour off large, heaving sweaty bodies and down into the open drains. Put on a towel and head off to the sauna to steam a bit more sweat & coal dust out of the pores. Back to the cold showers.

Then back into your civvy clothes for the banquet. By then, the more manly miners have already quaffed two or three beers. The banquet tables were groaning with food and drinks. I had two sumo wrestlers sitting, one on each side of me. Given the language barrier, it seemed best to smile a lot and to show maximum enthusiasm for each of the seven courses.

I like hearty Polish cuisine, so this was going to be easy & enjoyable. Slowly it dawned on me that I had perhaps under-estimated the alcohol side of the challenge. Toast #1 to our guests. Bottoms up. Toast #2 to women...apparently a tradition and it certainly caused a lot of untranslatable merriment. Bottoms up a couple of times. Toast #3 to our hosts, the miners, so my turn. I did my best. Only my colleagues could hear that I was already slurring in English. The interpretation seemed to come out a lot shorter in Polish than in English. Bottoms up. The interpreter winked at me and poured himself another vodka. Bottoms up.

The toasts continued in Polish, bottoms up after bottoms up, although no-one was pretending to translate any more. I could see that this was leading slowly but surely to a medical emergency. For me and all my colleagues. I tried the old Stalin trick...filling my vodka glass with water. One of the sumos caught me, threw the water on the floor, and refilled my glass with vodka. I tried faking the bottoms up, so the glass was still

full afterwards. The other sumo laughed from his belly, threw the vodka in my face, and refilled my glass. Seemed like the only option was just to go with the flow.

I do recall getting through the seven courses. I don't know at what point they switched to red wine, then white wine, then beer, then brandy. I do know that they all went down the mine the next day. While we all remained in a coma until late afternoon. In retrospect, going down the mine seemed much less hazardous than the banquet afterwards. I'm sure the miners had a good laugh about it the next day as they toiled over their satanic machines in the bowels of the earth.

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## THE SPOOKS WHO DROPPED BY FOR A CHAT

Some of us were lucky enough to work in Eastern Europe during the bad old days before the Berlin Wall came down. Engineering feasibility studies, financing projects, working with these so-called communist regimes was no big deal. These guys didn't want to be communists. The Big Bear next door left them no choice. They were perfectly candid about it with us. If you wanted to have a decent career or to feed your family, you joined the Party. Had I been in their shoes, I'd have joined the Party. Within each family, they all had the usual old arguments. Fighting communism from outside or trying to change it from inside the Party. But I know for sure that I would have joined the Communist Party.

Then the Wall came down. Eastern Europe broke loose. The international spotlight swiftly shifted to Gorbachev and then to Yeltsin. Instructions came down the line to the Soviet bureaucrats: go find out how the Soviet Union could work with the western market economies. After all, if the western market economies could work with Poland & other countries when they were still communist, they should be able to work with a still-communist Soviet Union.

I was based in Washington. My phone rang. Mr Krivorotov from the Soviet embassy here. Wonder if you would mind if I drop by for a chat about your experiences working in the communist countries of Eastern Europe. Sure, why not? He showed up with a colleague. We had a good chat about doing business in Eastern Europe and they left.

A week later, the phone rang again. This time it was an agent from the uniformed service of the US Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). Could she come by for a chat about my contacts with Mr Krivorotov? Sure, why not? Let's meet over coffee in the office cafeteria. The FBI lady was not friendly. My job is to tail Mr Krivorotov. What did you talk to him about? Doing business in Eastern Europe—why is that a big deal? After all, we've been doing business with most of the other communist countries for

about three decades. And, now, the Soviet Union is about to join the club. My interlocutor lost it: You naïve pinkos, etc. I waited for her to calm down.

Sir, I have one last question for you. Why did Mr Krivorotov leave a copy of Soviet Quarterly magazine in your mailbox at home? I laughed. I had figured out that someone from the Soviet embassy must have followed me home after work one day. Probably in the hopes of recruiting me for their lost Soviet cause. And now I learn from the FBI agent's question that she had tailed the embassy guy to my home address. Must have been a fun little convoy, especially since I usually walked home after work.

I never again received the Soviet Quarterly magazine in my mailbox at home. I never heard from Mr Krivorotov ever again, nor from the FBI agent. Maybe they're still following each other around.

SECTION 5

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## BALTICS IN BLACK & WHITE & GRAY

We went to the Baltics the same way as everyone else did at that time. Took the overnight ferry from Stockholm to Tallinn, capital of Estonia. Taxes on alcohol were high in Sweden. So as soon as the ferry left Swedish territorial waters, the boat turned into a giant, brawling nite club. A lot of sore heads and upset entrails by the time the ferry swayed into Tallinn harbor at 7am.

It was mid-winter. A truly desolate scene. Ice floes grinding angrily against each other; against the jetties; and against the submarines. A dozen soviet submarines, in hues of black and gray, silhouetted against the gray dawn. A black & white photo with sinister sound effects. Alfred Hitchcock couldn't have done it better. Welcome to the former northwest frontier of the soviet empire.

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## IGNALINA...A SMALL STEAM LEAK

Ignalina was a small town in Lithuania. Probably still is. At that time, in the early 1990s, it hosted a very large soviet nuclear power station. Not quite as dangerous as Chernobyl in Ukraine. More like Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. Most of the jobs in Ignalina were at the power plant. So nobody there wanted to shut it down if they could possibly avoid it. The management's views on safety were, shall we say, pragmatic.

Our friendly little delegation was standing in the main hall of the nuclear plant. A vast circular space above the reactor, with thousands of blocks of lead underfoot, protecting us from the intense radiation below. The Chief Engineer was explaining all the fail-safe mechanisms built into the plant. The leader of our group, a nuclear engineer called Achilles Adamantiades, very politely interrupted the Chief Engineer to ask why there was steam coming up through the floor nearby. "Well, that's a small steam leak." "Yes, but it's a small steam leak from the primary (radioactive) side of the reactor." "Yes, that's right."

Achilles escorted us out of the reactor hall at a fast trot. We returned to the hotel in the capital, Vilnius, to cool our heels. The night passed uneventfully. In the morning, over morning coffee, the newspaper headlines blazed "Ignalina reactor number one shut down to repair major steam leak." Perhaps they should have invited us to visit reactor number two.

## TOKYO FISH MARKET

Let's take time out to go to Tokyo. The international community, especially the Europeans, had become super-anxious about Chernobyl. About the possibility that there might be a series of Chernobyl-like explosions all around the western perimeter of the Soviet Union. With strong winds taking the radioactive cloud westwards into Europe. Frankly, it was a very legitimate concern. So all the relevant international organizations agreed to meet in Tokyo to talk about what to do to avoid this disaster scenario.

The hotel in Tokyo gave me a room on the 43rd floor. I unpacked a few things and stood staring out the window. Suddenly a queasy, swaying sensation. The view out the window started to move like a metronome. I lost my balance and sat firmly down on the bed.

A disembodied voice called me from a concealed speaker: "This is just an earthquake. Please stay in your room. Do not go out. Do not take the elevators. Our buildings are safe during earthquakes. Please stay in your room. Thank you." Seemed like a good idea to obey. So I stayed in my room. It felt like a very long time. But it was probably only a couple of minutes. Not my first earthquake. But definitely my first earthquake 43 floors up.

I tried to get some sleep. I had a date at 4.30am the next morning. A date to go see the famous Tokyo fish market. We arrived at the fish market at dawn. An endless hangar-like warehouse with wet concrete floors underfoot. Wooden crates, metal crab pots, glass fish tanks, and huge stainless steel tables for the big creatures.

The market was already a hive of activity. Clearly the Japanese know one hundred times more about edible things from the ocean than we do. I recognized a few fish here & here, plus some shellfish, lobsters, crabs and eels. But the rest of it was a giant Alice in Wonderland of unknown exotic creatures, big & small.

We drifted over towards the Very Big Fish Department to grab a spot where we could watch the tuna auctions. Someone said it would be a Dutch auction. Already the potential buyers were there, checking out the tuna they were going to bid for. The bidders took turns to perform a basic freshness test—they put their finger in the tuna’s most visible orifice, pulled it out, and sniffed it.

They then lined up behind the tuna. Usually five or six bidders. The auctioneer arrived with a small stool, a clipboard and a fat yellow pen. He started chanting numbers the way auctioneers do. We all scrutinized the bidders intensely, looking for a wink, a nod or a twitch. We saw nothing. They stood there poker faced. Every ten seconds or so, the auctioneer would stop chanting; shout “hai” triumphantly; and stab his clipboard dramatically with his yellow pen. Apparently he had seen a bid.

After three minutes, and a final “hai”, the auctioneer and the bidders suddenly all walked away. The auction was over. This giant tuna was on its way out the door to become sushi & sashimi, all within the hour.

## A VERY SPECIAL 40TH BIRTHDAY

I first went to Moscow in 1990. Bought myself a fox fur hat, a down coat & fleece-lined boots and boarded the plane. The Soviet Union was on its last legs. We didn't know it back then. Brave Germans had already destroyed the Wall in Berlin. But we thought that the mother-lode of communism would hang in there—would stay intact. As usual, we were wrong. The Soviet Union was like a laboratory of what goes wrong under totalitarian rule. An inexhaustible source of intriguing anecdotes.

I hired a guy from the Soviet Academy of Sciences to help me open doors. And interpret for me. Among other things, I wanted to visit one of these coal-fired monstrosities that heated all the apartment buildings of Moscow. I wanted to know whether we could help them to be more efficient, less polluting.

My academician friend introduced me to the Chief Engineer. We had a good look around the very dilapidated plant and went back to his office. Just the three of us. The Chief Engineer then explained how the system worked. The Five Year Plan gives us an annual quota of building materials for the maintenance of the heating plant, he explained. What do we do with these building materials? We build dachas. We give most of the dachas as kickbacks to important people in the Moscow city government. And we keep a few for ourselves and our friends.

Now if you would like to join us in this scheme, we could make it very profitable for you personally and perhaps also for your employer. This offer took me by surprise. I took a sip of my sugary tea and explained, very amiably, why this wouldn't be possible. We wrapped up the meeting. The Academician very kindly repeated his invitation to dinner that night. And we went our separate ways.

A few hours later, I found my way to the Academician's apartment building. The elevator didn't work. There were just a few naked bulbs in the stairwell. And there was a strong smell of stale urine. I began to doubt my Boy Scout map reading skills. I

found my way to the apartment on the third floor and knocked, timidly. The door was opened by my gracious host, the Academician.

Once the door was closed, it was a different world. The apartment was spacious and sumptuous. A small detail caught my eye—a large menorah on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. Introductions all round. The Academician & his wife. The Chief Engineer and his wife. The Academician explained that they were all Jewish and since I too was Jewish, they had hoped to celebrate the closure of our business deal over dinner. But now that the business deal was not possible, let's have a nice evening anyway.

I agreed with that. I was sorry to disappoint them about the business deal. I also had to confess that, despite my name, I was not Jewish. But, actually, it was my 40th birthday (sure, you can do the math) and I was delighted to spend it with them. They all looked down at their plates and took a long pull on their vodkas. And then the birthday party began in earnest. The dinner was excellent. The vodka flowed. Everyone vowed lifelong friendship. And then we all went home as if nothing had happened.

## LOCKED-UP IN A BROOM CLOSET

A few months later, an American friend of mine arrived at Moscow's Domodedovo airport. He made the mistake of flying in from Tashkent in Uzbekistan. There was a glitch with his visa. Even with his fluent Russian, he wasn't able to talk his way out of it. They told him they would deport him back to Uzbekistan the next morning. Meantime, it was getting late. So they locked him in a nearby broom closet.

Little by little, the noises of the airport died down. Then silence. The broom closet was pitch dark and very cold. My friend slept fitfully. Suddenly, at around five in the morning, there was a frightful noise. Heavy keys were opening the broom closet. Outside stood a short and very angry babushka. What the hell was my friend doing sleeping in her broom closet? She started crashing around with her metal buckets & mops.

"What is to be done?" (Lenin borrowed this slogan from a 19th century Russian novel). My friend picked up his carry-on bag, walked swiftly through the unmanned immigration lines, out through the silent, empty airport—and caught a cab to his hotel in downtown Moscow. And then—nothing happened. He left Moscow a few weeks later without anybody noticing that he didn't have an entry stamp. How could the world's #1 police state not notice?

This amusing episode taught me one thing. Not to worry too much about the many little things that went wrong in this super-dysfunctional place. Usually, you could count on incompetence to help you out. Not always, just most of the time.

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## CHOOSING BETWEEN MAFIAS

At the beginning, there were three of us working together. A Russian, an Afghan and myself. The job—to persuade the Russians that they would be better off if they privatized their entire coal industry.

All the potential buyers were somewhat mafia-connected. We knew that. Of course, the existing “owners” were just members of a different mafia—the mafia of the Communist Party and its nomenklatura. They sucked two billion dollars a year out of the government budget to subsidize the miners. Did the miners see these two billion dollars? Did these funds go into schools, kindergartens and social services for miners and their families? Only a small part of it. Did the party apparatchiks have a good time on the Black Sea coast every summer? Of course they did.

It was a no-brainer to put an end to this nonsense. The miners’ labor unions didn’t see it that way. Why? Because the union officials were all members of the same mafia that was going to the best beach resorts at the Black Sea or wherever. So someone had to go to Western Siberia, to Eastern Siberia, to the Donbass, to Pechora above the Arctic circle—to explain this to the rank and file of miners. Our Afghan colleague volunteered to do it. He did it. He convinced a lot of miners that they would be better off with private owners. He came back to Moscow alive.

The whole process was eventually successful. Fast forward 3-4 years. No government subsidies. Output up by 30 percent. Employment up by 15 percent. Wages up. Our Afghan colleague can take a good part of the credit for this outcome. He later went on to do much, much greater things in his home country. But that’s his own story to tell.

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## GEORGIA ON MY MIND

Georgia is a very exciting small corner of the Caucasus. Birthplace of Stalin, the well-known seminarian, much to the chagrin of the younger generation of Georgians. Truly distinctive and excellent cuisine—for a long time, the only edible cuisine in Moscow or indeed in the entire Soviet empire. Excellent heavy artillery wines that gave a whole new meaning to the term “full-bodied”. Good skiing, a couple of hours’ away from Tbilisi, the very picturesque capital city.

Unfortunately, as is the case for so many other small countries in the region, Georgia’s main problem is having bad, bullying neighbor(s). Nibbling away at their frontiers—left, right and center. No names, please. Well, maybe the Georgians have had a few purely domestic political problems of their own, from time to time, but then who doesn’t?

My plane landed at Tbilisi airport very early one crisp, clear winter morning. The sun was struggling to rise above the icy horizon as the taxi drove along snow-rutted roads to the hotel. We chatted amiably in broken Russian about the winter weather—always a good conversational ice-breaker.

The taxi dropped me off at the hotel. I took my bags and wandered into the lobby. Soviet modernist architecture. Vast frigid, empty, shadowy spaces of concrete, steel and glass. Oddly, not a single living soul in reception. Well, it was very early. I called my colleagues in their rooms. No replies. It was starting to remind me of my favorite 1970s cult movie, the “Rocky Horror Picture Show”.

I continued wandering around and eventually I found them. The hotel staff and my colleagues were all holed up in the hotel restaurant. Sheltering under the tables. Shattered glass everywhere. A few hours earlier, Eduard Shevardnadze’s car had been hit by a missile as he left the hotel. The last foreign minister of the Soviet Union, the

international mouthpiece of Gorbachev. It was an armored Mercedes, kindly supplied by Germany.

So Shevardnadze survived and died safely in his own bed many years later. However, my colleagues were a bit rattled. I would have been rattled too. Maybe if my command of Russian had been better, the taxi driver might have talked about something other than the weather. But then again, maybe not. Needless to say, the rest of our time in Georgia was just great. Their cuisine, wines and scenery are one thing. But, best of all, the Georgians were hell-bent on getting out of the Soviet empire and into the mainstream western world ASAP. Truly a feisty little country.

## VNUKOVO AIRPORT WAS NEVER SAFE

Fast forward to 2014. The press reported the death of the CEO of the Total oil company. His private jet was taking off or landing (not sure which) at Moscow's Vnukovo airport, when a drunken snow-plough operator drove his machine out into the middle of the runway. The plane hit the snow-plough & exploded. The passengers & crew were killed. The drunken snow-plough operator was injured. Apologies all round. Then life continues as before.

This unhappy incident brought back vivid memories of my own encounters with Vnukovo airport – the departure point for air travel to the oilfields of Western Siberia. In a typical fiasco, the shuttle bus took us out to the plane on the runway, dropped us off, then left. It was snowing heavily and blowing a howling gale. Bitterly cold, probably minus 15 C. They hadn't yet brought the ramp out for the passengers to get into the plane. Meantime, they had just started refueling. So for the next 45 minutes, we passengers all huddled under the wings. Every second person was smoking—right next to the refueling lines.

Nothing exploded. Fate was on our side that day. But Total's CEO was not so lucky. Unfortunately, the safety statistics have to be proven right some of the time.

## WERE THEY TRYING TO RECRUIT HIM?

Let's move to 2015. My buddy, Frank spoke very good Russian. Not quite sure where or why he learned it. Frank had drifted in and out of Russia for a decade or so. He always had legitimate work assignments. Nothing shady. We had worked together in the 1990s.

After a while, Frank became restless and headed off to Asia. There he finally met a loving soul-mate, married and settled down. Like many who have had a footloose past, Frank decided to take his new bride on a nostalgia trip. Around his old stomping grounds in Russia.

In Moscow, they checked-in to our old favorite, the Aerostar Hotel. Behind the hotel was an abandoned airport runway. Parked on this runway was a veritable who's who of Russian aeronautical hardware. It was the first place we had seen a MiG-29 up close and personal, for example.

Frank called to invite some of his old friends over to the Aerostar. Reception called to announce their arrival. He went down to the lobby only to be greeted by two apparatchiks. Clearly FSB (KGB) types from the non-uniformed branch.

They were polite. They just wanted to know everything about Frank's past. And why he was back in Russia. Frank gave them straight answers. While they seemed convinced, they asked to meet Frank again the following morning. No problem.

The next meeting was somewhat more cordial. Apparently, their boss had been interested in the results of their interview with Frank. The boss sent his best wishes. Assured Frank that he would be most welcome in Russia at any time. And hoped they would stay in touch.

## “BRIDGE OF SPIES”

Tales of the Cold War come back into fashion from time to time. In 2015, Spielberg released “Bridge of Spies.” A rollicking good Cold War spy story from the 1960s, after the Russians shot down Powers in his spy-plane.

Recounts how a private lawyer from Brooklyn (Tom Hanks, in full gravitas mode) negotiated a spy swap. Gary Powers, the pilot of a downed U2 spy plane. Plus, as a bonus, an American student caught on the wrong side, as the cement was drying on the Berlin Wall. Two for one, against a Soviet spy, with a mysterious Irish accent and a pleasantly intriguing personality, arrested in the US.

Most of the action takes place in East Berlin. Outside: severe mid-winter, as if filmed in black & white. Inside: seedy Soviet decor. With the signature dust-covered burgundy-red drapes. And liberal servings of Armenian brandy. Oodles of wonderful American cars from the fifties.

Spielberg takes his time. The movie is not rushed. I think you’ll like it.

