

To Boldly Do What No Hamster Has Done Before
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

TO BOLDLY DO WHAT NO HAMSTER HAS DONE BEFORE

Recorded, Translated and Compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith
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Dedication

Whether hamsters or their owners, this book is for you.

Thanks for all your contact, words of encouragement and phrases that were unprintable (you know who you are).

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A Human's Introduction

From the moment our hamsters' stories started appearing on the Internet - and, subsequently, in book form - their email inboxes have been bursting at the seams with fan mail.

Daily, they receive advice on stock market investments, information about weird personal web sites with exotic sounding names, offers of enhancement that are normally, in themselves, bigger than the hamsters they're being sent to and, in ever-increasing amounts, messages about medicines with strange labels (and usually spelt with numerical and punctuation characters so our kill-files won't work on them).

Indeed, so much of a celebrity have they each become that they regularly receive notification of having been registered in lotteries in which they've won the top prize. African ex-political leaders also write to them confidentially, asking them to help them secure millions of dollars in overseas accounts.

Whoever you are - thank you.

Our hamsters love receiving such correspondence and take delight in responding to you all personally. It's good to know that their popularity seems to be beyond measure and has never once waned since the first day that their stories went public.

However, being such celebrities as they are now, I really do think that you should be giving us all your services and sending us all your products *free of charge*.

Observations of an English Hamster in America

Dak was always one of our favourite hamsters and I'm thrilled that I've been able, finally, to put together all the various strands of his writing that he did while in America with us in 2000.

Many of the hamster communities in North Carolina and West Virginia contacted me after the release of the last book to send on the hamscripts they had in their collection that were reputed to be by his paw and I'm indebted to them for the vast array of works that surfaced.

However, what it went to show was that, although much has been credited to him, there's not very much that can be attributed with certainty. For example, 'Pooky Pooter's Puckered Pea-Pods' had 'fake' written all over it - in red ink, as it happened - and was easy to spot.

More difficult were stories that had the style and insight of Dak as gleaned from his other works - the articles for the Rodent Weekly and his short work 'The Community

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in Eastbourne' (both presented to the reader in the previous release).

Some of my decisions were purely arbitrary, I am the first to confess, but decisions had to be made. I chose to reject his epic 'Gone with the Beans' - although many have asked me to include it - and yet retained 'The Boston Cheese Party' - which many asked me to leave out.

I had to ask myself whether it was like Dak to have written such stories - and, as Kath and I are the only people to be able to assess such matters (being the only ones who conversed with him daily), our decisions had to be final - we did, of course, consider submissions and advice from leading international hamscript experts.

Because of its intrinsic worth, however, I decided to consign 'The Lord of the Onion Rings' to an appendix as, when the hamscript was given to me, it had no 'intro' or 'outro' to place it within the framework of his visit. Most experts regard it as a genuine work attributable to his 'American Period'.

The Final Remedy and The New Beginning

George was our first Syrian hamster, Ebony our second and Limood was the third (Arlev, Hakeem, Dak, Kesef, Yafa and Rab were all Russians), bought by a GFO when she came to visit us during the early part of 2001. He came highly recommended from the Eastern European Rodent Universities and, indeed, brought with him a clear purpose of what he intended to achieve whilst in our midst.

His first two works were parts of the whole - a testimony by the rodent communities of the First Century AD to the historical events recorded in the Bible's New Testament. While mankind has majored on the manuscripts written by their own kind, rodent accounts have been universally ignored, works that not only appear to be faithful to their own but which add background to the events witnessed.

For example, here you'll find a characterisation of the man known as 'Matthew' from the lips of a hamster who knew him personally and a description of what actions took place when a leper approached a group of men and women travelling through the land.

I can honestly say that I find Limood's compilation of ancient hamscripts incredibly illuminating and able to flesh out the bare bones that are so often presented to the reader in the factual human Gospel record.

So successful was his first work that he continued with a second, drawing on the testimony of rodents from the Mediterranean area who witnessed the spread of the Good News in various situations and events.

I should point out that the first volume was originally entitled 'The Final Solution'

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which we argued over with Limood for several weeks as the title had certain connotations that could have been unjustly levelled at his work. He agreed to the name change shortly before the work's first release onto the Internet.

An English Hamster in Holland

Limood's secret journey with us to Enkhuizen in Holland was every bit as carefully planned and resourced as George's were to Paris and Scotland and Kesef's to Greece, although it ended in a totally different manner to each of them - something that we couldn't have anticipated.

Compiled, then, via email after our return, this is the first work to have been written 'overseas' and to have been communicated to us through electronic means. If anything, it's set a precedent for all the world's hamsters who have access to a computer and Internet connection that they may forward on their own particular rodent tradition for inclusion in, perhaps, another work that would be truly international in flavour and scope.

And, finally...

After Limood, there weren't any other hamsters who lived under our roof, although we continued to maintain strong links with the community of hamsters who lived nearby in the undergrowth (and described in 'Requiem for a Dead Hamster' in 'The Legacy of George the Hamster').