## CHAPTER 5

# MIDLIFE CRISES



*Most of us go through this. A painfully long period of living in suburbia. We do it because we need to put the kids into decent public schools. And most of these schools are in suburbia. The math is simple. Your child goes to school from age 5 to 18. You have several children, several years apart. Ergo, you live for 20 years in the suburbs. That's exactly what we did. In the suburbs of Washington DC.*

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## CRASHED ON THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

Corporate team-building exercises have always been a pain in the neck. A necessary evil, perhaps. But a pain in the neck. Every now and then, one gets the chance to have fun, to enjoy it, against all odds.

Our Jolly Facilitator told us that our small plane had crashed in the snowy northern wastes of Canada. She gave us a map and a list of 20 objects. We had to decide what to do to survive. And we had to choose the five objects that would help us most to stay alive. Divide up into small groups—you know the routine—and come back in 20 minutes.

Four of us sat at a table. One domineering type-A male. Two interesting looking female colleagues. It was hopeless. The type-A had all the answers. I suggested that the compass would be useless because we were right next to the magnetic North Pole. One of the women agreed with me. She suggested that we should keep the alarm clock. Why? Because we would need to stay awake to avoid freezing to death. And because we could use the clock-spring as a hook for ice-fishing. I agreed with her. In fact, I thought both her ideas were brilliant. I also thought I detected a flicker of a witty, mocking smile in her eyes.

Type-A disagreed. The alarm clock lady and I drifted off into a corner to exchange other ideas. And to let Type-A finish preparing his summary of the small group's consensus findings, ie, his own. Meantime, the alarm clock lady and I were having a ball in our own little subgroup-of-two. It took us a while to admit to each other that we couldn't care less about ice-fishing. We were hopelessly in love. And we've been together ever since.

SECTION 2

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## MEETING THE IN-LAWS ON THEIR HOME TURF

We all have our little hang-ups. I had to sign the marriage certificate before I was allowed to meet my future mother-in-law. A sensible precaution, but totally unnecessary, as it turned out. On my side, it seemed like a good idea to take my beloved to visit the Antipodean homeland ASAP—in the hopes that this would encourage her to sign up.

I wasn't totally honest about the trip. I talked mainly about the long flights we would take to get to my home country. Five hours in the first plane. Thirteen hours in the second plane. Two and a half hours in the third plane. I didn't go into the details about what would happen after that.

Finally, on the far side of Customs & Immigration, my blushing bride asked what happened next. By then, we were both a little frazzled. Well, we have a short domestic flight. Maybe one and a half hours. No big deal. We can sleep on the plane. Okay.

Eventually got off that flight. Took a taxi to a ferry terminal. Boarded the ferry for the three-hour ride to the next island. By then it had become crystal clear that the ferry ride was not going to be the romantic, scenic outing that I'd had in mind.

Got off the ferry. Still more or less on speaking terms. Walked with our bags down to the small-boat jetty. There, my smiling, weather-beaten brother was waiting with a small motor-boat to take us on the next leg. Forty-five minutes in rough, rolling seas to his holiday house. It was now clear why I had pleaded for army style roll bags instead of suitcases.

Finally, a small jetty appeared out of the mist. On the end of the jetty, halo'd in fog, my sister-in-law and her two young boys waiting to welcome us. Their enthusiasm was heart-warming. How about we leave the bags on the jetty and get into the kayaks to go visit another set of cousins in the house in the next bay? Four planes, a taxi, a ferry, a motorboat—and now kayaks? We declined as graciously as we could. And fell into the arms of Morpheus.

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## NEXT WEEK WE WON'T HAVE THESE CROWDS

Growing up in a small, sparsely populated country does certain things to the psyche. After making friends with a number of Nordics, I realized that there are many others out there with the same social disabilities as myself. Silence is fine. Everyone is totally comfortable with a family dinner that includes long periods of silence. Why talk if you don't have anything to say? Walking or driving endlessly through vast empty landscapes is also fine. That too can be done in almost total silence, comfortably.

The person whom I was trying to impress had lived for a long time in Cairo. Twenty million people (who knows exactly?), with about one square meter per person. A rather stark contrast with my near-empty homeland. I took her for a long drive cross-country. And my parents came along for the ride. For about three hours we drove through grandiose empty landscapes. No other cars passed. No-one said a word. After all, there was nothing new to say.

Finally, we arrived at a small lake. A family was out fishing in a small boat. By then, my Cairo friend was showing signs of extreme claustrophobia: "Look..people..!!" she blurted out. My mother looked briefly distressed: "You know, my dear, next week the children go back to school—and we won't have these crowds."

SECTION 4

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## ARABS & ANGLOS

Finally, we were getting married the next day. The families from both sides had gathered at our house for an afternoon BBQ on the deck. Just to get to know each other a bit, before the big day. Mostly Arabs on one side; mostly Anglos on the other.

The getting-to-know-them thing was going well. The noise level rose. One of my future brother-in-laws was singing opera at full throttle. Much to our surprise, our neighbor appeared on the deck. Very apologetically he explained that he had just put his house on the market. He feared that our rowdy party might deter potential buyers.

This was news to us. We didn't know he wanted to sell. We had good friends in Cairo who were keen on buying a house on our street. The blushing bride took the cordless phone; called our friends in Cairo; walked back with the neighbor to his house; gave our friends a quick telephone tour of the house & garden; wrote a check to our neighbor for the deposit; and returned to the deck-party.

Why had she been away for so long? She explained. There was a brief pause. My brother-in-law wound the music back up and turned to my prim & proper mother: "Margaret, basically we're Arabs. The neighbor complains about the noise, we buy the house..!!"

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## CYPRESS SWAMPS AND ALLIGATORS

We were a bit late in taking our honeymoon. It was slightly rushed. A funny friend said why don't you go to the Cypress swamps near Savannah, Georgia? Neither of us had been in that part of the US, so we said, sure, why not? And made the bookings the same day.

The honeymoon started badly. The rental car company at the airport claimed that my drivers license wasn't valid. We got over that one, then headed off to the swamps. We were well outside the peak tourist season, so more or less alone everywhere we went. I was feeling a little better already.

We rented a canoe & paddles and pushed off into the swamp. A nearby sign asked us not to upset the alligators. Seemed like very good advice. Try googling "cypress swamps savannah" for photos. Enormous cypress trees rise hundreds of feet straight out of the swamp waters. They're so close together that it's very dark, like twilight, down at water level in our canoe.

Most eerie of all, it's totally silent. No bird songs. No insect noises. The sound of the paddle dipping in the water was very loud. Every now & then, a small noise from somewhere nearby. Magnified 100x by the silence. Was that an alligator snout in the water over there—or just a log? Neither of us was keen to paddle over there to find out.

After a while, we relaxed a little. Stopped worrying about Oscar the Alligator. And enjoyed the eerie silence, the mosses on the trees, and the tangled mangroves. As honeymoons go, I thought it was off to an okay start. But perhaps we should do

something a little more uplifting, with more sunshine, open skies, and wind in the hair.

Fast forward two hours to another, very different swamp. This time, a grassy swamp leading out to an estuary, the beach and the open sea. No trees. Sort of like the Everglades. We rented a dinghy with a small outboard motor and set off cruising as quietly as possible through the meandering channels.

A few swamp birds revealed their presence. Gulls wheeled overhead. Bright blue skies. After a while we arrived at the mouth of the estuary. Wide open calm water, protected from the open sea by a big sandbar. It was high tide. The time of day when creatures of the deep can cross the sandbar for a family picnic in the estuary.

And then we saw them coming...dolphins. Maybe a dozen of them. Leaping out of the water, showing off, the way only dolphins can. They made a beeline for our dinghy. I knew why...they were going to rub their itchy backs along the underside of our dinghy. Sure enough, one after the other, they shot out from under the bow of the dinghy. Lots of scrunching & bumping noises under the boat. Walt Disney couldn't have done better. Truly a fairy tale of nature's beauty.

My fellow honeymooner wept and held me tight. I knew then that everything was going to be alright.

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## MY BEST FRIEND, DUKE

When I tied the knot, the love of my life was sole in charge of three teenagers and a dog. The only obstacle to living happily ever after was the dog. Teenagers were angels by comparison.

His name was Duke. And he was huge. Lean, not fat. But unusually tall. And full of boundless energy. It was very unfair on him. There was no way to let him get the exercise he needed. Let him off the leash—and you get a phone call two hours later from a farm ten miles away. Keep him on the leash—and get dragged behind him like a drunken water skier.

Duke was truly charming and wouldn't hurt any living creature. But he did push the limits. Of course, I knew how to deal with this dumb adoring animal. Just be firm. Lock him in the basement at night and ignore him. Ignore the moon-howling, door-scratching, crashing noises. Just sleep through it.

Look, I'll give you the short version. First, he was allowed to sleep at the foot of our bed. Then on the end of the bed. Then between us on the bed. In the end, I had to sleep on my back so that he could rest his enormous head on my chest.

Worse still, he snored, he dribbled and he twitched violently when he was dreaming. But he was very, very happy. Dog scores ten, man of the house scores zero. So much for the fantasy of being Top Dog, the all-powerful dominant male.

One day, our company decided to move us to the other side of the world. No question of Duke coming with us. The local Labrador Adoption Society sent a Dog Shrink to interview Duke; then me (I confessed); then a series of potential adoptive parents. They found a wonderful lady who lived by a large city park. The children were furious; treated us as serial killers; but what else can you do?

SECTION 7

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## WHITEWATER RAFTING

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Let's all go whitewater rafting. Mom, Pop & three teenagers. An ideal family outing. Good for bonding. Sunday morning arrived. The weather was great. We rented a strawberry-colored Cadillac and set off early.

The instructors were friendly. Gave us a few helpful tips and pushed the rubber raft out into the river. One of their helpful tips was to obey the Captain. I had been elected Captain. So, for example, if the Captain says paddle to the right, all four crew members should paddle to the right. Simple really.

Things went quite well at first. The river was wide & calm. It didn't really matter too much who paddled which way. After half an hour or so, the river narrowed a little. And a faint roaring noise could be heard from further downstream. Quite suddenly, there were large rocks everywhere. And the river began foaming at the mouth.

The Captain started giving orders. Calmly at first. And then with more urgency. The results were not as expected. Teenager #1 asked why he should paddle to the right; got his paddle stuck behind a rock; lost his paddle overboard; and then seized the paddle of teenager #3, who then became very upset. Teenager #2 remained relatively zen, but appeared to be unsure about left & right.

At this point, the raft went violently backwards down a rapid and ejected Mama Bear into a whirlpool. The Captain made the mistake of showing more concern for lost paddles than for the plight of Mama Bear. And things went downhill from there.

Eventually, we had a quorum back inside the raft, albeit with a shortage of paddles. The friendly instructors who had somehow managed to show up on a nearby rock asked whether we needed a captain. I said no, we already had five of them. A witticism that wasn't hugely appreciated within the confines of rubber city. The whitewaters slowly calmed down. And we coasted past the finish line, all with a great sense of relief.

A little later, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps I could say that I had enjoyed the outing. Although my Captain's pride was a little wounded. Probably we all learned something. But even I am not foolish enough to believe that it would be any different if we did it again.

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## THE GREAT ANTIPODEAN OUTDOORS

My brothers and I had had an idyllic childhood growing up in the great outdoors. We wanted to give our children the same freedom. The same feeling that the great outdoors is a giant playground, waiting to be explored.

We had friends who were helicopter pilots. So we strapped our two teenagers into a helicopter and sent them off for a joyride. They landed on the end of a glacier. Bounced around checking that the snow was solid enough to bring tourists up there later in the day.

The pilot dropped them off on a rocky needle spire at 3000 meters, while he flew off to check the meteo equipment on another glacier. Miraculously, when he came back to pick them up, they were still there.

Finally, after a couple of hours, we got the radio call from our friendly helicopter pilot to come pick them up. The rendezvous was in the boonies, at the end of a dirt road, beside a lake. I borrowed my mother's car, drove to the lake and waited.

The noisy bird arrived and squatted down in front of the car. The children piled out, ran heads-down to escape the whirling blades, and scrambled into the car. The pilot gave me a hand signal to stay still.

He took off, just a meter off the ground, swung around and put the skids on the hood of the car. With the searchlights shining directly into our car. The children were paralyzed with excitement. Gently, he bounced the front of the car 3-4 times, then flew away. No doubt grinning from ear to ear.

Life is a video game for people out there. Later that evening, we recounted our day to my mother. I expected some sort of mild reprimand. But all she said was that she might not lend me her car for a while if I was going to treat it like that.

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## WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

You might have read earlier about the “Starlit Sauna”. About my youngest brother. A constant source of inspiration. A few years later, he moved on. Quit market gardening. Took up a new trade, more in line with his daredevil nature. He became the manager of a mountaintop communications center. Repeater stations for TV, radio and cellphones.

It was a jungle area. Impossible to put a road up the mountain. Too much rain. Endless landslides and all that tropical stuff. Instead, they had put a cable car up the mountain. And my brother’s job was to keep the show on the road. All the communications in the area depended on it.

We arrived en masse, parents plus three teenagers, for a tropical holiday with my brother and his girlfriend. Looking forward to it. My brother invited us all to take the cable car up the mountain as he did his maintenance work. We piled in. My brother was wearing a climbing harness. There was a chainsaw lying nonchalantly in one corner of the cable car.

Off we went. Climbing steeply up over the jungle canopy. Most of the time the canopy was a long way below us. But at one point it got uncomfortably close. My brother stopped the cable car. Opened a trapdoor in the floor. Leaving a gaping hole down to the forest canopy below. We all froze, our butts glued to the wall of the cable car cabin.

My brother attached a rope from his chest to a hook in the floor and disappeared, rappelling out through the trapdoor, nursing the chainsaw in his arms. Terrified, we peered out through the trapdoor. He had started the chainsaw and was swinging around on the end of a rope ten meters below us whacking branches off trees.

After 10 or 15 minutes, he winched himself back into the cabin, closed the trapdoor, and set the cable car in motion again, heading for the trig station. All in a day's business. While it was fun to watch, we were all mildly relieved to get back to home base, terra firma, and a cup of tea.

Meantime a couple of bloodsucking leeches had attached themselves to my lifetime companion's otherwise flawless legs. We wrapped up an eventful day by going swimming at the local beach—after studying the big signs about saltwater crocodiles.

## EXORCIZING THE HOUSE

The first thing you do when you re-marry is to renovate a house together. It's a bonding thing. If one of the "exes" was in the house before, it's also a kind of exorcism. It's no longer the same house. Now it's "our" house. It's also an exercise in "can we do a project together?" Without strangling each other over how to handle the contractors.

The first time you do a renovation, you'll probably do it "by the book" (after reading the textbook for Contracting 101). You'll hire an architect to do the plans. You'll get bids from three competing contractors. You'll sign up with the contractor who submitted the lowest bid. And you'll hire your friendly architect again to supervise your contractor.

You have some misgivings. Your architect is taking a 10% fee on the final cost of the renovation. So s/he has little incentive to keep the construction costs down. Your friendly contractor soon reveals his hand. You change your mind about a small detail in the kitchen. Your contractor asks you to sign a Change Order for the extra cost. The extra cost seems a bit exaggerated. But what can you do? You've already signed up with this guy.

After a dozen change orders, you realize that your contractor has now made up for the fact that he under-bid in order to win the contract. End result, between the friendly architect and the friendly contractor, you pay 30-50% more than you planned. Worse still, you had to borrow from your mother-in-law to pay for the over-run.

When you do your second renovation, you may like to consider not doing it "by the book". First, find an architect that you like and whose taste you trust. Preferably from some country where business is routinely done on a handshake. Iran, for example.

When the architect suggests his brother as the contractor, invite both of them over for coffee, talk about their kids, then say Yes. Discuss the big picture with them—styles, materials, color—but don't insist on actual drawings. They're in your architect's head. And he'll never get around to putting them down on paper. Agree on a ballpark figure, let's say to the nearest \$20k. Smile, write a generous first check, and pour another round of coffee. Drop in to the work site every evening or two after work. Call the two brothers to give them your guidance for the next few days. After all, there are no plans.

At the end of the job, negotiate the final price of the job. This step is nerve-wracking. If you and the brothers are both equally upset about the outcome, the price is probably about right. They did a great job for a reasonable price. So much for Contracting 101. And with a bit of luck, you won't have to borrow from your mother-in-law this time around.

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## WHEN BICEPS ARE NEEDED

Every night, after work, we would drop by our house to see how the renovation was going. The architect was Iranian. His younger brother was the contractor. Most of the work had been done by a Mexican crew. Nice work, very clean & well-finished.

God knows how they did it. The contractor spoke no Spanish. And the crew spoke no English. Near the end, the contractor was getting impatient to finish the job. One night, when we dropped by, we were dismayed to learn that the contractor had taken the Mexican crew off the job.

Come & see this, he said. Inside the living room were four women in their mid-30s. All four had crew-cuts, bulging biceps and sleeveless blue overalls. They exchanged monosyllabic instructions to each other in a great Alabama drawl. One would pick up a full slab of drywall, hold it effortlessly against the wall, while her colleague carefully cut it into place. Perfectly. The other two followed up with the finishing touches. This well-oiled machine cut & pasted their way through our house

By 2am, they had finished. First class work all round. They grinned; took their payment in crisp hundred-dollar bills; and left. The next day, the Mexican crew was back on the site for the final details. Happy ending all round. Long live the U.S. melting pot. And long live diversity.

## LOCK UP YOUR CHILDREN

Our time in the northeast US was full of amusing cultural experiences. We had been hanging out with folks from West & North Africa for many years. We had picked up some bad habits from these friends and from our travels. Like hanging out during the weekend in the boubous or gelabiyehs of north/west Africa.

One day our neighbor (let's call him Leroy) came home to find that his sister had locked him out of his house. Leroy's sister came from a far-flung rural corner of the US. She had rounded up the children, dragged them into the house, and put the house into military lockdown mode.

No doubt, she was looking for Leroy's guns, so she could defend the children. Leroy was a paid-up member of the National Rifle Association. For sure he had everything from a Colt to an Uzi in his bedroom closet.

Leroy tapped on all the windows. Finally his sister opened the door for a split second to let him into the house. Shortly afterwards, she calmed down enough to tell him the cause of the lockdown: "Look through the window. There's a man next door—mowing the lawn in a dress!" I plead guilty.

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## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

Our other neighbor was recently back from his second tour of duty in Iraq. We called him the Colonel. He had issues. At 4am, he would police the perimeter of his property with a flashlight. We're not quite sure what kind of intruders he was looking for. At 6am, he would go for a run. At 6am, I too was out in the streets walking (sometimes running) our very large & energetic Labrador. The encounter didn't go too well. It's true that I was dressed in Middle Eastern garb. Perhaps it gave him unhappy memories. Who knows?

His wife was an even more dramatic case. In her late thirties. Daughter of an army colonel. Had grown up on army bases. She then married an army guy who rose to be Colonel, in Iraq. She lived with her two children in one army base after another, while her husband fought in various foreign wars. Then, finally, they left the microcosm of army bases to live in a suburban house in the northeastern US. I guess we were their first-ever "civilian" neighbors.

We're not quite sure what they knew about us. Perhaps they knew that we were moving to Palestine. Perhaps they knew that our real estate agent was Iranian. Clearly they had a thirst to know more. Late one evening, we drove home from a restaurant. As we swung into the driveway, our headlights lit up an amazing scene. Our neighbors had emptied all our trash cans onto our driveway. There they were, sitting cross-legged in our driveway, reading our mail, checking our bills, whatever.

For a moment, we wondered whether the CIA had asked them to do this. But after a moment's reflection, we realized that, no, they were just paranoid. A life on army bases. Perhaps not the best way to understand the complex multicultural realities of the US of A that they were defending with their lives.

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## THIS IS *NOT* HAIGHT ASHBURY 1968

We had new neighbors. A charming young couple. She European, he from the Middle East. With two adorable young children. We decided to do the good neighborly thing. Invite them and everyone on our block to a BBQ evening on our deck. It was early fall. The weather was perfect. Everyone had a good time. After a couple of hours, the older neighbors started to trickle away back home.

Meantime I overheard our new neighbor (let's call him Khalil) explaining how he was growing marijuana in the bathroom under fluorescent lights. He was kindly offering to bring a bunch of it over to share it with the neighbors. Nice idea. Let's get the whole neighborhood stoned on our back deck.

I took Khalil aside. Tried to explain that this was a conservative east coast neighborhood. Not at all Haight Ashbury 1968. Some of these neighbors would be capable of calling the cops. Anyway, no harm done. All the neighbors went home unstoned. And we too went to bed.

An hour or two later, I woke up with a start. In this season, all our windows were open. The bedroom was full of a very distinctive, smokey odor. Holy mackerel. I pulled on my jeans and jumped the fence. There was Khalil putting the finishing touches to burning his entire stash in the middle of his back yard. A pall of smoke hung over the whole neighborhood. Announcing the weed's ethereal presence to everyone within a one mile radius.

I guess it was my fault. I shouldn't have freaked him out quite so much. It had a happy ending. No-one called the cops. And the neighbors stayed mum.

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## LUMBERJACKS

I love Canadians. Their ice hockey, their good-heartedness—and their chainsaws. Okay, I know, these are well-worn clichés. But every now and then, something pops up to reinforce the clichés. Some time ago, there was a huge ice storm in our Washington neighborhood. Most of the large trees in the area were felled by ice or lightning. Trees fell on houses, on parked cars, and on some unfortunate people.

We were living overseas at the time and had rented the house out to Canadians. We had seen the ice storm on the news. And we were dreading the call from the Canadians. So we called them. They were inexplicably cheerful. No, nothing had fallen on the house. Yes, all of the big trees had come down. The back yard was an impenetrable jungle of horizontal tree trunks, smashed branches and foliage.

And then it became clear why the Canadians were so cheerful. They offered to take out their very own chainsaws (they had one each) and to spend several days reducing this jungle into firewood. They offered to do this at a tenth of the price of a local contractor. And they would take time off work to get it done.

Would we agree to this? We felt it was only fair to say yes. I'm sure that they put the phone down, donned their lumberjack plaid shirts & caps, grabbed their chainsaws, and sprinted straight out the door. Whistling happily. Perhaps singing Monty Python's: "I'm a lumberjack and I'm okay."

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## HE WAS VERY ANGRY--ABOUT ROCHESTER

You're at a ski resort. You get on a 2-seater chairlift. And, dammit, the guy beside you wants to chat. He has about five minutes to tell you his life story. Then you arrive; raise your poles; and schuss off down the mountain, never to see each other again. No need to hold back. One can unload one's inner emotions on a chairlift to a perfect stranger. It's safe. And it costs less than a shrink.

This guy was mid-50s. Looked kinda solitary. He had spent his career at Kodak. In Rochester, upstate New York. Rochester has glacial winters. Grey skies, howling snow storms. Can be a bit rough on the morale. He celebrated his 50th birthday in Rochester. Then days later, he received the infamous "pink slip." Kodak hadn't kept up with the digital revolution. So they were laying off staff.

He took his final paycheck and started looking for a new job. Celluloid skills weren't much in demand. He was getting more & more desperate. Finally, finally, he got an offer from a small boutique firm in San Diego. He got out a map. And found San Diego in the bottom left-hand corner of the US of A. He really didn't want to go there. But he'd run out of options.

First day at the office in San Diego held a few surprises. Colleagues were in polo shirts, some in shorts & flip flops. Fine, clearly need to ditch the blue Mormon suit. Shortly after 4pm, he realized that he was the only person left in the office. He checked the fire escapes. No problems there. But everyone had gone. Odd. So he left too.

The office was close to the beach. He had nothing else planned. So he decided to check out the beach. Took off his socks & shoes. Rolled up his blue suit trousers. And wiggled his toes in the warm, wet sand. Quite pleasant really. As he wandered along the waterline, he thought he saw one of his newfound colleagues. In a wetsuit with a surfboard under his arm. Further along, a family, flying kites. You get the picture.

We were about to arrive at the chairlift drop-off point. I made a few short, positive, friendly assenting noises. The sort that an amateur shrink might make. Wrong move— it turns out that our fellow skier is very angry. He's very, very angry that he spent the first 50 years of his life in Rochester, upstate NY.

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## LE TOUR DU MONT BLANC

More family bonding. Six of us from various branches of the family had signed up for a 7-day trek around Mt Blanc. Starting in France, near Chamonix. Over two passes into Italy. Over another two passes into Switzerland. And finally over one last pass back to Chamonix.

It was the last week of July, so mid-summer in Europe. Day-1 took us by surprise. In the early afternoon, the gods let loose a massive thunderstorm. And by late afternoon we were trudging through knee-deep snow. We were very pleased to arrive at the first night's shelter.

Time to get to know our charming guide and the rest of our group. Maybe twenty in total. All French apart from our clan. Several were in their 60s or 70s. But wiry & supremely fit. The usual group dynamics. Polite & careful bonhomie over dinner. Things got a bit more difficult after dinner. Bathrooms were scarce. Everyone slept in one large bunk room. The snoring was excruciating, not to mention flatulence. Best to be the first to go to sleep and the last to wake up.

The gods were kinder to us for the rest of the trek. Brilliant blue skies. Every day felt like being on the film set of the "Sound of Music" with Julie Andrews. Goats with bells. Endless pastures of heavenly alpine flowers. Weather-beaten folks in wooden clogs selling fresh home-made cheeses from remote chalets. One magnificent mountain vista after another. Everything that the glossy brochure had promised. A fabulous seven days to store in the piggy bank of happy memories.

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## “THE WORLD ENDS NOT WITH A BANG...”

“...but with a whimper” (T.S. Eliot). I was in a Minister’s office, in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Something was wrong. The Minister’s assistant asked me to take a call on the Minister’s line. It was my sister-in-law calling from far away. Her voice wavered. My father had died. Would I come home for the funeral?

The Minister got me onto a flight to Paris that night. The next morning, standing in front of check-in, a pickpocket took everything except my air ticket and my passport. The police were sympathetic. But there was nothing they could do. They advised me to cancel my credit cards. I begged for a cellphone from a perfect stranger. Called my wife on the other side of the world. She later told me that the pickpocket had already racked up several thousand euros in downtown Paris

Numbed, I boarded for a long overnight flight. The woman seated beside me seemed very interested in me. I tried to ignore her. Eventually it became clear to me that she was a call-girl. When we landed, I eventually got rid of her by hiding in the men’s WC until my next flight was called.

Another long flight. My brother picked me up from the airport. I was a wreck. He drove directly to the retirement home where our father had died. They had asked us to pick up his “things”. The nurses were compassionate. He had been drinking a cup of tea. He had made a whimpering noise. And then slumped forward. That’s all. The nurses gave us a pathetic, small bundle of unwashed clothes. And we left.

We had good intentions, my brothers and I. We took the urn of my father’s ashes to the shore of his favorite lake. We cast his ashes to the four winds. The wind changed. The ashes blew back in our faces and all over our clothes. My father had the last word.

## CHAPTER 6

# ENAMORED OF AFRICA



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*Imagine that you have a childhood sweet-heart. You never quite get over her. During the course of your lifetime, you go back to her several times for a brief affair. Each time, you part on good terms. That's how I feel about Africa. I fell in love with Africa in the 1970s as a back-packer. The affair continued in the 1980s and in 2001-2005 (a major relapse), and again in 2015 (a short, nostalgic fling).*

## BEWARE OF ANGRY VEGETARIANS

We're in the late 1980s. The Zambezi river upstream of Victoria Falls is a wild and wonderful place. The river is wide and shallow here. The water crashes noisily over thousands of boulders in its headlong rush towards the precipice.

Gloriously colorful birds flit from rock to rock, their songs drowned out by the raging river. Pods of hippos look after their newborns, all chomping happily on the reeds along the shoreline. No doubt there were other scaly friends out there with very big teeth. But we couldn't see them. So all was well.

Our guide was a white Zambian. We four piled into two canoes. He headed out in front, alone in his own canoe. We followed the guide, sticking close to the shoreline. From time to time, we would slalom down a small waterfall between two rocks. After a very blissful hour or so on the river, the roar from Victoria Falls started to sound a lot louder. A lot closer.

We now relied on hand signals from our guide to tell us where to go. He turned towards us; hit a rock side-on; and abruptly disappeared overboard. Bad timing. We were just trying to skirt around a large pod of hippos with young ones. Our guide swam frantically towards the shore. We amateur canoeists were too far away to help him. And rather unaware of what would happen if papa or momma hippo got angry.

Happy ending—he made it to the shore without getting chomped by a large angry vegetarian. A little shaken. And perhaps not very pleased with himself. We decided to call it quits for the day.

Back at our luxury tents by the river, we took a hot shower from a solar bucket. Toasted the sunset with a G&T. And enjoyed a superb spit-roasted barbecue. All under romantic space-age lighting from the Milky Way and the Southern Cross. Truly heavenly.

SECTION 2

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## I GUESS WE'RE JUST NOT TASTY ENOUGH

The safari continues. In the Okavango delta, in Botswana. Fabulous place. A large river flows from the north down into the Botswanan desert. The river ends there. It never makes it out to the sea. So there, in the middle of the Botswanan desert is a vast swamp. Thousands of small sandy islands, with small shallow channels, perfect for poling around in canoes. Truly a paradise for wildlife. Everything, big & small, that you would see in a real desert. Plus all imaginable species of birds. Plus all critters that like living in water. Including the ones with big teeth and a scaly skin suitable for making old-fashioned lady's handbags.

Why do lions very rarely attack people? Have they tried eating us and decided that we don't taste good? I don't know. A Botswanan guide took us for a walkabout. By canoe to a large island. He was unarmed. He explained that he had never been armed. And he had never been attacked. He said that large animals will recognize a hunting gun and go after the bearer of said gun. So much safer to be unarmed. Seems reasonable. The same applies to people living in the urban jungle. Much safer to be unarmed.

He had a couple of other rules. When you see the lion, don't look at it. Do not turn your head. Do not talk. Breathe normally. Look straight ahead—NOT at the lion. And keep walking forward, quietly, in single file. Nothing will happen.

Be aware that there are usually two lions, the male and the female. And most often they are doing a stake-out. The male lion sits out in the open. The female lion hides about a hundred meters away. Passing gazelles, or whatever, see the male lion, freak out, and run into the waiting jaws of the female lion. The male lion then joins her for

the snack. Quite simple, really. I guess that explains quite well why it's not a good idea for us to freak out and run away from the male lion.

Anyway, sure enough, that's exactly what happened. It takes a lot of willpower not to stare at the male lion—I did sneak a peak. And it's also hard not to worry about the female lion. Where exactly is she hiding? What was that snorting noise that we just heard? Of course, it all went according to plan. Nothing happened. We saw a male lion at close quarters. We had a wee surge of adrenalin. And we happily poled our way back to the lodge.

Had a G&T as the sun went down. Gotta play by the old colonial rules. The sun duly went down. The bird songs slowly faded away. And the crickets—or was it some other insect with itchy legs?—took over the sound-track. An exciting day, with the prospect of more excitement tomorrow. Meantime, I sleep a joyful sleep, with my binoculars under my pillow.

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## ZIM-ZAM, RE-VISITED

We're now 30 years later, in 2015. On the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia, so-called Zim-Zam. A couple of centuries after Dr Livingstone "discovered" the falls. The town of Livingstone is now the epicenter of tourism on the Zambian side of Victoria Falls.

Things have changed in 30 years. You can still go canoeing among the hippos above the falls. And it's still great. But, nowadays, young daredevils go bungy-jumping off the Zim-Zam bridge that connects the two countries. Then go whitewater rafting in the boiling rapids below the falls. And, for the less adventurous, you can also rent a Segway to roam around the game park trails near the hotels.

Best of all, micro-light flights, soaring above it all, with thrilling, grandiose views of the falls. After swooping around the falls, the pilot takes us down close to the ground to say hi to the elephants, giraffes, impala, water buffalo & hippos. Then puts us gently back down on terra firma. Truly exhilarating.

Beside the pond outside my hotel room is a sign: "Beware of Crocodiles". A joke? No, today I saw him/her a few meters away from the shore. Big, moving slowly, leaving a trail of ripples & bubbles. Like Hansel & Gretel.

Reception asked me to keep the sliding doors closed in my room. Why? Because the monkeys will break-in and trash my room, looking for food. A joke? No, my colleague left his door open and was greeted by a team of mom & pop & two babies holding a party in his room.

Are we hallucinating? In the very early morning, four zebras graze on the lush lawns between our rooms and the swimming pool. Just looking at them is difficult for my astigmatism. At dawn and at dusk, bright yellow weaver birds swarm over nearby trees. Scurrying in and out of nests the size of pumpkins.

Not long before sunset, I leave this private zoo to wander down the short trail towards Victoria Falls. A nice young man offers his services as a guide. I accept. It's the end of the dry season. It will start raining heavily in mid-November. Meantime, the Zambian side of the Zambezi river bed is dry. We rock-hop for 20 minutes across the dry river bed. On our left, plunging views down into the rapids below the falls. Swallows swoop and shriek in the spray above the distant falls. In the shallow pools on our right, starched white egrets peck at invisible underwater delicacies.

My superbly knowledgeable guide takes me for a detour into an island of trees & ponds. There he shows me the nest of a hammerkop. This bird is somewhere between a duck and a goose. But it builds a nest the size of child's tree house. Quite unreal. Again, dozens of weaver bird nests in a tree overhanging a pond. Wherein lies an evil crocodile. Waiting to gobble up unfortunate fledgling baby weaver birds that miscalculate their flight path on leaving the nest.

We see rock-martins, kingfishers, red-winged starlings, bulbuls. It seems that I'll have to cross over to the Zimbabwean side of the falls to see hornbills. And the vultures are absent, too busy gorging themselves on cadavers in nearby game parks.

We make it over to the active part of the falls. To the Devil's Pool, a natural hot-tub, perched right on the edge of the falls. Magnificent, a natural masterpiece. With deafening sound effects. Facebook is calling. The guide intrepidly wades out to very edge to take a short, dramatic video with my iPhone.

The light is fading fast. Time to beat a hasty retreat. The guide points out recent elephant poop. Probably the same elephants who broke through the hotel fences the night before. Then strolled down the road towards the border with Zimbabwe. I hope they had their passports.

## BLOOD DIAMONDS

President Blaise Compaoré, ex-president of Burkina Faso, is not liked in some circles. I liked him. It seems that he treated his predecessor badly. Many people still believe that Blaise assassinated his companion-in-arms, Thomas Sankara.

For many years, folks worried about what role Blaise might be playing behind the scenes in various intercontinental trade flows. Especially the so-called “blood diamonds” trade from West Africa to Western Europe. And, on the back-haul, light arms from Belgium, Eastern Europe & the Balkans to various guerrilla movements around Africa.

It’s true that Blaise had a mixed bag of loyalties. For example, he was buddies with Charles Taylor, ex-president of Liberia. Mr Taylor was at the epicenter of the blood diamonds trade and was eventually sentenced to 50 years by the International Court in the Hague. He was found guilty on eleven counts, including terrorizing his own people, torture, rape, etc., etc. Charles & Blaise were both buddies with Mr Ghaddafi. They both needed Libyan oil money.

At the same time, Blaise was working discreetly with the US & France to halt the rise of the Islamists in the Sahara. For a long time, Ouagadougou was the staging post to ferry arms to the Tuaregs fighting AQMI (Al-Qaeda’s Saharan branch) in northern Mali, around Timbuktu. Nothing is simple in this part of the world.

Every now & then, one trips over random circumstantial evidence. One day, at the Hotel Independence in Ouagadougou—what a wonderfully mellifluous name for a capital city—I saw a couple of handsome young dudes in white uniforms, sitting chatting by the pool. Clearly pilots. My Russian was good enough to know that they were speaking in Ukrainian. The bellboy was a friend of mine. He mentioned in passing that these guys never paid their hotel bills. The President’s office always paid the pilots’ hotel bills. Bingo!

## THE FERRY FROM MOPTI TO TIMBUKTU

My son “T” and I arrive in the Malian river port of Mopti. We have tickets on the paddle steamer to take us downstream (northwards) on the Niger river from Mopti to the fabled city of Timbuktu (Tombouctou, as the French-speakers would say). The paddle steamer is moored like the Queen Bee in the middle of a sea of wooden canoes of various kinds. The sun is setting. The ladies of the night are already patrolling the river banks.

The next day, late afternoon, we are on the upper deck of the paddle steamer as it churns its way downstream. The sky suddenly darkens. The wind rises. A twister appears, racing across the desert towards us. Violent winds throw the paddle steamer sideways onto a sand-bank in the middle of the river. Five minutes later, the storm has passed. And we’re back in late afternoon sunshine. But very firmly lodged on the sand-bank. It’s not difficult to imagine how evil spirits have made their way into desert folklore.

We hear the captain making radio calls to request a tugboat. The captain announces over a crackly loud-speaker that we will have to wait 24 hours for the tug to come upstream from Timbuktu. Passengers on the foredeck slaughter a goat for the evening BBQ. Blood pours over the hot metal decks. Traditional music blares out of a transistor radio.

It’s time to use the satellite phone. “T” and I futz around trying to get reception. Make a few calls to Bamako. Then pass another hellishly hot & torrid night, sweating & waiting. The next morning a large canoe/pirogue with outboard motor appears from the far shore. Two men in Tuareg head-dress and a Gendarme. They tie up alongside the paddle steamer and climb up the rickety ladder to speak with the Captain. It seems that our hosts in Timbuktu are worried that we’re late. So they’ve sent a 4WD to drive us up to Timbuktu along the left-bank. Needless to say, we are a couple of days “late”—whatever that might mean.

SECTION 6

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DR & MRS KHAN

The guest-house in Timbuktu was surprisingly good. The best hotel in Timbuktu. Run by a charming & very knowledgeable Malian. He told us the story of the guest-house. A few years earlier, a wealthy man from Pakistan had come to Timbuktu with his Dutch wife, Hermina. Our Malian friend was their guide for their visits out into the remote Tuareg areas north of Timbuktu.

When he left, Dr Khan gave our Malian friend a large sum of money and asked him to build a guest-house. To be called the “Hermina Khan”—how else could it have been given such an exotic name? Eight guest rooms, available all year round, except for the occasional visits of Dr & Mrs Hermina Khan. Many years later I realized that Dr Khan was almost certainly the famous scientist who had become immensely rich by selling Pakistan’s nuclear secrets to North Korea.

## MOSQUES & MANUSCRIPTS

Nowadays, it's impossible to talk about Timbuktu or northern Mali without thinking about these lunatic ideologues smashing shrines and destroying centuries' old manuscripts. Just 10-20 years ago, it was a beautifully peaceful place. The Imam of the seven mosques (if I remember right) was a very learned, multicultural & multilingual gentleman. Sort of like the Rector of Al-Azhar in Cairo. Took a great pride in showing blue-eyed foreigners the richness of this jewel in the desert. Alas, I fear that those days are forever over.