Besides, we were adopted by next door's cat, a feline by the name of Phoebe, and we felt it unwise to subject her to the aggressive nature of a Syrian hamster defending itself - something that she would have fled away from.

She has her own stories, though, as we were quick to discover - how she has covertly worked for MI6 for years - and the details surrounding her conquest of her house are now legendary. She's also been recognised as an honorary rodent by the 'Hamster for President Campaign' for all her charitable and fund-raising work for them.

Perhaps, in the not-too-distant future, a fifth book will be released that charts her own articles and stories - perhaps we may be approached by other hamsters from around the world to record their stories for the benefit of humankind - perhaps, even these tablets will start kicking in and I won't be so delusional in thinking that animals talk to me.

All that we're certain about, though, is that the future is never predictable.

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THANKS

I have retained the original 'Acknowledgements and Thanks' sections in the two works that included them rather than compile them together here as one, seeing as it would confuse the issue as to which hamster was saying what about who (which is, I agree, a confusing statement in itself).

However, insomuch as people have been an encouragement to us recently as we had the huge disappointment of PublishAmerica reneging on the Book Contract and deciding not to go ahead with its production, it's only right that I try and wrest from my own mind the names of the people who have been important.

Although only names, at least you're mentioned.

My mum and dad, first and foremost.

Pavel and Jaron Plasencia, Liz Liagin, Jennifer Budnick and Jane Duffy in North America.

Lee Westerman, Anne Davey, Anna Challoner, John Longstaff and Poz Abey at my work place.

Keith Bailey and Claire, two friends, along with Steve and Catrin Holmes who've been an encouragement since the very early days these stories began.

I should point out that Dak quotes from Amy Grant's album 'Heart in Motion' on page 36 - although he didn't attribute it, I finally found out where he took it from. There - hope that keeps the copyright owners happy.

Lee H Smith

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Observations of an English Hamster in America

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BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The reader may be wondering why or how Dak ever made it to America in the first place so a word of explanation is in order. The following is an article that appeared in the Rodent Weekly on Saturday 22nd April 2000, written by myself, in which I explained to the Weekly's readership that both our hamsters had been somewhat over-doing it at the computer and needed a brief rest.

It's fairly self-explanatory and says little more than I've written above. Still, to pad the book out, I've decided to include it.

Dak ill, Ebony serious

I heard the groans from the nest compartment as I descended the stairs that fateful day just the other week, when the sun poked its nose through the thick velvety curtains and...(Editor's note: less of the poetry, huh?)...okay, okay. I was just trying to create some ambience.

Dak was ill - or, should I rather say, incapacitated. He held his paws for me to look at and whined pitifully. 'They're so, so sore. Can't you do something about it?'

I looked at the fur and shrugged my shoulders. 'I think you've been typing too much, Dak, I really do. How often are you using that laptop?'

Dak thought for a moment and confessed, 'I'm on it most hours. There's so many bits of articles to do now we're short staffed and we have to make the deadlines each week.'

I could immediately see what it was without having to subject them to a full blown medical examination. Dak and Ebony were sure, too.

'RSA?' Dak asked. 'Is it what I think it is?'

'RSA?' I questioned. 'What does that stand for?'

'Repetitive Strain Injury,' Dak assured me, 'I read about it in a book once. Apparently a lot of computer operators and manual labourers get it when they can't take frequent rests in their employment.'

I looked at him with disbelief. Surely the initials should be RSI? Perhaps I'd best go and look up the correct spelling of that last word - I was sure that it was spelt with an 'i'.

'Where did you learn about it?' I asked.

'Oh - in the DHI magazine. It was a main...'

'DHI?' I interrupted. 'What does that stand for?'

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Dak looked at me in disbelief. 'You haven't heard of them?'

I shook my head. 'No - can't say I have.'

'Okay. Stands for "The Dyslexic Hamster Association". Ebony and I are chair hamsters for the Group. Needed some figurehead or something so we volunteered.'

I couldn't help remarking to myself that, perhaps, they should be patients rather than patrons but I held my peace and bid Dak continue. Actually, he'd lost his train of thought and fell silent.

'What you'll need to do is rest,' I told him. 'Yes, I know! You've got articles to write, correspondence to answer, people to interview. Dak, listen! You and Ebony have got to take a long break and slow it down or you may never be able to write again! You hear me?'

There was a pause and a sigh.

'Guess so...'

I turned to go but Dak called me back.

'That mean we can go away somewhere?' he squeaked.

'If you want...' and there was a frantic scurrying in the nest compartment as the entire food contents were crammed into the cheek pouches. Dak emerged with a loud squeak announcing to Ebony, 'Great! Hey, comrade! Let's go visit some friends in Washington!'

And, with that, they disappeared out of the door and off to the nearest airport.

INTRODUCTION

The Rodent Weekly has already detailed the problem with RSI that both Ebony and I experienced shortly before we went on an extended vacation to the States for recuperation purposes (reproduced in the previous article) and, having found ourselves in Washington in the headquarters of the Hamster Presidential Campaign, we set about resting and seeking out the best medical care that sunflower seeds could buy.