Speaking of manuscripts, there's a much happier story to tell about manuscripts in Chinguetti. It's kind of Timbuktu's sister city across the border to the west, in Mauritania. Perfectly preserved by the dryness of the desert. All the manuscripts have brilliant colors, like the day they were born. From the sublime (astronomy, medicine) to the more mundane (real estate titles, genealogies). A pleasure to behold.

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## SLOW TRAIN TO THE COAST

We were in Zouerate, the center of Mauritania's iron ore mining industry. In the far north, close to the border with the Polisario homeland. We decided to take the iron ore train from Zouerate down to Nouadhibou on the coast. The Chief Engineer from the mining company set up two plastic chairs on the very front of the diesel loco. It was truly very hot. We wrapped up from head to toe, with just our sunglasses & sandals sticking out from our boubous.

The train was 2km long and never made it past 50 km/hr. We had all the time in the world to discuss the meaning of life as the train rolled across the desert. During the colonial period, France had sent teachers to Mauritania to accompany the nomadic tribes in their wanderings. The nomads had an excellent primary & secondary education, which then opened the doors to the best engineering schools in France.

However, right now, on the train, the Chief Engineer is mainly interested in his camel herds. Their whereabouts? Do they have enough grass & water? From the cow-catcher, he calls each of his herdsman in the four corners of Mauritania by cellphone. (In case you're wondering, his camel herdsman use cellphones where you just replace the non-rechargeable batteries every now & then.) They exchange tips on where to go next with the camels.

The train rolls on. And, as usual, the sun sets slowly in the west.

## A PECULIAR LINK IN THE FOOD- CHAIN

It was a great film—for those who enjoy seeing the natural world up close. In French it was called “le Peuple Migrateur”. Three hours, no commentary, just following bird migrations around our small & beleaguered planet. Most of the filming was done from a micro-light airplane.

At one point, some birds arrive at le Banc d’Arguin, a protected area of sand dunes south of Nouadhibou on the coast of Mauritania. The birds are exhausted after a long flight from Europe. (I know how they feel) Some are injured. So let’s land & rest in a protected area.

Protected from humans, but not protected from...crabs!! An army of crabs launches themselves onto the stricken birds. Within a minute, all that’s left is a sad little pile of bones on the high water mark. Terrifying. Amazing that a species like these crabs can adapt itself to such strange circumstances.

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## THE PITH HELMET LIVES TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY

An English friend invited me to join her for the celebration of the Queen's birthday at the UK embassy in Bamako, Mali. She grinned. I knew that her views on the Empire were about the same as mine.

Indeed, the event was even more surreal than we expected. We had a couple of stiff gin & tonics in the garden. A hush descended on the assembled multitudes as the Ambassador (capital "A") emerged on the colonial balcony above us.

A handsome young fellow, late 30s, splendidly attired in white linen. He must have left his pith helmet inside on the dining room table. The ritual cough, then a short speech. "Friends, we are gathered here today to celebrate the birthday of our sovereign, Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the second. Harrumph, harrumph. I ask you to raise your glasses to toast the good health of Her Majesty, the Queen. Long may she rule over us..!!"

I thought I heard the Ambassador's heels click together, although I can't swear to it. At this point, the Ambassador delicately lifted the needle of a 1950s record player and placed it on the tiny 33rpm disc. After the usual introductory scratching noises, a brass band struck up "God save our Queen" from inside the tiny speakers, followed by a full-throated choir.

In the background, I thought I heard the Ambassador wavering between tenor and falsetto. "God save our Queen" is mercifully short. The whole event took only a minute or two. But has, for some reason, remained engraved in my memory.

## SÃO TOMÉ Y PRÍNCIPE HAS STRUCK OIL

Two islands off the coast of Nigeria (to the north) and Gabon (to the east). A former Portuguese colony. Very poor, struggling to make ends meet. The good news was that they struck oil. The less good news was that it was in waters that were disputed with Nigeria.

The President of São Tomé y Príncipe (ST&P) hired American lawyers to advise him on how to negotiate oil-sharing agreements with Nigeria. These swashbuckling lawyers rapidly racked up \$1m in fees & expenses. When they submitted their first invoice, the President told them quite plainly that ST&P could not pay.

The lawyers knew what to do. Call all their US political connections and get some US or international agency to pay their invoices. The lawyer in question had defended President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky affair. Clearly a very versatile legal firm. Sperm on blue dresses one day; oil-sharing agreements in West Africa the next.

So one day my phone rings. The voice on the other end of the line announces that he is a close friend of Pres. Clinton. Am I responsible for my agency's aid program in ST&P? Yes, I am. Do I know who Pres. Clinton is? Yes, I do. Will I instruct our agency to pay their legal bills in ST&P? No, I won't.

Am I aware that the president of ST&P is coming to see the head of our agency two days from now? And would that change my mind? No. My interlocutor issues a few more veiled threats and hangs up. The story has a happy ending—for me. Common sense won out over political blackmail. I'm just amazed that they even tried.

## SO YOU WANT TO GO SOMEWHERE TRULY REMOTE

First, go to Lisbon. Catch the weekly flight to São Tomé. If the flight is cancelled that week, spend a week in Portugal. Then catch next week's flight.

In São Tomé, arrange a 1-hour charter flight in a tiny plane to the tiny Island of Principé. Ignore the unmarked Russian Yak-40 that lands shortly after you. Ask the resort in Principé to send a 4-wheel drive to take you from the airstrip thru the jungle to the hotel on the beach.

Check-in. Enjoy the stunning beachfront view from your bungalow. Pull down the mosquito nets. Freshen up, take a shower. Put on your best tropical white linens. Then stroll out along the little wooden walkway to the restaurant. You can just see the green roofs at the end of the pier. Take your time. Stop along the pier to admire the brilliant tropical fish in the reef below.

Sunset comes suddenly in the tropics. So time to settle-in at the restaurant. Hmm, what could they possibly offer in such a remote location? Surprise, surprise... everything. Lots of fresh fish...okay, that's to be expected. Great steaks for the carnivores. Fresh vegetables & salads. French & Italian cheeses. Fresh fruit & classy local chocolate deserts. Excellent local coffee. And an international wine cellar that would be the envy of any sommelier. Including some delicious South African Sauvignon Blancs. Close your eyes...and you could be in the best restaurant in Capetown. Two other couples had tables that night. Hard to imagine how they made money on this little venture.

Back at the bungalow, I drift off into a mellow sleep. With a free movie of food-fueled dreams whirling thru my head. During the night, a large hi-speed motorboat comes quietly into the bay. Discharges large metal crates of guns for the 4-5 revolutionary movements at war in various neighboring countries. Then unloads goodies for the restaurant. Ups anchor—and eases out into open waters for the return run back to Capetown. Well, it was just a dream.

## TAXI-DRIVER JOURNALISM

Some time in 2015, I was in a small airplane on a local flight inside Zambia. That's Northern Rhodesia for those of you who are old enough to have done your primary school education in a classroom with a huge map of the British Empire, in red, on the wall.

Most of the passengers inside this polished aluminum flying cigar-case were Zambians. Pretty much all of them were chatting with their fellow passengers in English. Strange, why wouldn't they chat in local, Zambian languages? So that was question #1 for the cab driver as we left the airport. Answer: "because we have 72 languages inside Zambia" (you idiot).

Okay, maybe some of them are more like dialects than separate languages. But you would have to master at least 6-8 clearly separate languages if you wanted to chat with all of your compatriots. So you start with English until you find out whether you have the good fortune to be chatting with someone from your own language group.

Many years ago, newspapers used to be published in most of the local languages. Nowadays all newspapers are published in English only. Similarly, and this one's for the fans of the Freakanomics podcasts, bibles in local languages are now bought & sold at astronomical prices. Because, nowadays, you can only buy new bibles in English.

Of course, as in most countries, the educated elite of Zambia has long used English to communicate with the rest of the world. But, given the 72 languages inside the country, English seems destined to remain the lingua franca for all Zambians for the foreseeable future.

There you have it... "taxi driver journalism". It fills the page while waiting for truly global inspiration.

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## “BOOK OF MORMON”

Finally, in this Africa segment, we have a recommendation for you—go see *The Book of Mormon*. Yes, it’s a musical. And, like you, we haven’t bothered to go to a musical since *The Sound of Music*. *The Book of Mormon* was written by the same guys who wrote *South Park*. It’s the most politically incorrect thing you’ll ever see on Main Street in the U.S.

Two young Mormon missionaries head off to Africa to do their 2-year stint of evangelizing. It’s not going well. Practically zero converts. They decide to “adapt” their religious storyline to fit the local customs. They start getting lots of converts. Meantime, slowly but surely, their Mormon faith morphs into ... well, you need to go see it. Very clever, very funny. If you take it at face value, it seems deeply racist. But actually the Africans are the winners.

The amazing thing is that the Mormon church has been very savvy about this. They haven’t made a fuss. They haven’t sued for libel or defamation. They just encourage folks to go see “*The Book of Mormon*” and decide for themselves. On that point, I guess we agree with the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. And on not much else.

## CHAPTER 7

# THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE UPDATED



*Chances are that if you love someone, you might also like their friends. And if those friends come from the Middle East, you might also end up liking the Middle East. Of course, you can be selective. You don't have to like all of the Middle East, all of the time. After all, it's an extremely diverse place. It's like anywhere else—you choose your group of friends rather carefully and you learn to live with the rest.*

*I eased into this slowly. We lived in the most Jewish part of the Washington suburbs. Our children learned to sing the Israeli national anthem at high school. Our daughter attended 43 bar mitzvahs or bat mitzvahs in 18 months. I know, because I slept in the minivan while waiting for her to come out.*

*Meantime, every Sunday, we had lunch with the Palestinian side of the family. Those who were expelled from Jerusalem in 1948; then nationalized by Nasser in Egypt in the 1950s; then lost their businesses again in Beirut during the civil war in the 1970s and 1980s. Only to land in the warm embrace of the US of A. No wonder they are now forever grateful and dedicated Americans.*

*A job offer came up. To work in the Middle East. So that's how it started. Living in the Middle East for a decade or so.*

*We're very secular. Me, the woman in my life, and most of our friends. Nonetheless, we're all interested in religions, in an academic kind of way. If for no other reason than to understand regional politics at its most basic level. Our group of friends covers all three Religions of the Book. Including the main sects within those religions. Most times when these folks write about their own religions, it's impossible to understand. Or at least, very boring and time-consuming. So I've taken the liberty of giving you my own potted summaries. I had good intentions. Please forgive me for my errors, my inaccuracies and my sins.*

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## WATCH OUT FOR THOSE FALSE RUMORS

It's not easy to run a radio station during a civil war. Bad enough dodging snipers on your way to work. But once you're behind the microphone, you also have to dodge the Censor.

The Censor is paid by the "government" of the moment. Perhaps the "government" controls only ten percent of the national territory. But if your radio station falls inside that ten percent, probably in the capital city, then you gotta cope with the Censor.

Most times, the Censor is a poorly paid and under-educated bureaucrat. He or she is also very bored. Do the lyrics "she's leaving home, bye, bye..." convey a subversive message, for example? After all, where's home? On which side of the truce line? And what are her political motives for going to the other side? I guess we should check with Paul McCartney to see what he had in mind.

Even more subversive than lyrics is—the news. Unfortunately, most news channels were reporting major progress by the other side. For example, in shelling government-held territory. Clearly the Censor was not doing his job. He was supposed to stomp out these false rumors.

To be fair to the Censor, there was some fairly imaginative journalism going on out there. On a quiet day, journalists would ask their friends to flick wet towels beside the newsreader's microphone. The gunfire-like noise in the background was very convincing. The Censor considered that wet towels and shelling of apartment buildings were in the same category of vicious lies—the false rumors.

The reality was a bit different. One day, a good friend showed up in our apartment. Dazed, trembling, a little incoherent, but still with his legendary sense of humor. What happened? "I just received a false rumor on my balcony".

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## OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Maybe the Soviet Union didn't invent the Police State. But they certainly perfected it. And they taught their friends how to use the same methods.

Every now and then one runs across these soviet remnants, alive & well, in another part of the world. A few years ago, we were checking into a hotel in Homs, in Syria. These were the good old days when it was still possible to enjoy being a tourist in Syria. Great archaeology; best food in the Middle East; best souks in the Middle East; best Arabic language schools in the Middle East; you name it.

We handed over our passports. Both our passports are from English-speaking countries. But we were talking among ourselves in French. The guy behind the counter was very uneasy. In the end, there was no way around the problem. So he asked us straight up & down, would we be speaking to each other in English or in French in our room?

It was hard, but we managed not to laugh out loud. We said, in English. He looked relieved and gave us the keys to our room on the ninth floor. Of course, everyone on the ninth floor was English-speaking. Our French-speaking friends were on the tenth floor. And our Arabic-speaking friends were on the second through eighth floors.

That's the way the hotel was hard-wired for the folks in the back office. The folks who listen to the bugs. They're specialized by language. A pure clone of the Soviet system. We did our best to make it fun for the listener. Probably our best gag was re-enacting the famous scene from "When Harry Met Sally". But I fear that our listener was horribly bored for most of our stay.

SECTION 3

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## SOME SMALL CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Our good friend was stationed in Baghdad. A sensational guy. Brought up in Sudan, Greece, Lebanon, Mexico, Canada and the US. Spoke four languages like a native. Smart & charming. The perfect multicultural chameleon. And built like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Let's call him Carlos.

A small & trivial part of Carlos' job was to drive out to the airport in Baghdad from time to time to pick up incoming consultants. This was in the good old days before they switched to using armored helicopters to bring people from the airport into town.

As usual, Carlos hung around outside the arrival gates, trying to pick out his incoming consultant, Josef Schmidt. Carlos had a pretty good success rate at spotting these guys. "Hi, are you Mr Schmidt, please come with us." Carlos and the equally large Iraqi driver escorted Mr Schmidt out to the van with tinted windows and started driving towards the Green Zone.

Carlos tried to make small-talk, but Mr Schmidt was totally non-responsive. Carlos started to think that something might be wrong. Then a brainwave: "You are Mr Schmidt, right?" "No, I'm not." "Then why did you get in the van?" "I thought I was being kidnapped."

Carlos was furious: "Well, next time you think you're being kidnapped, could you please check. Because now we'll have to drive all the way back out to the airport to drop you off and find the real Mr Schmidt." Meantime, Mr Not-Schmidt was sobbing quietly with uncontrolled relief in the back of the van.

SECTION 4

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## STORIES FROM THE EGYPTIAN UPRISING

At first they called it the January 25 Revolution of 2011. Now that the military are back in power, it seems more realistic to call it the January 25 uprising.

Friends arrived on January 23 to spend a few days with us in Cairo before taking the fabled Nile cruise from Luxor to Aswan. By January 26, it was clear that their cruise would not take place. And that they would not be leaving Cairo, or indeed Egypt, any time soon.

The airport was closed. We settled-in, bought reserves of food, water & candles, watched television news—and waited to see what would happen next.

Tahrir Square was a 20-minute walk away. At that point, the atmosphere was like Woodstock. The Brotherhood frisked everyone going into Tahrir to make sure they were not armed or intent on causing trouble. Soldiers sunbathed on their tanks, chatting with pretty girls passing by.

Our friends wandered down to Tahrir most days. It triggered happy, giggly memories of their student courting days in May 1968 in Paris. The only thing that bothered them was that the placards were all in Arabic. Didn't make much sense when most of the television cameras were foreign. Perhaps foreign viewers will think their placard says "I love Al-Qaeda".

So they went around day after day helping the young demonstrators to write out their "Down with Mubarak" & other slogans in English and in French. They had a lot of fun. Henri had been a senior guy in the IMF for 35 years, including the Middle East. No doubt it was gratifying for him to see street politics in action up close and personal.

## HOW TO FIREBOMB A RESTAURANT

It's really very easy. You go to the kitchen when the staff are not there. You cut one of the rubber hoses coming out of the LPG gas bottles. You wait a few seconds for the LPG gas to spread out across the floor. You get as far away as possible. Throw a match. And run like hell. Boooooom..!!

We actually watched someone do it. We were on the 24th floor of a tower building in Zamalek, an island in downtown Cairo. Brilliant view across a narrow part of the Nile. On the other side of the Nile was a very nice riverside restaurant. It belonged to Mr Ahmed Ezz, a very successful businessman. Mr Ezz was a close friend of president Mubarak and his sons.

Mr Ezz also bankrolled the president's political party. So it really was no surprise when we saw a young guy run frantically out of the kitchen a few seconds before the restaurant exploded into a fireball. The message went out: ... the Egyptian Revolution has now moved out of Tahrir Square and is spreading across the city like wildfire.

Next on the menu was a nearby apartment block with a mini-mall on the ground floor. Again, the owner was Mr Ezz. From 24th floor across the river, we watched as angry crowds looted the mall. Then set fire to the apartment building. TVs, fridges, you-name-it, were loaded into tiny 3-wheeler motorbike taxis and hauled off to the desperately poor neighborhoods of outer Cairo.

It's actually not that easy to set fire to a concrete apartment building. The best way to do it is to pour gasoline on the electrical wiring. For three days in a row, angry young men came back to set the wiring back on fire. Until nothing remained but a blackened concrete carcass.

## WHY ARE ALL THESE GUYS WEARING SHINY BLACK BOOTS?

The Egyptian uprising continues, but turns bad. It was a beautiful sunny January day. Time for our daily trip down to Tahrir Square to check out the political temperature. We left Zamalek Island and crossed the bridge, heading towards the east bank of the Nile. As we crossed the bridge a battalion of demonstrators swept by, crushing us up against the railings of the bridge. Their placards were well written and covered in plastic. Hmmm, unusual, I wonder who paid for that.

We let them march by. Suddenly our Mauritanian colleague took us aside—pointing to the boots of the “demonstrators”. He was right—every one of them was wearing brand new shiny black leather army boots. We did an abrupt about-turn and headed back home. Sure enough, all hell broke loose about half an hour later on Tahrir Square. The regime had let loose the goons, the paid hoodlums. Predictable but disappointing.

The Egyptian uprising continues. To everyone’s surprise, it turned out that every household in our neighborhood had arms of one kind or another. Shotguns, rifles, handguns, iron bars, and even Uzis. It was comforting to know that the neighborhood militias were out there, all night, every night, patrolling the unlit streets. Somewhat more convincing than the supermarket trolleys chained to the glass doors at the entrance to our building.

Nonetheless, we lily-livered foreigners were still prudent about hitting the streets at night. Well, we were willing to sneak 100m down the road to visit good friends at a nearby embassy. All the more so, since they sent their security guards up the road to escort us. A handsome, muscular bunch of dudes, straight out of a “Men in Black” movie. At one point I asked the ambassador about the process for selecting the security guys. He smiled wearily: “My wife chose each one of them.”

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY IN BAD ARABIC

From time to time, I enjoyed being a boss. The thing that I enjoyed most of all was that the staff laughed at my jokes. My family had long since given up. The repetition got on their nerves. My jokes and stories were greeted by: “Yes, I’ve always liked story number 73”. Or some other put-down.

It was different at the office. Even I knew that the staff had no choice. After all, sometime very soon, I was going to do their dreaded annual performance reviews. Little did they know that I dreaded these farcical events just as much as they did. Not only did I dread doing theirs. But I also dreaded doing mine. Over the years, I had reported to a series of politically-appointed vice-presidents, each one more inept than their predecessor.