It wasn't long before I was feeling so much better that I decided to attempt to collate an interview with the now late Sir Fuzzy Logic (it appeared in the pages of the Rodent Weekly shortly after I returned) that we had recorded on cassette a few weeks' back along with Ebony.

Indeed, my paws felt so good after typing up that interview that I left him behind in Washington and headed south to try and rendezvous with Lee and Kath who'd taken leave of us to stay with friends of theirs in North Carolina.

The hiking went well - perhaps this will be the subject of a future series of articles - and I arrived at their front door a few days into their holiday. They were immediately delighted to see me - as I'd naturally expected they would be - and they set about taking me about with them on their frequent journeys to various places that they were visiting, not only in the Carolinas but, beyond, into both Virginia and West Virginia.

My observations here recorded are meant to warn the unwary travelling hamster and to furnish him with enough background information about the place so that he will be able to enjoy his visit should he ever make it here. I trust that the reader will find the notes readable even if they're read not for the purpose of a tourist venture.

I must extend a warm paw of thanks to Louise and all her family for allowing me to stay, protected from harm's way, out of the jaws of the local cat population which swarm about the trailers here. Louise has a large family and it would be difficult to name them all but, amongst the most dear to my own heart, I must mention Billie who frequently proof read my jottings to make sure they were okay and who gave me positive feedback.

Her two children, Elena and Reyna, also allowed me to record a couple of conversations that they had with Lee and I'm most grateful for the care with which they looked after both my owners and how they humoured them even when they came out with the most idiotic of statements that I knew would have the kids wondering.

Jeri was good fun to be around, too, and I remember with warmth that meal she cooked my owners - and her extensive range of Little Debbie products in the pantry where anything savoury was a rarity.

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Justin, Billie's husband, picked Lee and Kath up from the airport when they first arrived and they wanted me to mention their gratitude for being so warmly received in a strange land.

And, finally, to Louise, the perfect host. I guess that a lot of hostesses could overpower their guests with endless journeys and information, but Louise knew when to give Lee and Kath space and allowed them to largely choose which places they wanted to visit. The food was always great (judging from the scraps I got given) and I was allowed ample time on the computer to commit my thoughts to file.

To Mondee and Paul, also, who invited us all over for a meal - great evening, thanks.

And to all the Carolinans who've not got a mention here but who made my visit special - thank you.

One day, I may return...

Dak the Hamster

WE ARE THE SEVERAL, LED BY THE FEW...

'How many's a few?' said Elena.

It was a valid question. Lee and Kath sat on the steps leading up to the trailer in the warming morning sun and watched the stray cats pacing to and fro in search of food. I sat, perched high on the roof looking down on the scene which unfolded before me.

Somewhere, way in the distance, Elena's sister, Reyna, was riding the cycle on a dirt track, waiting for the call from her sister to tell her that her 'few' minutes were up. Her question was a relevant one considering the situation - I was just a little apprehensive about the answer she was about to get from Lee's mouth.

'A few,' said Lee, 'is a bit less than several.'

A puzzled expression came over Elena's face as she sat contemplating the answer for a full thirty seconds before asking, 'And how long is several?'

I would have asked the same question myself. The problem Elena had was not that she wasn't a bright kid - she was. The problem was Lee. Although the answer might have satisfied many, Lee knew that his response couldn't possibly be interpreted in real terms and, by his response, had necessarily compelled Elena to ask another question.

'Several,' answered Lee, 'is somewhat bigger than a few.'

This was a circular argument if ever there was one - like those scientific formulae I'd been reading about where one theory substantiates another which proves the first. Something that can't be disproved because verification is accepted by criteria which are, in themselves, just theories that have been founded on assumption.

I couldn't help but think that I was witnessing the utterance of a master of confusion as I sat there. Reyna was approaching the trailer with a friend cycling in tow and shouted across, 'Are my few minutes up yet?'

Lee looked at his watch and said there was still some time left and, as she cycled off to the edge of the trailer park, Elena turned her attention once more to the puzzle, asking, 'So what's the difference between "few" and "several"?'

I had to hear the answer to this one - humans seem to tie their lives up into time pockets and schedules and these arbitrary periods have always been a fascination to me. The answer wasn't long in coming.

'A few,' began Lee, 'is half a several. In fact, one several is equal to two fews.'

Lee should have trained to be a maths teacher, he would have excelled at it. All this algebraic stuff was sending my head spinning, for where was the other equation which would allow poor Elena to be able to solve the puzzle? After all, if

$a = 2b$

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where was the statement

$b = 4$

which would allow a solution to the problem of how long Elena had to wait before she was to be able to play on the cycle? If these purely arbitrary time periods went unchallenged, a few could quite easily change into several - into aeons, to be absolutely honest - and wars could be started because one's several didn't match the few that the other party had expected to be given.

Where could this all end? I was soon to find out, but I wasn't sure that it would help illuminate my understanding.

'Your sister was given several minutes on the cycle,' Lee explained, 'and, when a few minutes had expired, there was a few minutes left - because...?'

Elena thought long and hard over the proposition. Eventually she offered, 'Because, because two fews equal one several?'

'Precisely,' said Lee.

'But,' Elena objected, 'that last few began ages ago. When's it going to end?'