I tried my best to keep the atmosphere “lite” at the office. Every Thursday lunchtime, we would meet for a staff lunch. 50-60 staff. Did they show up willingly? Or did they fear that the boss was doing a mental roll-call? I’ll never know. We always started with a general chit-chat about the quality of this week’s sandwiches. Then segwayed gently into the political events of the previous week. Selfishly, for me, it was hugely important to get their frank and uninhibited take on what was really happening.

This particular office was divided between a majority of Muslims and a minority of Christians. Some militant, some mellow; on both sides of the house. Fortunately there were “clans” within the office. And these clans crossed religious lines. So that made it much easier. The biggest divide was between those who were active believers and those who were much more secular in their view of the world.

If the debate started running off the rails, there was always an easy solution. Birthdays. With 50-60 folks in the room, there would always be 1-2 birthdays that week. So with a wink and a nod from my trusty assistant and co-conspirator, we would strike up Happy Birthday to You, dear XYZ(s), in lusty off-key English, before switching into Happy Birthday in horrifically bad Arabic for the second verse. All remaining tensions were then gaily defused by the cutting of the cake and the distribution of impossibly large slices to all there present. Well hamdullilah and hallelujah.

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## THINGS THAT GO UNSAID

I like Middle Eastern cultures. It's understood that the purpose of life is to have a nice time. No point in telling people things that are painful for them. Let's just leave it unsaid.

There might be a brief pause. You look at each other in the eyes. You both look down. And you move quickly onto a new, happier topic. Both sides know what was left unsaid. Personally, I find this very elegant, thoughtful and considerate.

I was reminded of this when we invited a couple of close friends to Cairo to stay in our apartment. As things turned out, we were not there. Our driver went out to the airport to pick them up. Brought them back to our apartment. Took them upstairs and put one suitcase on each side of the double bed. Looked them in the eyes, then asked when they would like to start looking around the old Islamic quarter the following day. And he left.

Very elegant. He understood perfectly well that our friends were gay. He knew that being gay in Egypt is a crime, punishable by prison. And he knew that there are just as many gays in Egypt as anywhere else. No need to talk about it. I like that.

## THE YEMEN(S) FOR DUMMIES

This short guide to Yemen is written by a dummy. For other dummies.

There used to be two Yemens. South Yemen was a British colony. Aden, the capital city, was the largest naval port in the region. You can still see the old Harrods building on the Main Street. South Yemen fought a war against the colonists. Threw them out and set up a secular socialist regime. Quite progressive and open-minded. Good education, for both boys and girls. Good health services. Unfortunately, they couldn't really afford it. So the S.Yemen economy fell apart, slowly but surely.

Meantime, North Yemen was ruled from the mountain city of Sana'a. A very traditional, tribal society, where religion was respected.

After a couple of civil wars, North and South Yemen were "unified" and ruled from Sana'a. In fact it was a hostile takeover. The north won out over the economically weakened south. The southerners have not forgotten. They are still biding their time.

In the area running north from Sana'a to the border with Saudi Arabia lives a group known as the Houthis. Their religious beliefs are loosely related to the Shia form of Islam practiced in Iran. The Houthis have a long list of grievances against the rulers in Sana'a. So, in late 2014, the Houthis invaded Sana'a. Everyone believes they were helped by Iran. It's probably true.

So now we have a Shia-linked sect from the north of Yemen ruling a large part of "unified" Yemen. Almost everyone else in Yemen is Sunni. All kinds of Sunnis. Everything on the spectrum from very moderate, almost secular, Sunnis through to Al-Qaeda. Looking kinda ominous, right? And pretty much in line with what you're seeing on the evening news.

At this point, my friends from the region come down on me like a ton of bricks. No, this is NOT at all a sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni. There is no tradition of Sunni-Shia conflict in Yemen. Okay, yes, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is making things worse. But, really, the conflict is driven by personal & tribal rivalries.

General Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled Yemen for more than 30 years was squeezed out of power in 2012. He didn't go away. He still controls large parts of the army. Those parts of the army plus various tribes & militias swept down from the north. Squeezed Ali Saleh's presidential successor (Gen. Hadi) down into Aden. And then onto the next plane to Riyadh. To be continued.

That reminds me of a good book: "Yemen, Dancing on the Heads of Snakes" by Victoria Clark. The title of the book is a direct quote from Gen. A.A.Saleh on the joys of ruling Yemen. Unfortunately, none of what's going on, on either side of the political spectrum, looks to me like a recipe for getting back to good education for both boys and girls in Yemen any time soon. I wish someone had a better plan.

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## KHAT VERSUS CAFFEINE

They say that chewing khat (or qat) gives you a buzz like a megadose of caffeine. That doesn't sound very appealing to me. Others say it makes you feel very alert, perceptive, creative. Could give you an urge to write poetry, for example. That sounds more interesting.

In Yemen, chewing khat started as a rich man's thing. Wealthy folks would chew during the weekend. Then over the years, poorer people, who couldn't really afford it, started chewing. First, during the weekend. But then the habit spread to weekdays. In the good old days, women didn't chew. Only men. Now women chew. And even children.

It's a social disaster. Right up there with alcoholism in Soviet Russia. Families spend up to forty percent of their income on khat. The parents become dysfunctional. Families fall apart. And nobody does anything useful after 3pm. Neither at work, nor at home.

To make matters worse, the khat is grown in Yemen. Using stolen groundwater from illegal wells. Using subsidized fuels for the irrigation pumps. And using loads of pesticides.

Meantime, natural rainfed khat grows in the highlands of Ethiopia. Cheaply, with no irrigation and no pesticides. Yemen could import this hi-quality organic khat from Ethiopia for probably half the price of the homegrown variety.

However, the mafia of domestic khat producers in Yemen makes sure that doesn't happen. Customs officials (no less) will burn imported khat if they find it. And those who have thought about importing it on a commercial scale have been "discouraged" by various means.

Many people think that Yemen will be the first country in the world to completely run out of potable groundwater. I met an important person in Sana'a who seemed willing to talk about the problem. We agreed to meet for lunch on Saturday. The conversation was going rather slowly. Long vacant pauses. He seemed to be looking for his words or his thoughts. His eyes were bloodshot. He was completely out of it—on khat.

When I drove to the airport a few days later, I saw a group of young boys lying motionless in the middle of a traffic circle. The driver nodded. Khat.

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## THE HORN OF AFRICA

Djibouti is a charming little city-state. The legacy of the French colonial heyday is still there for all to see. The old colonial hotels, the good food, the French language spoken alongside Somali. The diving is good. The people are friendly.

Djibouti just has the bad luck to live in a rough neighborhood. Until recently, pirates pillaged shipping with impunity along the coast of Somaliland just next door. Somali refugees pour across the border after each drought. Or after yet another episode of civil war.

Many of the refugees will stay forever in Djibouti. Others will trust their lives to the people traffickers who will take them across the Red Sea at night to the coast of Yemen. Supposedly, they're on the first leg of a long journey to the European eldorado. More likely, the traffickers will rob them, then abandon them in Yemen.

I checked into my hotel. Most of the other guests seemed to be military. From Spain, Germany, Japan, France and the US. Apparently they were part of the international anti-piracy task force.

I picked up a taxi and went for a drive around Djibouti-Ville. On the outskirts of town, the US embassy covered several square blocks. An enormous windowless compound the size of several aircraft hangars. Seemed like a rather large US embassy for a tiny little country like Djibouti. Perhaps there's another explanation.

Next day, we rented a 4-wheel drive and headed out into the flat, roadless countryside. We got out to admire the picturesque desert. Out of nowhere, a US Hercules transport plane appeared, low in the sky. Landed noisily in a tornado of dust and sand just a hundred meters away from us in the desert. Turned around. Taxied. And took off again. Clearly this little country has more uniformed visitors than I'd realized.

Time to go back to the hotel. To rest up after a day outside under a merciless sun. Back in my room, the TV news had the usual litany of depressing stories. Including drone strikes on Yemen and Somalia. Launched from where? I'll leave you to guess.

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## VEGETABLE JIHAD

Let's face it, we monocultural white boys need time to adjust to living east of Istanbul. First, there's the call to prayer. Several times during the night. And in the early morning. The subconscious part of the brain adjusts very quickly to this haunting melody. To the point where a night is somehow not complete without half-hearing the call to prayer.

The next step in the adjustment process is wedding parties. A furious salvo of fireworks for 10-15 minutes. Followed by the muted distant sounds of oriental music. All the locals can easily tell the difference between fireworks and Kalashnikovs, Uzis and Bazookas. We wimpy foreigners are not so sure. But eventually we get it.

Stage three of adjustment is about firing into the air. Folks do it to celebrate a particularly fiery political speech. Or perhaps just to celebrate Easter Mass. Wise folks head indoors when they hear this happening. What goes up must come down. Every year there are casualties from stray bullets.

So, having made it successfully through the first three phases of auditory adjustment, I thought I had graduated. But no, after moving into a new apartment, my senses were assaulted by a new barrage of sounds. Two men in a truck were driving slowly past our window. Messages blared out at 120 decibels through an ancient loudspeaker.

"The Caliphate has arrived. All believers are liberated. All non-believers should assemble in front of the building. Justice will be swift." Or so I imagined. Such is my paranoia. I asked my companion for a quick translation. She said that, yes, indeed, the jihadists were outside our window. Only these guys were from Vegetable Jihad. They were selling tomatoes, lemons, lettuces, grapes, figs, and cucumbers. At very good prices.

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## DON'T SWIM DURING NASRALLAH'S SPEECHES

Rumors have probably reached you—that the Middle East is a pretty mixed-up part of the world. Lots of wonderful people. Mixed up with quite a few bad guys. You've probably also heard that Beirut is a bit of an outlier. Truly diverse by the standards of the region. And much more tolerant than most of its neighbors.

Of course, Beirut is like most US cities. It's a good idea to know who lives in which parts of town. And to make sure you don't stray into the wrong part of town after the sun's gone down.

Beirut has a few other weird idiosyncrasies. For example, it's not a good idea to go swimming when Hassan Nasrallah is making one of his fiery speeches. One bright blue summer's day, I was enjoying doing my lengths in a sunny rooftop Olympic pool when the lifeguard told us all to get out of the pool — immediately — and get back inside the building. I complied, but I really did think it was a bit over the top.

Yes, yes, of course I could hear that thousands of Nasrallah's supporters had started firing merrily into the air in support of his speech. But that was four kilometers away, in the southern suburbs. I sat there grumpily waiting to get back into the pool.

One of my swimming buddies arrived. He laughed. Told me that the same thing had happened to him a few months earlier. And when he got back into the water, he saw that several stray bullets had indeed landed in the pool. In his lane. And with enough force to shatter the porcelain tiles at the bottom of the pool. Interesting—so I guess the lifeguard had a fair point.

## A “ROOTS TRIP” TO LEBANON

We picked him up from the airport in Beirut. A tough New Yorker, mid-30s, tall, muscular, military haircut, in black sleeveless T-shirt. Let’s call him Bud. Our son’s best friend in NYC. We liked him instantly.

It’s the classic story. His mom was Lebanese. She was an orphan. Grew up with the nuns in an orphanage in the Lebanese mountains to the age of 16. The nuns were hard on the kids. In the winter, they had to walk barefoot through the snow to get water from the well.

One day, a middle-aged man appeared at the door of the orphanage. Lebanese, in his forties, he had emigrated to the U.S., and now he was back in Lebanon to find a wife. The nuns were very straightforward. They told Bud’s mum-to-be that she could choose. She could marry the man from America. Or she could work in slavery for the rest of her life with a family in the village.

She chose to marry the man from America. Her life in America, in the Deep South, was not happy. At some point, she had a brief fling with a younger man. A man of her age, also Lebanese. Her husband found out; pulled a gun; and shot her point-blank.

She survived, but spent two years in hospital recovering. It was the Deep South. So her husband paid off the police and the judiciary and got away Scot-free. This is all by way of background to explain that Bud’s mom had very unhappy memories of everything Lebanese, including the Lebanese in America.

So, when Bud announced to his mom that he was going to do his “roots trip” to Lebanon, she didn’t want to hear a single word about it. Bud went anyway—and we picked him up from the airport.

We had the GPS suckered onto the windshield. As we left the airport, the GPS said that we were on the “Imam Khomeiny highway”. Bud was thunderstruck. We were amused—because we didn’t know that the highway had a name.

We took our roots boy home, put him to bed, and waited for tomorrow. We were determined to show him a good time and to show him his roots.

The next morning, we took Bud down to the Beirut waterfront for some good Lebanese food. Our friends were intrigued by this tall, muscular, American. What was his mom's family name? Where was she from? Which village? What was the name of the orphanage? Eventually we narrowed it down to one village and three possible orphanages in the area around that village.

We went back to the apartment; logged onto Wikipedia; found the coordinates of the village; entered them into the GPS; set the alarm clock; and went to bed for a good night's sleep.

The next morning, refreshed & ready to go, we piled into the car; suckered the GPS onto the windshield; and set off. An hour and a half later, we were nearly there. The first orphanage was not it—too recent. The second orphanage didn't fit the description. The third orphanage looked promising.

It was already late afternoon. We parked the car and ventured into the office. They checked their records—yes, Bud's mom was there. Meantime, a tidal wave of children (5-15 years old) descended on the playground. Football, basketball, you-name-it, they did it.

Bud joined in joyously. It so happened that he was wearing cool, red, hi-top sneakers. The children asked their teachers who was this American idol. Finally, one of the teachers came out, called for calm, and made a short speech.

Bud is from America. His mom "graduated" from this school and went to America. Wow..!! Bud has come back to see his mom's school. And he will give us a donation—so that our school can do even better than it's doing now.

Whereupon Bud reached in his jeans' pockets, peeled off several thousand in greenbacks, and handed them over to the school's accountant. Gasps all round. In the middle of all this, Bud hauled out his cellphone to call his mom in California. She confirmed that this was her orphanage. Everyone cried a little bit. And then, emotionally drained, we drove back down to Beirut.

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## THREE WAYS TO GET A DRIVER'S LICENSE

Method 1 is the cheapest. You sit the test. You pass. And they give you a driver's license. Well, it's not all that cheap. Because the law makes you take driving lessons with a registered driving school. You can't show up in your own car for the driving test. No doubt the driving school pays something to the guys who run the driving tests so that their driving school stays "registered". And then the driving school needs to recover those costs from you. But at least it looks clean. You paid for driving lessons. You passed the test. And they gave you a license.

Now if you have the bad luck to fail the test, you can resort to Method 2. You and your driving instructor quietly step behind a parked car. You discreetly give your driving instructor one or two large green bills. He discreetly takes them to the driving test guy. And, hey presto, you get your license. It was a close call. But you made it. It was expensive. But slightly less expensive than paying for another set of driving lessons. So money well spent.

Of course, for some folks, money is not a problem. They can move straight to Method 3, the most expensive method. You just tell your friendly driving instructor upfront that you would like to get a driver's license without all the hassle of lessons and tests. He arranges it. And you pay him when he delivers the freshly minted driver's license into your sweaty palms. Fair enough. Everything has its price.

The amazing thing is that you will find these same three methods in almost all developing countries. And even in some so-called developed countries. Your country has to get into the top third of Transparency International's rankings before this kind of hanky-panky disappears.

Anyway, I'm pleased to announce that my bellissima and I just got new driver's licenses. By Method 1, I promise.

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## A SHORT BLOG ON THE LEBANESE ECONOMY

Let me start with a short disclaimer: I love Lebanon. I am perfectly aware of everything that's bad about it. But I'm also very aware of everything that's good about it. It's a long list. And, for me, the goods still outweigh the bads. Okay, it's a close call.

Let's start by looking at the bads. These are mainly about politics, governance and the economy. Let me skip politics & governance. Instead, let's look at a few economic factoids. The government hasn't been able to pass a budget law since 2005. By my math, that's more than ten years. Instead, each year, they've been forced to pass temporary budgets that are identical to the budget of the year before.

Right now, in 2015, there's no President. Nobody to sign new laws, sign new loans, or even sign the appointments of new ambassadors. So total paralysis. The national budget is in three parts. One third to pay public service salaries. One third to pay interest and repayments on the colossal public debt—135% of GDP if my memory serves me right. And one third to pay subsidies to the electricity sector.

So what about investment in public infrastructure..?? Nothing, zero, nada, nichevo. The only public investment taking place is whatever is funded on concessional terms by the international donors. Which then adds to the national debt.

Okay, Beirut and the other municipalities can finance a certain amount of infrastructure (roads, water supply, etc) from their tax base. But they can't borrow. No sovereign guarantees from the state. So municipal investment is pretty limited.

On the other side of the income statement, we have the Lebanese private sector. Very dynamic. It's a rough & tumble, reminiscent of Chicago's heyday, but they do get stuff done. The best health care in Lebanon is private. The best education is private. It all has a US flavor to it.

While it's hard to choose, perhaps what bothers Lebanese citizens most is their electricity sector. It has been an unresolved scandal for the past 25 years. An endless sinkhole of public funds. Hundreds of millions of dollars. Let's not speculate about where these funds go. But no country can grow and compete in this modern world if one-third of its very limited public budget is eaten up by subsidies to a non-performing electricity sector.

I haven't talked about the regional situation, insecurity, the army, refugees, you name it. Next time I write I'll tell you about the goods that outweigh all these bads. Meantime, hold your breath.

## A SUNDAY HIKE THAT WENT BADLY WRONG

The eastern end of the Mediterranean has a certain charm. From eastern Turkey through Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and into the occupied West Bank, there are choppy chains of mountains. Sparsely populated, often rather remote from law enforcement.

In the good old days, it was easy to go hiking around these hills. Enjoyable and relatively safe. These days it's best to be more selective. And to include some local folks in your party.

In autumn 2014, we joined a group of friends for a Sunday hike in the mountains of the eastern Mediterranean. About twenty of us, with three guides from a nearby city.

It was one of those days that romantic poets write about. Our footfall was eerily silent on a carpet of red, yellow and brown autumn leaves. Early morning mist swirled around the close-packed tree tops. We wandered up the winding forest track towards the skyline.

Alone in the silent forest. Well, not quite alone. Every now & then we would catch a glimpse of distant shadowy figures moving between the trees. Most often they were cradling what appeared to be a shotgun. Local boys out hunting, our guides told us. Reassured, we continued on our merry way.

After several hours and several pauses, we stopped in a very pretty clearing for lunch. Baguettes, cold cuts, cheeses, olives, some Mediterranean salads. Some of the group shared red wine in plastic cups. Replete & replenished, everybody then gathered in the center of the clearing to take a head-count before setting off for the long downhill slog to the waiting bus.

But wait, we're one short. Let's do a recount. Everyone check that their friends are there. Still one short. Hey, where's that guy who came alone—with no buddies (in diving parlance)? Come to think of it, nobody could remember seeing him since the previous pause over an hour ago. Meantime, the sun was already down on the tree tops. The shadows were getting longer by the minute. Maybe one hour of daylight left for a search.

Fast forward to midnight. By then our guides and some soldiers from the local outpost had suspended their search until first light. The parents of the lost soul had driven up from the city with some of his clothes so that the dogs could track him down in the morning.

Meantime, the rest of us were being politely interrogated at a remote rural police station—as possible accomplices in a kidnapping..!! Not quite what we had in mind for a Sunday hike in the forest.