'Well, there's about half a few left and after that you can play on the bike.'

'Half a few?' I thought to myself, 'What on earth is half a few?! Is half a few equal to a quarter of a several? *What was I saying?* All this talk was getting stupid!'

I watched as Elena ran after her sister to tell her the glad tidings that she only had half a few left - I'm sure Reyna was going to understand that! - and listened as Lee turned to Kath and assured her with his words.

'Kids don't understand time,' he whispered, trying not to be overheard. 'You have to explain to them in language that makes sense to them. I think I managed to do just that...'

Today, Lee and Kath were venturing into Virginia, a place that was instantly recognisable as one crossed the State boundary by the change from dual carriageway to single road, then on to dirt track and open field - and by the way that the shops ceased being practical shopping and restaurant facilities and became, rather, antique shops and mountain top sales centres, the former generally being no more than outlets for the local States' refuse collecting service.

I had been warned by certain Carolinian hamster acquaintances that hamsters in them thar' parts were wild and unfriendly, that they had IQs of less than four and that they chewed tobacco relentlessly from morning to night - and then on through til sunrise - but what I actually found was a quaint community that relied more on living from the land than their more industrial neighbours to the south.

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The human equivalent were equally as rustic and the incident I'm about to relate illustrates that, although a Red Neck will be the friendliest of all when it comes to hospitality and warmth, it appears that geographical and technical information is lacking.

Or perhaps it would be better to say that in *all* humans, the limits of brain capacity can only contain either one or the other - and I know which I'd prefer to find.

We were at some tourist centre where delights such as dry cured hams and bacons were on sale - each of which looked as if they'd died sometime in the distant past when motorised vehicles hadn't been invented - along with preserves that stretched broader than the widest supermarket carries and which made the stomach churn if one thought too long and hard about it.

For, there amongst the strawberry jams and plum preserves, were black pepper jelly and boiled chilli paste, both of which seemed to appeal to a man's good conscience to pass them by and move on to some less sinister and inherently less evil product.

Even amongst the wooden signs, there were statements proclaiming red neck spirituality such as 'You know you're a red neck if your lawnmower has four legs'.

I was riding shotgun in the car and had decided to journey round the store in one of Louise's pockets when a Red Neck - an older guy clad in a denim work outfit and adorned with the most bushy red beard I'd ever seen (was that real?!) - pointed to Lee and Kath as they returned to the car and said, 'They're not from round here, are they?'

Louise turned back to look at the gentleman and gave him a smile.

'No,' she said, 'they're from England.'

The Red Neck looked quizzically at her, a sudden realisation coming across his face as he added, 'That past Maryland, ain't it?'

Louise struggled to associate the location with where her guests heralded from and then realised that he must have meant *New* England.

'Oh no,' she corrected, 'England across the water.'

This seemed to cause some confusion and there was a short span of silence before the local said, 'That where the Queen comes from? Yeah, I heard of that...'

Louise nodded and turned towards the car, hurrying over to where Lee and Kath stood to relate the incident. They joked in the car coming back but, to be honest, I could see where they were coming from.

Although Virginia is a quiet, sleepy place, their concept of the world seems to be lacking - after all, what do they need to know of lands beyond the Blue Ridge mountains where they'll probably never go and definitely never read about, even if they did have books?

Tourists had best be warned, though - it would be better to wear a tee-shirt that

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said 'I come from where the Queen lives' than to even so much as hint at the location 'England'.

And, as for the finer side of English culture - well, I just wouldn't bother.

It had been a most enjoyable day's outing - but tiring. Kath had collapsed on the sofa in front of the tv as Louise busied herself in the kitchen. Lee was checking his email on the computer but, even so, he was struggling to keep his eyes open.

Reyna bounced into the trailer with excitement in her eyes and a spring in her step that told Lee something was up. He felt a tap-tap-tap on his back and, turning to face the child, he peered over the rim of his spectacles - he had this theory that it saved wear and tear on the lenses if he didn't always look through them.

'Remember this morning,' she began, 'when you were telling us about time?'

Lee cast his mind back to the conversations he'd been having with the kids - ones which I would be frightened to outline in any great detail except the one previously described - but was bewildered as to which incident was being brought back for consideration.

He didn't need to wait long, however, Reyna continuing with a request that brought the conversation to mind.

'Would you time a several?' she asked 'Elena has got the bike and it's my turn when one of them's up.'

Lee looked at his watch and nodded in agreement, pleased that someone - at last - had listened to the font of wisdom which had emanated from his mouth. As everyone knew, two fews equalled one several and it was a simple matter to calculate the length of a few, double it and program the computer to beep at the appropriate time.

Unfortunately, things weren't that simple.

'You have to sit on the porch step and watch us,' Reyna continued. 'That way, you'll be able to tell us when the several is up the moment it is.'

Lee closed the window that held his email and walked over to the door. The great thing about kids was that they listened and understood.

If only all adults could be like children...

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

'I've got Altoids,' said Lee.

Kath looked at him quizzically and with a fair amount of pessimism.

'I got them from a friend.'

Kath reached for the green hold all which lay beside the bed and unzipped the side-pocket where the medical insurance was stowed away. Under 'section four', she skimmed through the list of prescribed diseases and ailments which the policy didn't cover, her eyes moving backwards and forwards speedily, yet efficiently.

'I can't see any reason why you're not covered under this for them. Shall I ring the local doctor to get some cream for you?'

Lee reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small metallic container, opened the lid and offered her the contents.

'Here,' he said, 'have an Altoid.'

Kath looked at him with surprise. 'An Altoid is a sweet?! You're kidding!'

'Nope, straight up,' Lee responded. 'Now is it any wonder that we've never seen them in the UK?'

This was by no means an unusual occurrence - we'd been seeing and hearing some pretty strange things ever since we'd landed all those days ago (me in Washington and they in Greensboro) and eyebrows had been raised consistently.

For instance, visiting some relatives, someone had asked Lee if he'd had a little Debbie since he'd been over here. As the only 'Debbie' he knew was the one he'd worked with, he was extremely unsure just how he was meant to answer until a box of cakes was pulled from a store cupboard and the maker's name 'Little Debbie' was displayed in the uppermost corner. In the UK, 'Mr Kipling' in the same context wouldn't have caused even an eyebrow to be raised.

And why tell a child to put his wienie in the fire at a barbecue? Both Lee and Kath span round to see just what was going on, I remember, only to discover that the shortened form of the word 'wiener' was a small sausage that you hung over a fire to cook and then eat.

They breathed a sigh of relief when they discovered their misunderstanding, too.

The Americans of North Carolina do a lot of their shopping in what's known as Malls (pronounced 'maul' - but it has nothing to do with what happens under WWF rules) - a place where humans go both to shop and eat food at hugely inflated prices. They also go there to cool off, it appears, for not everyone's air conditioning works.

Then there are the large, independent stores that set up warehouse-like structures

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on their own with car parks outside them larger than 'Long Stay' Car Parks at any of Britain's Airports.

One such company is Walmart - our current trip was beginning to make both my owners open their eyes in wonder and amazement for there, in aisle three, was the mysteriously named 'Jerky Turkey'. Although - seemingly - a meat product of barbecue proportions, the actual name conjured up in one's mind a picture that was more akin to a bird trying to beat a drug habit.

The 'Ding Dongs' in aisle nine were also a mystery (to me, anyway) and I wondered whether they really were human waste products packaged up for purchase - certainly they were the right colour but wouldn't the FDA have slapped a 'no sale' label on it long before it'd hit the shelves?

Strange sounding products weren't limited to Walmart, however, and amongst the favourites in the Westfield local store was 'Bubble Briefs', a pack of small pieces of chewing gum sealed hygienically with a picture of a pair of blue underpants on the front.

Why did the Americans associate underpants with bubblegum? And was it only Jeri who'd practically applied the two? These were questions for which I never fully obtained satisfactory answers and which left large doubts in my mind as to whether it might be a popular local pastime to walk round the house in underwear, chewing gum and blowing bubbles.

Advice on food products also began to make me wonder as to whether or not people over here really needed to be told absolutely everything that needed to be done with their product.

For instance, on a can of Nabisco 'Easy Cheese' that discharges it's contents when the aerosol button is depressed were the instructions 'For best results, remove cap' - as if one could obtain any other results by not removing the cap.

Perhaps it should have read, rather, 'For any results at all, remove cap'?

Then there were the liquid products - and I should extend a warm paw of thanks to Billie who told me about this - a drink called a 'Fuzzy Navel', something that seemed to go well with the 'Navel Fluff removal brush' that Lee and Kath also discovered on their brief expedition into Virginia one day (why not just use a finger?). Perhaps the alcoholic drink actually produced the problem that the small fur-like object was designed to remove?

Even the road signs seemed strange for, there on the dual carriageway, there was the large twin signs 'Wrong Way' to inform drivers that they were travelling in the wrong direction - and yet, these were situated some fifty yards from where one might have come on. Far better, I would have thought, to follow the UK and stick up signs

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forbidding entry into it in the first place than to let a car start down the road only to find out that they were driving against the flow.

I never stopped wondering at the labels that were used in the States - and I guess I never will. What seemed normal to me coming, as I did, from the UK, might equally be a cause of mirth to those who visit from America. Nevertheless, if you're ever in the States, I must highly recommend that you observe and, in so doing, you will find yourself giggling out loud when everyone else remains serious.

CHURCH

In America, you can often find multitudes of church buildings everywhere - sometimes side by side in the same neighbourhood, streets lined with them or facing one another across the street or on corners.

In England, the same's true of pubs - perhaps there's something inherently meaningful in that observation, perhaps not. But, recently, I've noted that some churches meet in the vacant rooms over pubs and, if my calculations are correct, the UK could see brewery take-overs in a decade or so if current rates continue unchecked.

This is no new thing, of course.

Back in medieval England, the monasteries were some of the finest places to get beer, the monks seeming not to have too much to occupy themselves with except the development of superb real ales that have stood the course of time and can, even today, be bought bottled in various retail outlets throughout the land.