Fast forward again to daybreak. Someone (but who?) had found him safe & sound (but where?). No details. Surprisingly, the local hyenas hadn't attacked him during the night. Apparently he was in very good shape. Then a news blackout for 48 hours. Of course, rumors started to run riot. Most likely he had been kidnapped and they were now negotiating the price of his release.

A week later, we joined a "Welcome Back" party for the lost soul. His version was that he had spent a cold night out and that the dogs found him in the morning. He had a shy, enigmatic smile. No amount of friendly cajoling would persuade him to change his story.

However, in this part of the world, the conspiracy theory always wins. So we all know, for sure, that he was indeed kidnapped by the shadowy figures in the forest. And that, as is often the case, he signed a promise of silence as part of his release. More importantly, our version makes for a much, much more interesting story.

## A FEMINIST'S LAMENT

From time to time, I read a wild blog by a feminist in Beirut. Not the easiest place in the world to be a feminist. So it's more often an angry rant than a blog.

Recently she wrote a rant about glasses (or spectacles, if you prefer). For years, she had been wearing glasses with large unattractive thick black frames. As part of her overall ugliness armor to ward off the tidal wave of lewd comments from men in the street.

At some point, she started to notice a change. "Hey, I love your glasses", for example. How strange. Our feminist friend mulled this over for a few weeks. Until she finally cracked the code: Mia Khalifa. A US-Lebanese porn star who had caught the attention of many middle eastern males. And guess what, Mia Khalifa ALWAYS wears her glasses. With large thick black frames.

Unfortunately this deep insight from the feminist blogosphere came too late to save me. I had already bought new glasses a year ago. With large unattractive thick black frames.

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## CROONER KARAOKE

I have a buddy who likes to sing karaoke. Me too. So we do it together. We invite family & friends. They do their best to enjoy it. Listening to us singing lustily. But, let's admit it, a little off-key. He bass, me tenor.

We did Xmas carols last time. It worked well. A small number of us had been brought up in churches. The rest in mosques. But, every single one of them knew the words of the Xmas carols. One of those many little magic things about the multi-confessional Middle East.

For our next karaoke, we're planning to do Crooners. Crooning started when microphones arrived in the 1920s. Singers no longer had to throw their voices to the back of the room like opera singers. Instead, they could croon sentimentally into the microphone.

In the 1940s, Bing Crosby and Jim Reeves took crooning off into country music. But by the 1950s, crooning was slowly but surely being overtaken by rock'n'roll. Perry Como scored one last great crooning hit in 1973.

We're going to start with a very small sample of "dead crooners". Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Mario Lanza, Nat King Cole, Ray Charles, Johnny Hartman, even Elvis.

Then, if our guests haven't already left by then, we can move on to a few "living crooners". Charles Aznavour, Billy Joel, Julio Iglesias, Sir Paul McCartney (Kisses on the Bottom), Tony Bennett, with screaming Rod Stewart as a grande finale. But by then, there'll just be my buddy and me. No witnesses. We can scream as lustily as we want.

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## THE TURKISH COAST IN SEPTEMBER

Slept on the deck. Under the stars. With just the quiet lapping of water against the hull. No wind. No passing boats. No other sounds. Woken before sunrise by a damp, chilly dew. Dozed off.

Woken again at sunrise by the crew starting their duties. Slowly the boat-side panorama morphed from black cardboard silhouettes into steep green hillsides. A boat passed, far away. We swayed briefly in its wake. With a few metallic protest clunks from the anchor chain. Then again silence.

The others emerge from their cabins in dribs & drabs. Yawning, stretching, reaching for their sunglasses. First stop, strong Turkish chai or coffee on the after-deck. Did you sleep well? Yes, thanks, and you? Time for the pre-breakfast swim. One by one, they walk the plank, and plunge into the brine. How is it? Like a sauna. Another splash. And another.

The swimmers float & chatter. Swim a few lengths. Float & chatter. Climb back onto the boat. And towel-off for breakfast. Mediterranean fare—cucumbers, olives, tomatoes, yoghurt with dill, coarse bread and eggs. More strong chai or coffee.

By now the sun is starting to breathe fire at the earth. A few folks gather around the chart table. The Captain's finger hops across the chart from bay to bay. Difficult decision. Let's move from beautiful cove 39 to beautiful cove 52.

Up anchor & away. Dinghy bobbing behind. Playing cards on the after-deck. Sun-bathing, snoozing on the forward deck. Coddled by a gentle breeze. The headlands pass. Occasionally a marina, hidden away in a tree-lined cove. A forest of masts, halyards slapping lazily in the breeze. Occasionally a fellow boat swooshes by. Symbolic waves between perfect strangers.

Down anchor; swim/kayak/sail; lunch on the after-deck; siesta.

The sun slips down over the yard-arm. Time for drinks. On the boat or on the beach?  
The sun's rim dips below a nearby hill. A brief lull in the conversation. The twilight deepens.

Nature's ballet moves on to act two. The moon takes over as principal ballerina. Timidly at first. A flame orange arc edges out from behind a distant peak. The arc becomes a pale orange disc. Then kicks off to join the stars. Like a chameleon, becoming gray-white—an oversize star.

Time for dinner on the after-deck. Grilled fish, eggplant, fresh salads, Turkish raki. The music veers from jazz to crooners to dance. A burst of exuberance to wrap up another idyllic day.

One by one, we drift off to sleep, perchance to dream. Under the stars. With just the quiet lapping of water against the hull. No wind. No passing boats. No other sounds.

## THE 3 RELIGIONS OF THE BOOK

Another cheat-sheet for dummies. The Jews came first with the Torah. Then the Christians with their New Testament. Then, 600 years later, the Prophet Muhammad with the Holy Quran. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the three “Religions of the Book”. In that chronological order.

Christ was a Jew who broke away from Judaism to protest about the corruption of the “clergy” (let’s use this term for all three religions). Rebellion against the corruption of the clergy is a recurring issue in all three Religions of the Book. Until today.

Much of the Quran is quite tolerant towards the two earlier Religions of the Book. For example, the Prophet Muhammad recognized all the prophets before him. In Islam, Christ is a prophet who came before Muhammad, but is not the Son of God. In all three Religions of the Book, a liberal interpretation of their books (Torah, New Testament, Quran) is totally compatible with the modern world.

In the hours after the Prophet Muhammad died, a tribal dispute broke out over who should be the Prophet’s successor. Ali was one of the candidates. This dispute festered until Ali’s son, Hussein, was killed during a battle in Kerbala, in present-day Iraq. Islam split into Sunni Islam (centered on Mecca, in Saudi Arabia) and Shia Islam (centered on Iran). FYI, there are still many more Sunni Muslims than Shia Muslims in the world today.

Over the centuries since then, various ideological differences have developed between Sunni and Shia Muslims. From the Shia point of view, this schism was a “reformation”. Just as the Protestants broke away from Catholicism many centuries later. Having said that, the doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia are much less significant than the differences between Catholic Christians and Orthodox Christians, or between Catholic Christians and their Protestant break-always.

After the Sunni-Shia split, a Sunni clergy took control of Sunni Islam, while a separate Shia clergy took control over Shia Islam. In both cases, these clergies launched an industry of interpreting/re-interpreting the Quran; things that the Prophet said; and things that the Prophet’s companions may have said. The Catholic clergy did something similar for the Christians.

On the Sunni side of the house, something happened around the 11th or 12th century AD. The Sunni clergy decided that there was too much re-interpretation and rule-making going on. No doubt that was true. So they froze the interpretation industry at that point in time. Critics say that this back-to-basics decision has locked Sunni Islam into a conservative time-warp. On the Shia side of the house, the interpretation industry continues until today. In this respect, Shia Muslims consider that they are the “reformist” branch of Islam.

A few centuries later, Christianity disgraced itself again with the Inquisition, burnings at the stake, and so on. Once again, a rebellion against corrupt clergy (Catholic in this case) led to the reformation and to the creation of a host of Protestant sects. Some folks like to draw a parallel between Shia Islam and Protestant Christianity. It’s okay, but a bit of a stretch.

I know less about Judaism. All I can tell you is that the Reform Judaism that I’ve known in the US, for example, feels like a positive force. While, at the other end of the spectrum, Orthodox Judaism does not. Especially when it comes to Eretz Israel versus the Palestinians. Again, the difference between these two very different branches of Judaism seems to be driven by their clergies rather than by the Book. The Torah is the same.

So to sum up. All three Religions of the Book started out with quite good basic books. Preaching love and tolerance. Over the centuries, religious bureaucrats (clergy) have messed it up for all of us. Causing endless wars and hatred. Religion is a private business, between us and God. Let’s go back to the original books and forget about the clergies. Well, we live in a free world. You’re free to agree or disagree.

PS: On the Shia-Sunni split, I have a book recommendation for all of you anguished news watchers out there: “After the Prophet: the Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split”; by Lesley Hazleton. Watch the news on Al-Jazeera; put the TV on mute during the ads; and dip into this book. I think you’ll find it relevant and stimulating. Happy reading.

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## MULTI-CONFESSIONALISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

We were in Beirut. And we were about to move out of our apartment. So we called the moving company. The estimator came to our apartment. A charming elderly gentleman called Hussein. He wasn't in great shape. I helped him up the steps and into the elevator.

Following local social norms, Hussein accepted our offer of a Turkish coffee and a leisurely chat before getting down to work. To my surprise, the chat revealed that Hussein was my age. He looked at least 20 years older. Unfortunately poverty takes its toll over a lifetime.

He was very proud of his US-educated children—and rightly so. No doubt he had sacrificed everything (including his health) to make that happen. His daughter a pharmacist, his son a bio-medical engineer. Both with good jobs in Dubai. Both bringing much-cherished grand-children to Beirut as often as possible to make their grand-daddy happy.

Following local customs, the conversation turned briefly to politics. Hussein is Shia (as his first name suggests) and lives in the southern suburbs near the airport. The Daesh suicide attacks a week before were close to his neighborhood. We express our condolences and outrage. Hussein expresses his anger at the Saudis who presumably financed the attack. We agree.

Hussein expresses his admiration for Iranian culture and for their tolerant view of non-Muslims. We agree. And, before moving on to the inventory of our furniture, Hussein tells us how much he wants the Christians to stay in Lebanon. So that Lebanon remains the multi-confessional Lebanon that he wants to preserve. As a unique country in the Middle East. We believe him and we desperately want to believe that he is not alone.

## SAUDI ARABIA FOR DUMMIES

Okay, so maybe you won't have the patience to sit thru 3x28 minute episodes of a BBC doco, narrated by our buddy, Tarek Osman from Cairo. But let me give you some sound-bytes in the hopes that you'll be willing to give it a shot (you can fast-forward from time to time).

Tribes, camels, swords—as a warm-up act. Al-Saud family takes control. President Roosevelt drops by to say Hi—please note. What on earth(?) is Wahabbism?

Why did the Saudis fund the Taliban in Afghanistan? What was Osama bin Laden doing in Afghanistan? Why were the Saudis so upset about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait? So upset that they invited the Christian Crusaders (the US) to invade? (wow, that bad..!!)

Why were 15 of the 19 members of the 9/11 team Saudis? What is a “Salafi” anyway? How do the Saudis feel about Al-Qaeda? How do the Saudis feel about the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, ..)?

How come the Saudis are some of the most avid users of social media (YouTube, FB, Twitter, ..)? Why do the Saudis want to oust Assad in Syria? (no-brainer, but if you're not sure, then you should at least listen to episode 3 of Tarek Osman's documentary)

I went to Riyadh a couple of times. Truly a unique, mind-opening experience. Do you know the Saudi parody of Bob Marley: “No woman, no drive”? Did you see the recent cartoon showing a Saudi couple watching the movie “Thelma and Louise”. The guy says to his wife that the film seemed rather short. She looks at him ferociously and tells him it's because the censor cut all the scenes of women driving.

## ON THE ROAD TO THE CALIPHATE

2015 wasn't a good year for Mo. His IT service/consulting business in Dearborn Michigan had been growing nicely. Until the Hackivists attacked it. They thought a guy called "Mo" must be in cahoots with Daesh (ISIS). Of course, he wasn't. But he lost all his client data in the attack. And now the business was struggling to get back on its feet.

Mo was a very "religious" guy. Like, he went to the hair salon every two weeks, religiously. For touch-ups to his man-bun. For a number 2 close shave to just above the ears. And for a trim to his Czar Nicholas style beard. A very modern & stylish dude.

Mo's great-grandparents had emigrated to the US. From some far-eastern corner of the Ottoman Empire. As the empire was finally falling apart. Came in through Ellis Island and all that. Mo's grand-parents still spoke Arabic at home. After that, nobody spoke a word of anything other than English. Or perhaps some basic Spanish that they'd learned at high school.

Until today, nobody had made a "roots trip" to where the great-grandparents had come from. Not a single soul in the family. In fact, nobody was quite sure anymore where that was exactly. Just somewhere in the general area now controlled by Daesh.

Mo's family had kept just one tradition. They named the oldest boy Mohamed. After the Prophet. So our Mo was the oldest boy.

Like I said, 2015 wasn't a good year for Mo's business. So when Mop-head Trump declared war against all Muslims, it was kinda the last straw for Mo. He closed his business. Kissed his girlfriend goodbye. Bought a cheap 1-way ticket on Turkish Airlines to Istanbul. And picked up a paperback version of the Holy Quran in English to read on the plane.

It was Mo's first trip outside the US. He enjoyed a vigorous male massage in a traditional Hammam. He was moved by the timeless beauty of the St Sophia mosque. And he quickly came to love Turkish street food—deep inside the souk.

A short flight later took Mo to Gaziantep in south-east Turkey. Just north of the border with Syria. A slightly sinister town. Crawling with spies and military types. Turks, Kurds, Syrians, Iraqis, Americans, Brits and various Europeans. An occasional Russian. No-one had a totally credible storyline about why they were there. All the westerners were “consultants” for one security/intelligence agency or another.

In no time at all, Mo was spirited across the so-called border into the Caliphate. There he joined the IT department of Daesh and rose quickly through the ranks. Mo was an ace on social networks. He could hack with the best of them. And he understood the inner thinking of his internet victims.

Yes, this is a very sad and predictable story. If you wish, you can write the ending.

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## IRAN -- WHO WAS ADVISING OBAMA & KERRY?

We spent many years living happily in the U.S. From the very beginning, a large number of our friends were Iranian. They were all great. Some of the older ones had fled from Iran when the Shah was deposed. Others came later.

Several of my bosses were Iranian. They were all great, without exception. Very sophisticated, both technically and personally. I learned a lot from them. Among many others, our real estate agent (and good friend) was Iranian. He too was great. Very sophisticated. Knew how to deal with other cultures—the people renting our house—and how to gently negotiate a reasonable deal for each of their concerns.

So, on a personal, gut-feel level, I couldn't understand why the official U.S. foreign policy was so pro-Saudi (even after 9/11) and so anti-Iranian. Okay, I did understand that the Iranians hadn't endeared themselves to the US when they took over the US embassy in Teheran in 1979; took hostages; and raised the US to "Grand Satan" status for the following 30 years.

One day, in late 2012, my brother-in-law kindly invited me to join him for an evening at the Harvard Club in NYC. The speaker was a recently retired U.S. Navy Rear Admiral. It turns out that the retired Rear-Admiral was fluent in Arabic & Farsi/Persian/Iranian. Let's not hold that against him. The armed forces need the best intelligence people they can get.

The retired Rear-Admiral was a very persuasive speaker. His thesis was that the U.S. had wasted the last four decades in foolish alliances with the Saudis and other oil

producers in the Gulf. And that the U.S. should have developed stronger relations with Iran.

He did acknowledge that, despite the U.S. anti-Iranian policies, the U.S. intervention in Iraq had basically handed the country over to the pro-Iranian Shia. He seemed to approve of this accidental outcome.

Of course, in the question-&-answer session, a very predictable thing happened. Someone from the only nuclear power in the Middle East (Israel) raised his hand and asked a long & rhetorical question. The retired U.S. Retired-Admiral was very cool. He said: we know who you are; we know what your interests are; can we move to the next question? Thank you.

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## HOW I BECAME A PASTAFARIAN

A few months ago, I saw a photo that really caught my attention. Of a driver's license. A young woman in Kansas. The unusual thing was that she was wearing a colander upside down on her head. Like a hat. In her driver's license photo.

What is a colander, I hear you ask. I didn't know either. Well, it's that metal bowl with holes in it. You dump the spaghetti in it. The water drains off. You then add sauce and serve.

Clearly, this headgear wasn't an accident. Sure enough, Google revealed that the young woman had insisted on her first amendment right to wear a religious symbol for her driver's license photo. A Jewish guy can wear his kippa. A Muslim woman can wear her headscarf. And a Pastafarian can wear her colander.

A Pastafarian?! It turns out that a bunch of folks in Kansas got fed up with evangelical Christians insisting on teaching creationism to their kids in state schools. So they exercised their first amendment rights to form a new religion. Pastafarianism.

The new religion spread rapidly across the US. And it's now one of Kansas' great contributions to US multi-confessional culture. Along with great BBQ ribs, of course.

You can check out the Pastafarians' website if you'd like to learn more about their beliefs. All rather silly, really. But cleverly designed to gently make fun of all other religions. Of course, Pastafarians are just atheists under another name.

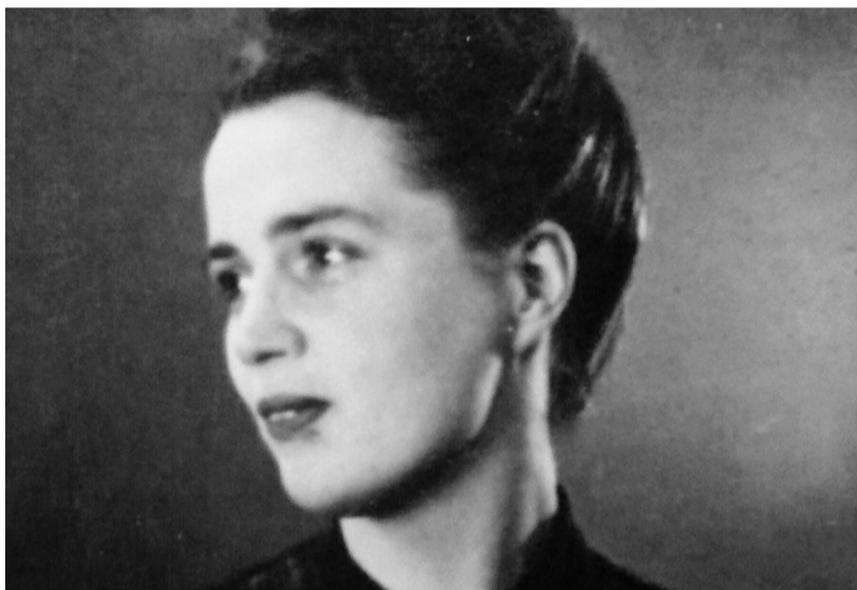
It has never been comfortable to be an atheist in the US. As usual, California would be an exception to this rule. But once you're part of a "religion", you're protected by the first amendment. And you get great tax breaks. If you can't beat'em, join'em.

The jury is still out on whether Pastafarians go to hell or not. After all, they do believe in just one god. In their case it's the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM). Rather than Yahweh, J.Christ, or Allah.

A few months ago, it was Easter. The non-Orthodox variety. Folks celebrated in various ways, some of them quite silly. It's their right. Excuse me for a moment. I'm just going to pop out to buy a colander.