Perhaps America's church buildings will one day become pubs and so complete the cycle? From what I heard while I was over there, some already are, while the UK's buildings are often sold to become d-i-y centres and carpet warehouses.

Humans are, indeed, strange.

I can't imagine Sir Christopher Wren ever having contemplated that St Paul's Cathedral might one day be owned by a seller of fine floor coverings or that, to learn about God, you should do no more than go down your local.

Still, I guess we must all move with the times or get swallowed up in tradition.

I've always been fascinated with what goes on in churches throughout the world so I was somewhat delighted when Lee and Kath decided that they, too, wanted to find out just what was going on in the places in and around North Carolina.

It saved me a few embarrassing moments when I have, at previous times, been discovered poking my head over the top of someone's hat during the sermon. Even so, I did need to make my way to a couple of out-of-the-way buildings that needed my close scrutiny.

But, even though I attended a large number of establishments, there are just the three places that I want to tell you about briefly, drawn from the pages of my diary, that held particular significance for me.

I wish to relate a more detailed history of a particular sect I discovered in a later article but it's to these three that I must now turn, described in the order in which I experienced them.

The Church of the Maximum Volume

'Prezz the Lowd!' screamed the preacher into the microphone. The glass vase at the back of the auditorium rattled and shook with the force of the vibration which echoed round the warehouse where Lee and Kath sat trying to escape the noise.

In the old days, the preacher who had the loudest voice was at a distinct advantage as he endeavoured to bring the Gospel to the masses that were gathered before him. Then, with the advent of louder and louder PA systems, the 'loud voice' became largely redundant and was replaced with the more sombre and reserved vocalisations which could be amplified with the aid of the new fangled electrical devices.

The preacher turned to a passage in his Bible and shouted it out to the congregation.

'It sez in the Bahbull, "Make a jawfull nors to the Lowd".'

With incredible logic, it seemed as if the decibels were going to touch a hundred the best part of the evening - if we stayed. I could see that the five of them sat in the back row were already beginning to struggle.

The two kids were pressing their fingers deeply into their ears in a vain attempt to block the sound and Billie was looking like a rabbit on the roadway, caught in some light beam and shocked by the brightness of it all. It certainly appeared as if this was just too much of a culture shock - a strange concept to be attributable to any American, I can assure you.

Lee and Kath were chatting - though, as I was later to discover, their responses to one another bore no relation as an answer to anything the other person had asked.

My mind summoned up my file on 'near-spiritual experiences', catalogued there from the holidays of Lee and Kath, and I quickly flicked through the headers which presented themselves to me.

It seems that, whenever they go on holiday, strange experiences are the norm and, to be quite honest, I can't recall ever being told of even one place they've visited where there wasn't something distinctly strange about the church that was there.

'They're supposed to be a peculiar people,' I thought to myself, 'but this wasn't what I imagined the writer Peter had actually meant by his use of the word.'

Yes, there was the time in Helston, Cornwall - one of my favourite stories - when the leader's wife, a lady who was tone deaf, had been appointed to instruct the congregation as to which songs they should be singing, leading the congregation with only the minimal amount of tune and the maximum amount of enthusiasm - and the effect she'd had of so

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putting off the congregation at the end of the service that she'd thrown every person out so that they grabbed at whatever note they could for the final note of the last hymn.

In some ways, this meeting was very similar.

And there was the time when Lee had handed round aniseed balls to the church before the meeting and, during communion when one of the elders went to get his handkerchief out from his jacket pocket, he'd inadvertently pulled the ball out which shot upwards into the air, clattered on the floor in front of him and rolled under the chairs where the congregation were sat.

These were classic examples of the sorts of things one could expect from a holiday church service - and the present one was living up to all my expectations.

Across from me, there was a floral arch at the right of the stage which adorned the auditorium. But what on earth was it doing in a church building? Was this some form of cult we'd stumbled across? The reaction of the leader of the church that Lee and Kath had stumbled on the day before left me with deep concerns as well.

When asked why the church had the name it did - Firecracker Ministries - he told Lee that he 'wasn't sure' just what it meant. I'd thought even then that, perhaps, they might have won the name in some kind of raffle or other and were only using it because it was free.

Though a pleb in the congregation might have struggled to find any spiritual associations, I wondered at the leader of the church.

I directed my gaze once more to the front of church where another leader had been thrown the mike (yes, honestly, this people had forgotten what it meant to hand something over and were more concerned to propel expensive PA equipment through the air like some cheap plaything - wonder if they're insured for such actions?).

The new speaker began by pressing his lips closely to the mike and screaming 'Isn't Gawd gued?' to which the congregation responded with a hearty 'Ay-mairn' and he proceeded to shout about all sorts of stuff of which I could only catch the odd word or two.

Lee has always told me that a believer should have no 'airs and graces' and that they should be the same at home as when they're in the church building - that 'church' shouldn't be some sort of act but an overflow of what one normally does 24/7.

I tried imagining what the breakfast table must be like in their household. Did they really shout at one another to pass the grape preserve - with or without a PA system? Did they throw the knives about the table rather than hand them to one another? And were they really happy to let their kids scream and bawl to their hearts' content so that

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they'd fulfil the calling to 'make a joyful noise to the Lord'?

I let my attention drift back to the meeting at hand and looked over towards Lee and Kath - the chairs were empty and five figures were hurrying towards the exit. I quickly slipped down the wooden ramp and scampered back to the parking lot, just in time to ascend into the car before they sped away.

I really must do this more often - the church has so much to teach me as to what *not* to do.

The Church of the Nepotic Worshippers of God

I excused myself from my owners' desire to attend one of the local church fellowships where Louise visited and, instead, had already earmarked a building that we'd passed several times in our travels both to and from Mount Airy. This being what is known in America as 'the Bible Belt', I naturally felt drawn more to the groups of people who were predominantly at the cutting edge of traditional belief systems than to those who I could spend my time with and witness what I generally knew to be the standard format of the churches here.

I guess that I should have been naturally warned when I first saw the title hanging outside the front door of the building - 'The Church of the Nepotic Worshippers of God' - but, for some reason that's now lost in my consciousness, I disregarded my doubts and slipped in through a hole in the lintel of the door and into the back pew where I witnessed the goings on.

It struck me that most of the people here looked exactly the same as everyone else - confirmed to me as I learned that the minister was the father of all three elders and an uncle of the four deacons. The pianist was his wife (something that's common just about everywhere, though here it was unusual that she actually had some musical ability) and the organ player an in-law which I think was related to him on his mother's side.

Indeed, I think the entire congregation were related to one another, but their insistence to call everyone 'Brother surname' or 'Sister surname' only confused me when about seventy-five per cent of the congregation had the same family label.

In a typically deep American southern accent, the leader instructed the choir to start up the opening hymn and the organ ground into action as they began from ring binders singing:

When ah da and fain'ly go t' hayven,
Ah will see all ma folks that gawn befaw.

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Ah'll see ma mar and par and hoss and hamstir,
And ah'll see both ma grandmar and grandpar.

Chorus

*Livin bah the baynks of Joedun,
Where ah'll stay till Judgment Day.
It don't matter that ah do nuttin,
Cos ah'm predestined livin this way.*

Ah'll see ma nayber and thar caynine,
And thar folks that played geetar.
Then thar'll be that ole Virginian,
That ah ran o'er in ma car.

Whoop! How grayte to be in hayven,
To see ma friends and famly there,
And if the Mexicans and Blacks ain't made it,
I can't say I rightly care...

The tune droned on through another eighty-seven verses touching on everything from the curse of Walmarts and selling alcohol on Sundays to the exclusion of just about every racial group outside their own familial experience from the gates of heaven.

It seemed that their exclusiveness was defined by their own experience but it was intriguing to see how the preacher managed to justify each and every wrong belief by recourse to Scriptures which didn't mean what they obviously meant.

And, of course, it made me wonder - as hamsters do - and I recalled all those other places I'd been where, once the doors were closed, those 'outside' were destined to hell - not because they didn't know the Creator but because they didn't know the Creator and observed the legalistic statutes that had been dreamed up by the particular denomination.

Lee once told me a fictitious story about a group of believers who were walking the streets of heaven and who happened to pass by a certain denomination's area where they were singing Jesus' praise with great gusto and fortitude. The leading believer turned to those who were following and whispered quietly:

'That's the such-and-such denomination - they think they're the only ones here!'
As Lee has told me time and time again, exclusivism breeds hate. Not that there

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isn't a place for stating unequivocally the foundational importance of the Creator's work, but to outwork that into a series of rules and regulations which depend more on man's thoughts than God's thoughts is tantamount to rebellion against the One who is said to be served by their observance.

I didn't need to stay very long before I left, though, as I glanced back at the clock, I noticed that I'd been there for some forty-five minutes, listening to the goings-on.

As I exited out into the bright sunlight I was glad that hamsters the world over could find unity in the fact that they had all been born hamsters, born into a world where the nature of the hamster had been imparted to them and where legislation hadn't been imposed upon them to make them conform to some image or other.

And I wondered - I wondered whether there might come a time when the Creator's people might rise to His challenge to treat all men equally and fairly, and especially all those who took upon themselves the name of 'brother'.

The Church of the Holy Fashion Conscious

I hadn't planned to be staying with my two owners for more than the one Sunday, but the thought of being able to attend another sectarian church had caught the imagination and I almost inevitably found myself waking to the sounds of the Greene singers coming from the living room telly.

My ears were drawn to the concert - not least because each and every song seemed to mirror the previous one musically though, from where I was lying, I was at a loss to distinguish any lyrics. I emerged into the room just as the applause was dying down after another song and heard one of the singers declare to the audience:

'My mama always used to carry a clean axe around the house wherever she went.'

The expression puzzled me - perhaps this was a Southern tradition that I'd been unaware of when I'd first arrived. After all, Americans seemed to carry guns and ammunition around with them on most occasions so an axe was a logical possibility. I decided to hear the guy out and returned my attention to the tv screen.

'There was no place that she didn't carry a clean axe.'