## CHAPTER 8

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MY

*Why should I write about Edith, my Mother-in-Law? Well, first of all because I was very fond of her. I say “was” because she passed away in 2014. She was the classic elderly eccentric British lady. Think Maggie Smith, for example. I find that truly endearing. But then I have cultural roots in the British Empire. Not all members of her family found these eccentricities quite so endearing. Edith and I had a Mutual Admiration Society. Edith simply couldn’t believe her luck—that one of her daughters had signed up with a British colonial settler. And I couldn’t believe that my bellissima had sprung from such loins.*

SECTION 1

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## MANCHESTER 1923

Here's what I've reconstructed—from letters that my mother-in-law left behind plus a little internet research. I've used my imagination to fill in the gaps. So please read it like fiction.

Edith & James, twins, were born to Bernard & Lucy Walsh. Hard times and famine had driven Bernard & Lucy to emigrate from Ireland to the north of England. Manchester had jobs in the rags trade. Bernard made his name as an exporter of rayon, the miracle cloth of the 1920s.

By 1933, the twins were doing well at school. By 1939, near the end of high school, the shadow of war was hanging heavily over their future. Edith was a bright but rebellious student. In 1941, against all odds, she pulled off a scholarship to go “up” to Oxford to study The Greats.

Somewhere along the way, Edith became superbly fluent in Italian and quite convincing in French. She extended her horizons to history, archaeology, literature, classical music and opera, theater, the arts in general, and politics. This didn't go down too well in Manchester. Her father Bernard would have liked Edith to study accounting. And her brother James simply couldn't abide these academic flights of fancy.

Every month the number of letters from Manchester to Oxford diminished—and vice versa. Both of the Walsh males had completely run out of patience and empathy by the time they received the bombshell letter from Edith in mid-1945.

Edith had married Elias Najjar, a charming Lebanese fellow student at Oxford. The star-struck lovers just had time to pick up their PhDs in Political Science from the Registrar's office at Oxford before their first child entered the world. A beautiful little daughter, destined to be the only true Brit in the Najjar household.

SECTION 2

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## OXFORD 1943-1946

The war years had been very difficult. Even those who came out of the war alive, came out with permanent emotional scars. Fear of the sirens. Fear of being bombed or burned. Fear of running out of food or other basics. Fear of receiving a telegram from the War Office.

And yet university life still went on in a subdued kind of way. War led to morbid introspection. How did this happen? Is there something fundamentally wrong with modern political and economic systems in Europe? Oxford was a magnet for the best and the brightest from all over the world. Fueled by coffee, port & sherry, Elias and Edith discussed these existential issues with free-thinking friends from near and far. Friends from the feisty British working class. Friends who had made it across from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Friends who had fled from repressive Middle Eastern dictatorships. Friends whose parents had survived the Armenian genocide.

Everyone had heavy emotional baggage of one kind or another. What they shared was a common bond of outrage and a sense that the world could be a better place. As soon as we can finish this wretched war. These were friendships that would last for decades. Even after they had all dispersed from Oxford to the four corners of the earth.

## THE BOND OF BEING SECULAR

Elias and Edith had many things in common. A love of history and politics. A love of languages, music and art. An ability to ignore the toast burning in the kitchen. Because it was more important to resolve an argument about the fall of the Ottoman empire than to save the toast. And the children didn't always make it to school on time.

But the greatest bond between Elias and Edith was that they were incurably secular. Atheist or agnostic, who cares? But 150% secular—for life. In a way, it was even more impressive for Elias than for Edith. After all, Elias had grown up in a very traditional Greek Orthodox family in Lebanon. Where there was no civil law. The clergy of the twenty-three different sects held the population to ransom for the smallest civil transaction. They used their unrestrained powers to steal land from the rich and the poor indiscriminately. A total feudal misery.

Elias rejected all of this hypocrisy. Instead he had become resolutely modern and liberal in all his attitudes—towards women, towards all races, towards all creeds. He discreetly avoided the company of the narrow-minded. He politely ignored those who told other people how to think. Proselytism, he called it. Source of all evil. Cause of all wars. Right up there with imperialism. So religions were not a subject for debate at the dinner table. A good way to explain historical events. But basically a ludicrous and strangely persistent set of fairy tales.

By then Elias's career as a talented UN bureaucrat had taken the family from London to Istanbul to New York to Geneva, where the family finally put down its roots. In those days Switzerland was one of those rare and wonderful countries where religion was a private affair. No-one asked whether you went to the Catholic church, the Protestant church or the Mosque.

Well, the question could arise in a very indirect way, for example when the children go to summer camp. On Sundays, the children were asked to line up behind Frau Müller or Frau Zimmerman. And they were expected to know which one is Catholic and which one is Protestant. In fact, when one of Najjar children, aged nine at the time, was at summer camp, she thought it must be a choice between two sports. Elias and Edith had succeeded in concealing the very existence of religion from this child until the age of nine. A major achievement.

When the child came home from summer camp, she demanded an explanation. Elias explained. It's very simple. Many people like being members of secret societies. They invent rules for the secret society—special handshakes, standing up & down, secret oaths and songs. You need to learn all this stuff to become a member. Elias kindly asked his daughter whether she was a member of a secret society. Yes, she was in a secret society with Veronica from the family next door. And what were the rules of this secret society? Well, the main rule was that they had to hate Michèle, the girl over the fence in the other side. Elias smiled. You see what I mean?

SECTION 4

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## MISSING IN ACTION 1975-1990

We, the family, still haven't quite figured it out. Edith disappeared for fifteen years. Some of us called it the MIA (missing in action) period. Others of us called it the AWOL (absent without leave) period. I'm not going to go into details. Please don't ask.

When she re-surfaced, in Earls Court in 1990, Edith was just a quiet and ferociously independent pensioner. Albeit with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. By day, getting her daily exercise, walking around the rainy streets and garden parks of London. By night, listening to classical concerts and live opera (libretto on her knees) on her beloved BBC. Dedicated to marmalade, marmite, Earl Grey tea and scones. Like "Tea with Mussolini". A model British citizen. God save the Queen.

Edith had a somewhat indirect way of answering questions. In fact, she disliked direct questions in general. A better approach was to come at the target topic sideways, crablike. For example, by discussing the newspaper headlines of the day over a coffee at the nearby Moroccan coffee shop. This would lead inevitably to a discussion of the historical background to today's events. And, with a bit of luck, that might include events from Edith's MIA period. Bingo..!! But it was hard work to get there.

Had she traveled during the MIA period? If so, she never said so. We never found her passport for that period. Just a brand new passport, dated 1989. A replacement passport in 1999. Another in 2009. All of them empty. No visas, no stamps.

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## AN AWKWARD MOMENT AT THE THEATER

Our own fledgling teenagers grew up. And flew from the nest to the four corners of the earth. At one point, I was briefly in the UK at the same time as our daughter and, as usual, my mother-in-law.

I called up our offspring to suggest that we celebrate by going out to the theater together. She kindly found tickets online. She did mention, in passing, that there wasn't much choice on Monday nights. So the play that she chose was somewhat avant-garde. No problem there. My mother-in-law is a brilliant woman and pretty avant-garde herself.

We met outside the theater. Our daughter, her boyfriend, my mother-in-law and myself. All looking forward to a fun evening of hi-end culture. We were late. The play had just started. Reluctantly, they let us in. We stumbled through the dark. Squeezed past theater-goers' sideways turned knees. With profuse whispered apologies. Sat down as quietly as possible.

Slowly our eyes adjusted. I snatched a few glances left & right, just to make sure that our gang was okay. Enjoying themselves. Their gazes seemed to be glued to the stage. A good sign. All is well.

I turned back to the stage. In time to see an intense scene of...simulated oral sex. I felt my neck muscles stiffen. I didn't dare look sideways at my mother-in-law, avant-garde though she may be. Thank the stars, it was a one-act play.

As we filed out, I tried a clumsy icebreaker, asking my mother-in-law whether she enjoyed the play. She smiled a wicked smile and said: "Well, if it was theater that we wanted, it was certainly theater that we got..!!" I love my mother in law.

## SORRY, I DIDN'T MEAN TO

You never know when a spontaneous remark will reveal a deep dark layer of the subconscious. Remember “Tang”? A disgustingly artificial orange juice from the 1970s. Take two teaspoonfuls of this luminescent orange powder. Add water. It fizzes like a soluble Aspirin. Close your eyes, hold your nose, and drink it. And try to imagine some distant relationship with oranges on trees. Apparently this substance was still legal in the UK in 2010, long after DDT had been totally banned.

In her own loveably eccentric fashion, my mother-in-law was hosting the wife of one of her grandsons. Don't think about it too much. Just recall that they were two generations apart. The junior one was from the British Empire. The senior one was from the Motherlode of the British Empire, London (quite close to Buckingham Palace), in the United Kingdom (still including Scotland).

Two generations apart, these two good women were tied together, across time and space, by common cultural bonds, such as Tang. With great ceremony, Senior offered Junior a glass of Tang. Junior sipped it. Perhaps her caution was obvious? Senior asked Junior whether she liked her glass of Tang. Junior replied, why, yes, of course, it reminds me of my childhood.

The next part was rather unexpected. My mother-in-law hastily took the drink back, looking distraught: “I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to.” Let's peel this back a little. Was my mother-in-law's own childhood a nightmare, never to be recalled? So much so that she assumed that all childhoods must have been traumatic? Never to be revived by Tang or other psychotropic drugs? I leave you with these hypotheses.

## GOLDERS GREEN CREMATORIUM

When Edith passed away in 2014, this secular family faced a dilemma—how to organize a secular funeral? Religious funerals are easy. The script is already there. A guy (most often) in weird fancy dress reads semi-relevant texts from old books. He mentions God a lot. And then there may be some half-hearted singing of texts from old books.

For our non-religious funeral, we had to start from a blank sheet of paper. We chose a “humanist” celebrant. At first there was some confusion within the family about whether a “humanist” might be an off-duty veterinarian. We overcame this misunderstanding by googling UK Humane Society and then UK Humanist Society. The former cares for cats and dogs. The latter provide celebrants for secular funerals.

The humanist philosophy seems to be to focus on the here & now without referring to fairy tales about the past or the future. Our celebrant started by exchanging emails with a few family members. Once she got the timeline right (of who did what when), she threw it away. No point in telling the family what they already know. She then moved onto feelings. Much more swampy terrain. And then anecdotes. Finally, after a day or two of “standing in front of her easel” (as she said), she came up with her own script.

We thought she would run it by us to make sure it was goof-proof. But she didn’t. She was confident that she had it right. She was right. It was brilliant. She led the family and friends through a celebration of my mother-in-law’s life. Out of the darkness of grief and into the sunshine of the crematorium gardens. What a talent.

Edith NAJJAR, 1923-2014

She is Gone, by Anonymous

You can shed tears that she is gone  
or you can smile because she has lived.

You can close your eyes and pray that she’ll come back  
or you can open your eyes and see all she’s left.

Your heart can be empty because you can't see her  
or you can be full of the love you shared.  
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday  
or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.  
You can remember her and only that she's gone  
or you can cherish her memory and let it live on.  
You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back  
or you can do what she'd want: smile, open your eyes, love and go on.

The memorial celebration had finished. We all filed past the coffin, paid our last respects, and stepped outside into the beautiful crematorium gardens. Dimly lit by a late afternoon autumn sun struggling through grey skies. Family and friends stood around chatting, not quite sure what to do next. There hadn't really been closure. The coffin had stayed there as we left the chapel. We knew that it would be cremated at some point later in the day. And that they would give us an urn of ashes the next day.

Our daughter slipped back into the chapel to take photos of the flowers. Admired a plaque on the wall commemorating the cremation of a well-known Maharajah. The organist had folded up his music and left. All was quiet, eerily silent. Suddenly, with barely a rattle, the coffin started moving. Curtains opened. The coffin glided through the gap. The curtains closed. And then silence. A little freaky. But most of all, very final.

SECTION 8

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## BROMPTON CEMETERY

The next day the family re-assembles at Brompton cemetery to bury the small urn of Edith's ashes. The cemetery is a charming wild garden area, a short walk from where Edith lived in Earls Court. Emily Pankhurst, the iconic suffragette, is buried here. Along with various victims of long-gone foreign colonial wars. Here & there, headstones with inscriptions in Persian, Russian and Armenian. All very cosmopolitan, as befits London.

Our small family group is standing around in dappled autumn sunlight. Fresh earth lies on the ground beside a small, shallow grave. A shovel lies nearby. The cemetery superintendent stands discreetly in the background. Edith's children lower the urn of ashes into the grave and talk quietly among themselves.

Suddenly, we are startled by the arrival of two enormous blue parrots, the size of vultures. They land on nearby headstones. Their owner/trainer appears from a nearby alley. Venezuelan Macaws he tells us. We gather round to admire these beautiful creatures close-up and listen to the owner's stories. The birds get bored and fly off down the alleys into the late afternoon sun. The show is over.

## CHAPTER 9

# LIFE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE



*I'll admit it, I was terrified of retirement. The grass is greener—I've always envied the friends who chose the other road. Not salaried employment, but self-employment. Entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, whatever. With a bit of luck they can fade away over a couple of decades. Working a little less every year until it hits zero.*

*Salaried employment usually stops dead in its tracks. From 100% down to zero overnight. Of course, one can always repackage oneself as a part-time consultant. That keeps the adrenalin going for a little while. But basically the life challenge is there, staring you in the eyes: who am I and what do I want to do with the rest of the time that will be given to me?*

*We can try to keep up with 21st century technology as it runs away in front of us at breakneck speed. It's demanding, but it's fun. And it usually involves contact with Millennials. We can work a little harder on leaving a liveable planet for our children and grand-children. Climate change comes to mind, for example. And we can take pleasure (or emotional refuge?) in grandparenthood. Or all of the above, why not?*

SECTION 1

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## METRO, BOULOT, DODO

Early morning in Paris. December, winter, grey, sun struggling to rise. A classic black & white photo. Of the kind that you might buy from a bookstall by the Seine. Walking briskly to catch the metro then the commuter train. Metro/boulot/dodo (subway/work/sleep) as the French call it.

Streets are empty. Just a few other lonely commuters. Also walking briskly to their train. Crossing the bridge from l'Ile St Louis to l'Ile de la Cité. Suddenly a very loud & scary noise. Whoosh, whoosh. Whoosh, whoosh. The sound of a departing email, scaled up to rock concert decibels. Panic-stricken, I look over the bridge parapets in time to see an armada of swans flying under the bridge. In perfect formation. Wings perfectly synchronized. Whoosh, whoosh. A hundred meters out the far side of the bridge, the armada lands, a little clumsily, in the Seine. Show over.

Out the far end of the bridge, my work-bound path takes me alongside Notre Dame cathedral. One, two, three young mothers with young children go past the other way. All are warmly clad. One in a stroller, two tugging on their mother's arms. Their mothers are sleepy. But the young ones are all fired up. Can't wait to get to their kindergarten. I catch a glance of the daycare center through a brightly-lid window. Young children rioting happily among themselves. No wonder they're in a hurry to get there.

Two minutes later I step down into the underground bowels of Paris. Metro, boulot, dodo.

SECTION 2

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## THE SAGA OF MME X, LA CONCIERGE

Mme X was our concierge. For many years. We felt sorry for her having to use a toilet in the courtyard. So we banded together to renovate her tiny apartment. And to bring the toilet inside the apartment. We hoped that she would be pleased with her newly renovated apartment. And would stop hoarding stuff in it. Diogenes syndrome, they call it.

But, no, within months, Mme X had jam-packed her nicely renovated apartment with junk. Junk that she found in the street. Junk that she found by going through the building's trash cans. Old newspapers & magazines were her favorite. Preferably dried out & highly inflammable. But also nameless organic substances that slowly rotted. A choking odor rolled out from under her door and into the building's entrance way. An indescribable potpourri of organics, with a soupçon of her unwashed Terrier, and droppings from her hapless caged bird.

Every day, once a day, the concierge takes the trash cans out to the street. Mme X, as a well-meaning, devout woman, would invite the local homeless folks into the building to partake of residual delicacies found in our trash cans. As a supplement, she would also collect abandoned baguettes from nearby bakeries. So plenty of atmosphere every day in the entrance of our building.

Meantime, the rest of the building was also going down the toilet, slowly but surely. At one point, the building committee discovered that Mme X had not bought any cleaning products in the previous four years. Cleaning consisted of slopping a filthy black mop along the wooden surfaces, from time to time.

The infamous potpourri odor was climbing up the stairs. Mezzanine, then 2nd floor, then 3rd floor. We were all a little depressed by this downward slide. I guess that Mme X was a little depressed also. But, unlike the rest of us, Mme X had found a solution. Every Friday afternoon, we would hear the firetruck & ambulance arrive. Large muscular men would administer some kind of happy drug. Then carry Mme X out, smiling, on a stretcher. On Sunday night, Mme X would return to the building. Looking happy. And with a new hairdo. A free spa, courtesy of social services. Eventually someone saw a pattern in this behavior. And the fire brigade stopped answering the Friday night calls. Which was a little worrisome when you think about it.

We, the folks living in the building, could live with all of this. Except the smell—and perhaps also the risk of fire. After several years of olfactory torture, we called the city health inspectors. Eventually, after nine months of our pleading, they came. Made a forced entry, emptied the apartment, and unleashed a chemical arsenal designed to kill rats, mice, cockroaches, lice and anything else that moved. A big sign went up outside the building saying “INSALUBRE” (loose translation squalid/unhealthy). Yellow police tape forced passersby out onto the street for three days. After ten days, Mme X was allowed back inside. But Diogenes is forever. And ten days later, the apartment was again stacked full of inflammable & noxious substances.

During this period, our building finally got its act together to terminate the employment of Mme X as our resident paid torturer. We all anted-up our share of the hefty compensation required. And now we’re waiting to see whether the building can compel her to leave her apartment. French law is stacked in favor of tenants. It will probably take another five years. So we’re not holding our breath. Well, actually, we are holding our breath—as we pass through our building entrance.

SECTION 3

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## PROSTITUTION

Only the French could do this. Put together a huge, eye-catching exhibition on “Prostitution: Splendor and Misery, 1850-1910”.

In the prestigious Gare d’Orsay museum, with views onto the Seine. A vast exhibit of paintings, sketches...and vintage porno movies. The latter in small rooms, hidden behind vintage burgundy felt curtains, for over-18 only. The storyline is compelling. A hierarchy of prostitution.

Illegal professional street-walkers, the majority. Wracked by venereal diseases, tuberculosis and violence, by their clients and their pimps. Misery.

Illegal part-time street-walkers. Women in low-paying jobs who cannot put enough food on the table for themselves & their children without selling their bodies after working hours. Misery.

Middle class women, upper class women, but still compelled to make ends meet. Impossible to tell who is who. Everyone is superbly well-dressed. Nonetheless, behind the fashionable facade, misery.

Then a minority, legal prostitutes in state-controlled brothels. Patronized by wealthy men. Supposedly glamorous. Supposedly checked for venereal diseases at regular intervals. Misery.

But it doesn’t stop there. In high society, in chateaux and in stately homes, the border between a masked prostitute and a masked comtesse is not clear. Successful prostitutes find vulnerable, wealthy men and graduate to comtesse—and exit misery. I guess that’s the “splendor” part of the exhibit.

The exhibition was packed. More women than men. Mainly older folks. In fact, an unusually large number of little old ladies in their 80s staring long, hard & wistfully, especially at the vintage porno movies. Happy memories or bitter regrets, who knows?

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## A TRIBUTE TO JULIAN ASSANGE AND EDWARD SNOWDEN

What is a spy? In the good old days, it was a person who was paid by a foreign power to dig up info in your country. Even then, the definition was ambiguous. Are the Military, Political and Economic Counselors at the embassy spies? Well, yes, all of these folks talk to people in your country, kind of off-the-record, then report to their bosses back home.

Is the Peace Corps volunteer, working in a village in northern Mali, a spy? Well, yes, a little bit. After all, the Counselor does invite the volunteers in for friendly cocktails at the embassy from to time.

Needless to say, there is no border between military, political and economic power. Never has been. Everyone's favorite example is Ronald Reagan. Many people believe that Ronnie brought the Soviet Union to its knees by launching an arms race, which the Soviet Union could not afford—economically.

The borders between military, political, economic and commercial information are also disappearing. Is the marketing director of a Brazilian aircraft manufacturer a spy? Well, you guessed it—yes. She needs to know everything there is to know about her competitors. Boeing, Airbus, Bombardier, you name it. About their civilian contracts and about their military contracts. And not just what's published in their annual reports.

Of course, nowadays, we can all be spies just sitting comfortably behind our screens. No need to be physically present in the target country. No need to take risks, other than getting hit by a virus or being hacked. We start with Google or Wikipedia and we work our way out from there.

Meantime, hackers from Pyongyang can take down Sony's website. Hackers from the Islamic Caliphate can take down the FBI's home page. All from the comfort of their own home. Move over, Sean Connery. Make way for the nerd-hacker having fun while doing his military service.

At this point, I'd just like to tip my hat to Julian Assange of Wikileaks (holed-up in the Ecuadorian embassy in London) and Edward Snowden, formerly a contractor for the CIA (currently living anonymously in Moscow). They're not saints. But, for all of us global citizens, they did us a big favor. Gave us a giant wake-up call about where we're heading on the information highway. There has to be some reasonable balance between national security and personal privacy. We needed to get back into the middle of the road.

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## THE GRAY PANTHERS STOLE OUR FUTURE

Let's start with the big-picture facts. Nowadays, the under-40s have just about zero job security. How many under-40s have those famous jobs-for-life that everyone had in the 1970s? None.

Okay, now I agree that it's not really a problem if you can get a new job the next day. And that used to be generally true in some of the more free-wheeling economies, such as the US. But, based on the sample of under-40s that I know in the US today, that's less true than it used to be. Most under-40s have very insecure jobs. And if they lose the job they have, they have very little chance of getting a new job any time soon.

They say that jobs are still easy to find in free-wheeling Australia. Great, if it's true. But we all know that it's not true anywhere in Europe—and hasn't been true there for at least 20 years. Forty percent unemployment of under-30s in Spain! Living in poverty at home with their parents. That sounds like propaganda from Karl Marx. But it's true.

Then let's look at the other side of the coin. Until quite recently, some Gray Panthers (not all) were making out like bandits on their pensions. Retirement at 55-60 years old. On a healthy fixed pension indexed to inflation. Meantime, life expectancy had gone up from sixty-something to eighty-something. So there's many more Gray Panthers in the population at large. For those happy Gray Panthers on inflation-linked pensions, they get to enjoy a rather well-paid retirement for, say, 25-30 years. Sounds like quite a lot of money going to the Gray Panthers. And not much to their children.

Okay, so the Gray Panthers might have two 35-year old unemployed children living with them at home. Which is not a very happy arrangement for anybody. Clearly something is very wrong with this picture.

Things have started to change. Recently, retirement ages have risen towards 65-70. Pensions are no longer guaranteed incomes. Instead, they are just investments in highly insecure and fickle mutual funds. These pension funds can easily be wiped out by the next financial crisis. Or even by the employer simply going bankrupt. Of course, it's much more important to give the CEO his golden parachute than to honor the company's obligations towards the pension plan. In which case the Gray Panthers might just find themselves living in the spare bedroom at the house of their 35-year old children. Let's just hope that these particular 35-year olds have good, safe jobs. And a house with a spare bedroom.

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## WHY DON'T WE JUST BBQ THE KANGAROOS?

My lifelong buddy, Dan, has a Ph.D. in sheep's urine. Well, let's be more precise. Dan's dissertation was about how sheep & cattle contribute to global warming—thru urine/peeing and flatulence/farting out there amidst the pastures—and what might be done about it.

This is a big problem for countries that have large cattle or sheep farming sectors. They need to reduce these emissions enough to help slow down climate change. It makes for a good conversation over a BBQ.

At our last BBQ, Dan wheeled out an interesting factoid. About 10 years ago, some enterprising young scientists in Western Australia discovered that kangaroo flatulence is methane-free. Kangaroos have a different set of bugs in their guts. Like all enterprising young scientists, they turned this discovery into 10 years worth of research grants. Looking for the Holy Grail—a vaccine for mitigating methane emissions from cattle and sheep using kangaroo gut organisms.

Ten years later, they haven't found it. And it seems unlikely that they will. Now our Scientist Dan the white-coat-man is a very practical fellow. Is he looking for vaccines? No, of course not. Instead, he's lobbying for meat farmers to switch from cattle and sheep to farming kangaroos. Which reminds me, I must go flip those delicious kangaroo steaks on the BBQ.

## COLONOSCOPIES

I'd like to reminisce about my colonoscopies. I'm a conventional kind of guy. So my first colonoscopy was a conventional kind of colonoscopy. Very mechanical. A long silver metal snake lay on a nearby table waiting for me. The anaesthesiologist gave the usual preamble about dosages, body weight, etc. This dose should put you in the twilight zone. You can watch the procedure on the monitor above your head. But we never know—you might go out completely. That was the last word I heard. Out cold for 45 minutes. Completely missed the show-&-tell on the monitor.

I awoke in an empty white cell. Feeling strangely refreshed and cheerful. I dressed and left. My beloved was there to drive me home. Not allowed to drive after anaesthetics. Outside it was a stunningly beautiful Spring morning. Vivid blue skies. A few Magritte-like puffy white clouds. Blossoms on the trees. Let's go somewhere.

Bizarrely, "somewhere" ended up being the Textile Museum. Half a dozen charming little old Queen Mothers were admiring textiles. Sharing insights with each other in earnest, hushed whispers. It's true that the colors and the textures were stunning. But maybe I shouldn't have expressed my enthusiasm quite so loudly. The rest of the day was just as delightful. I watched the sun set from our hammock. Listening to old Beatles' tracks. I particularly remember liking the Magical Mystery Tour.

Our son has an encyclopedic knowledge of medicinal drugs. Before dinner, he took me aside: Pop, did they tell you the name of the anaesthetic they gave you? Yes, Demerol, or something like that. Hmmm, just what I thought. Pop, you've been as high as a kite all afternoon. It's embarrassing for Mom. Now, go to bed and sleep it off.

Five years go by. Time for the next colonoscopy. Time to go hi-tech. Even if it means missing out on another Demerol high. So we signed up for virtual colonoscopies. The procedure itself is uneventful. Although, as a claustrophobe, it's never fun to be cooped up inside a scanner.

The fun starts afterwards. Your doctor invites you to a screen to play a video game together. You're side by side in a micro-rocket. You blast off from your own anal sphincter muscle. Then fly through a 3D recreation of your lower bowel, upper bowel and intestine.

Every now and then, you fire the retro-rockets to do a slow fly-by inspection of anything that looks unusual. A limestone outcrop where there shouldn't be one, for example. Finally, at the end of an exhilarating ride, you turn around and fly back out to the launch pad. Reminded me very much of Woody Allen in his white jumpsuit in "Everything you wanted to know about sex but were afraid to ask".

So there you have it. Meantime yet another five years have gone by. How am I going to choose?

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## CRIME OF PASSION

The deadline had arrived and William simply did not want to face it. He was mulling over all sorts of hare-brained schemes to avoid it. The problem had started about 6-7 months before, when William's neighbors decided to move back home to Germany. They packed their stuff into a container and left. They knew they were going to move into a temporary apartment when they first arrived back in Germany. So they pleaded with William to look after the cat for them. William reluctantly agreed.

The cat was not a white purebred Chinchilla. It was one of those run-of-the mill black, long-haired Persian cats that you find sleeping under parked cars all over the suburbs. Some white markings, but nothing special.

One month became two months. Two months became four months. By then William had become rather attached to his feline boarder. The cat's IQ, sense of humor and conversational powers seemed to increase every week. William simply couldn't imagine how he would be able to give sleeping pills to the cat and put him on a flight to Frankfurt. He was losing sleep at night and losing concentration during the day.

One evening, after work, we dropped in to say hi. William greeted at us the door, still in his pajamas, looking rather haggard. Scattered all over the floor were black & white photos that he had taken of stray cats down at the pound. At the epicenter of this maelstrom was an enlarged framed photo of the neighbor's cat.

William had decided. He was NOT going to send the neighbor's cat to Frankfurt. Instead, he would send a cat from the pound—the one that most closely resembled the neighbor's cat. He invited us to give our opinion on which one of the cat candidates was most likely to fool the owners. We gave our opinion, had two stiff drinks, and then left. God knows what happened after that. I haven't dared to ask.

## REGRESSING INTO CHILDHOOD

Apparently there have been some very good films recently on this theme. Folks getting younger every year until they become newborn infants. Not sure what happens after that. And I'm afraid to ask. Of course, the most interesting part of the plot would be the changing relationships with everyone else. The normal folks that are getting older every year. I'll go see these films when I find them.

I don't think we're going to get younger any time soon. We'll have self-driving cars long before then. But, meantime, our rapidly increasing life expectancy is a good start. Together with increasingly good health. What can we do with this unexpected gift? I decided to do a U-turn. To regress into childhood. Socially & mentally, rather than physically.

It's a pretty basic idea. Not at all revolutionary. First, ditch your old-fogie friends. Or at least dilute them in the mix. Except for those old-fogie friends who are also regressing into childhood. I have a few of those. Mostly charming eccentrics. Second, add a few millennials into your mix. Like all reasonable people, millennials are happy to hang out with you if you offer good wine, women & song. Third, try desperately to catch up with the millennials' grasp of the 21st century. Buy the same toys. Learn to use them fully. Apps, drones & electric conveyances come to mind.

Music is a bit more tricky. For sure you'll have to ditch the Beatles and the Beach Boys. You're on much safer ground with blues (almost anything) and jazz (selectively). Another guideline is to go back in time and recall the list of CDs that your children spirited out of your music collection. For example: we had to replace the box set of the Rolling Stones' greatest hits three times before it finally stayed there on our CD rack. (you guessed it, 3 children) So the Stones are a no-brainer.

But whatever you do, don't actually play your CDs. That's so 20th century. Think of a track, then stream it from one of your numerous free streaming apps. From your

phone, thru wifi to your speakers, of course. It's the only socially acceptable way to do it.

Eventually the millennials may get tired of you. And vice versa, of course. They too will get older. And/or they'll start having babies. In which case your main street-value will be as a babysitter. The best tactic at this point is to accelerate your regression into childhood. Get back to late-teens, early 20s ASAP. Behave irresponsibly at every possible opportunity (except for driving). Go to the gym obsessively. Sorry, too busy to babysit. Exploit your ongoing good health to rediscover the sports that you loved before you joined the all-consuming workforce. Instead of babysitting, wait a few years, then offer to take the millennials' young kids dinghy sailing. Or maybe kite-surfing, if you're truly adventurous. The parents will be too exhausted to do it themselves.

At that point, you can also start listening to the Beatles and the Beach Boys again. Discreetly, thru headphones. At the beach. Tap your toes in the sand. No-one will know. After all, you're entitled to re-live your own teenage years. Just because you're regressing into teenage-hood, doesn't mean that you have to listen to what modern day teenagers are listening to—thank god. As for regressing into primary school, then kindergarten, well, I'm working on it. Stay tuned.

## A 3-DAY REFRESHER WITH A MILLENNIAL

Millennials love their toys. Me too. But this 30-ish Californian millennial has way more toys than me. Better toys. And he knows how to use them to the max. He was kind enough to offer me a refresher.

First, my apps. Why was I still using Google map or Apple map when I could use Waze? Dunno. Did I have the wine-tasters' app, sort of like Shazam for wine bottle labels? Nope. Did I know how to find promo codes for Uber, Lyft, LeCab in order to get the best deal? Nope, never occurred to me to look. Had I seen the app that flips Instagram photos so that you can read shop signs the right way around in selfies? Sorry, no. The list was endless. I did my best to catch up, but it was pretty much a lost cause.

Occasionally the millennial would twitch and glance furtively at his Apple Watch. Notifications were rolling in. Silently tickling his wrist. A text from his Mom; a reminder about his flight time for the next day; even a phone call; for the rest, he wasn't willing to disclose the contents (something to do with women). At one point, the millennial discreetly used his Apple watch to change the music coming out of his iPhone. Okay, I was impressed.

We moved onto bigger toys—drones. He has two. Why two, I don't know. He mainly uses them to take photos. In passing, I learned that drones caused havoc last summer during the forest fires in California. There were so many private drones in there taking photos that the helicopters and firefighting planes had to be grounded to avoid accidents.

We moved onto the ultimate boys' toys—motorbikes. Our millennial is way out in front on this one. Already, I would have been jealous of the Ducati that he had left in the back of his garage. Why, because he has an electric motorbike, a "Zero" manufactured in Santa Barbara. How cool is that? Gotta do some serious catching up with the 21st century.

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## ETHICS IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

She's very lucky to be alive. A drunken driver plowed into her van at an intersection out in the boonies. She was saved by the airbags. Police later estimate that he was doing 80 mph at the beginning of the skid marks. The drunken driver is a barman at the local bar. It's his birthday and he has a few rounds in the bar with his friends. After he leaves, everyone in this small town hears the impact.

Friends from the bar are the first on the scene. Unfortunately, no cellphone service at the scene of the accident. So friends from the bar kindly offer to take both drivers back to the bar to call the local police. In separate cars. Friends from the bar are not stupid. The second car takes the drunken driver back to his home to help him sober up. In my books, that's a hit & run.

The local police arrive at the bar. Aggressively administer a DUI test on the non-local, non-drunken driver. And have a short private conversation with the lady who owns the bar. One can imagine: "Give him a break, it's his birthday for chrissakes. And, if you give my barman a DUI, I'll have to close the bar. Do you really want close the only bar in town?"

The local police then proceed thoughtfully to the scene of the accident. There they take their time measuring things. Three hours go by before they get around to going to the drunken driver's home to measure his blood alcohol level. According to their report, his blood alcohol level by that time is just below the max. Surprise, surprise! So no longer drunken driving. And let's forget about the hit & run.

The two insurance agents conclude that the accident was 51% the fault of the victim. So her insurance will pay for damages to the drunken driver's car. And her insurance premium will be doubled next year. Conclusion: don't ever expect any justice when you're an outsider in a small, closed, inbred community. Especially when they appoint their own local "law enforcement".

## SPEED DATING, SPEED BABIES

Recently we did a statistically rigorous Masters & Johnson survey of our friends in their thirties. About their love lives. Here are the highlights. Seven out of ten had met their future spouse on a dating site. Three out of four had resorted to some form of technology assistance to get pregnant for the first time. AI or in-vitro fertilization or whatever.

Of course, you go look for your lifetime soul mate on a dating site only after you've exhausted all the old-fashioned methods—friends of friends; friends of family; work colleagues; bars & nightclubs; dating sites—in increasing order of desperation.

Our survey also revealed that the dating site approach is super-stressful. After screening out thousands of serial killers, perverts and wimps on the dating site, you still have to go meet this chosen person in the flesh, in a coffee shop, bar or restaurant. Scary, exhausting and quite often discouraging. Most often, you know within minutes whether it's worth continuing the encounter. But what if the opposite number keeps on proposing one more drink? Occasionally, not very often, the process leads to a second or third encounter with the same candidate. More likely, you move on through the database to the next candidate. And then, eventually, finally, it works. Somewhere on the scale from orgasmic “true love for ever” to “good enough to be the father/mother of my kids”.

Moving on to the next step, our 30-something friends tell us that getting pregnant is no longer as easy as it used to be. In the good old days, it used to be a terrifyingly easy thing to do. Nowadays, old fashioned methods, such as repeated sexual acts, do not guarantee pregnancy. God knows what has changed. Eventually you both go visit a “Fertility Specialist”. Who needs a helping hand—him or her? You both study an à la carte menu of hi-tech medical interventions. And eventually, finally, this too works out. Happy endings all round, with special thanks to modern technology.

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## CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Why do so many people dream of living in California? It's a big place. San Diego and Los Angeles in the south. San Francisco and the Bay area in the north. Yosemite, Lake Tahoe in the interior. Great cities, great natural hinterland. Along the coast, the climate is benign. Summers not too hot nor humid. Very mild winters.

Rumor has it that California has the sixth biggest economy in the world. By most standards, employment is good. Lots of jobs in agriculture, services, IT and start-ups. San Diego has the Navy; LA has the cinema; and San Francisco has everything cutting edge & hi-tech.

Universities are good—and perhaps almost affordable if you are a California resident. Urban areas are very multi-cultural. Big Mexican and Asian communities. And a good sprinkling of everything else. Perhaps less so than New York, but pretty impressive nonetheless.

Political attitudes tend to be more liberal. In most urban parts of the state, you're unlikely to be confronted with a raving lunatic card-carrying member of the National Rifle Association as you order your coffee at Peets or Starbucks.

So for all of these very good reasons, a lot of people want to live in California. Needless to say, the pros bring some cons. As we all know from the movies, California is the land of the automobile. Public transport is minimal. With the exception of downtown San Francisco, very few people live in hi-rise apartment buildings, in a New York style urban environment. The whole state is an immense suburban sprawl.

You have to love your car. You want to go to a café; you want to re-stock your fridge; you get in your car. You want to visit a friend; you get on a freeway; and you drive in stop-start traffic at 15 miles per hour (we're in the U.S.) to exit C-76. Yes, the nearby nature is rich, diverse & abundant. But rather than face the traffic congestion to get there and find a park, you might find it more relaxing to stay at home on your balcony-deck, cooking up a great BBQ, admiring the sunset.

Okay, let's ignore congestion. How about earthquakes, bush fires, drought and...real estate prices? Along the coast, the Hayward fault and the San Andreas fault can shake the place apart at any time. Bush fires wiped out a vast chunk of real estate in the Oakland hills only a decade ago. California's totally unsustainable irrigated agriculture was flagged fifty years ago in a ground-breaking book called "Cadillac Desert"—very little has changed since then. And real estate prices are higher than in New York.

But what can you do? California has a truly magical magnetic attraction. Congestion, earthquakes, drought, bush fires and real estate prices are not going to stop us from moving there.

## HOME AT LAST

I made several attempts to go back “home”. Some attempts were in my head. Others were more real. My last real attempt was buying a house back home. Cantilevered off a cliff. With stunning views over a little port and out through headlands to the open sea.

Fate intervened. Sharp-eyed friends pointed out new cracks in the cliff below the house. Funny that the house inspection hadn’t spotted that. These same friends earnestly advised me to wriggle out of the purchase. So I did. Found a friendly geotechnical engineer in my old university mafia. And 24 hours later I had a certificate that annulled the purchase.

A few years after that, a series of severe earthquakes struck this area. The house remained at the top of the cliff. But was condemned. No doubt it’s no longer there. Symbolically, that was the end of the dream of going home. More importantly, I finally realized that “home” had moved on. And now it’s somewhere else. I’m sorry to stoop so low, but Hallmark says it all: “Home is where the Heart is.”