This certainly conjured up in the mind all sorts of possibilities and pictures. Were there really no limits to the places where his mother took her axe? The hairdressers? The toilet? Church? After all, an axe wasn't something that you could hide in your handbag and hope no one would notice.

The next sentence made me realise that I had still a lot to learn about the American accent.

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'You see, my mama used to always cry whenever she heard the name of the Lord...'
Clean axe? Oh dear.
Kleenex.

The deep Southern accent fooled me into a misinterpretation that made me squeak with mirth. I scampered back to where Lee and Kath lay sleeping and woke them with a quick nip to signal them that the time was fast approaching when we'd have to leave for the meeting - this time, they'd decided to come with me, being drawn by last week's report concerning the Church of the Nepotic Worshippers of God.

Today was going to be equally informative, a cross-cultural experience that would educate my awareness of just how much one was able to get inside a building that had been designed - initially, at least - for the worship of the Creator.

Today, near Yadkinville, we were going to the Church of the Holy Fashion Conscious, a place where everybody came dressed up like they were on some catwalk or other. Upon entering, I let my senses take in the sight. Here were turquoise suits that, had you switched the lights off, would have glowed in the dark. To my left, a bright yellow jacket shone with a luminosity I had only ever seen on motorway repair workers.

Women wore bright greens and blues and the preacher, obviously confused by the multiplicity of colours, wore a simple maroon blazer with black trousers - perhaps a halfway compromise to make outsiders feel more at home?

A woman ascended the steps of the 'altar' at the front of the building and took the microphone which lay on the lectern. In a sincere voice which wavered on the point of tears everytime she wanted to convey sincerity, she began, 'I have been saved, brothers and sisters...'

The congregation burst into raptures of applause - some raised hands skyward (or, rather, ceilingward) while others shouted the prerequisite 'Prezz the Lowd'. The lady continued even as the cheers rang out around the hundreds gathered.

'...I have been saved from the music of DC Talk, from the music of Amy Grant and from the unholy tunes of Michael Card - and I have been transported and delivered into the music of Southern Gospel. I have been delivered from wearing jeans on a Sunday to church...'

I noticed Lee begin to grin - he was wearing jeans! - was there no respect in him at all? I knew the answer to that so it was a silly question to ask.

'...delivered gloriously, brothers and sisters, into frocks and skirts with bright colours. I once - oh! prezz Gawd! - I once...'

Overcome with emotion, her upperlip trembled and she wiped tears away from each eye.

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'...I once squeezed the toothpaste tube in the middle; I used to leave the pots and pans unwashed for days but I just prezz Gawd that I saw the light of my ways and have been gloriously set free by Him. Hallelujah!'

The Church, almost as one man, stood to their feet and applauded, shouting out encouragement and acclamations which seemed to be directed at the lady who'd just finished speaking.

From somewhere above me, I felt a tug on my paw and, whispered into my ear, a few words which instructed me that we were about to leave.

'You kidding me?' I squeaked. 'Just when the service is getting interesting?'

No, they weren't kidding - they actually were gathering their belongings together and were already looking for the quickest route of escape - I mean, the nearest exit. I shrugged my shoulders and followed their lead, but couldn't help wonder that, had I been given just ten minutes more, I may have learnt something inherently important about what it means to be a religious American.

We exited into the bright daylight and I squinted as the sun glistened off the newly bought cars with under ten thousand miles on the clock. This totally fascinated me and I voiced my disapproval on the return journey - all to no avail, I hasten to add for, once my owners get a bee in their bonnet, there's just no way to change their minds.

But, one day, I'd love to return.

Yep, and learn more.

After all, if I lived here permanently, I could just get into the swing of those long drooling accents and the fashion parades that were ideal substitutes for anything which was genuinely spiritual.

AIR BAGS

Jeri, Jeri, quite contrary,
How does your vehicle steer?
Jeri, Jeri, your driving's scary,
The nut is making it veer.

Air bags are a real good idea.

Upon vehicle impact, an inflatable cushion fills up with air in front of the driver and protects them from being thrown forward into the steering wheel and dashboard. I bet it's saved a few lives in its time and, no doubt, is being built into more and more cars with each passing year.

However, trying to drive a car with the bag inflated must be really difficult and would be a genuine problem to the driver trying to steer accurately as they drove along the carriageway. I mean, try to imagine sitting in your vehicle with two sofa cushions wedged in-between you and the steering wheel - not only do you have to extend your arms round the obstructions, but you can't see the foot pedals or the gear shift.

If you doubt my descriptions - and, after all, I can only report on my observations seeing as I couldn't drive a car anyway - get those cushions and see just how difficult it is.

It was interesting listening to Billie suggest this problem as the reason behind the incessant swerving across the road that they were witnessing in the car ahead as it sped towards Gravity Hill. I think it was because the driver was Jeri - no, no, I mean because the driver was pregnant - that they were having such a discussion. There were certain striking similarities.

Kath wasn't sure, however.

There was a scientific principle at work, so she told us, and that was what the other two were overlooking. It was obvious to Kath that the gravitational draw of the large body of wood in the forests on either side of road was attracting the jeep towards them and the driver was struggling in a vain attempt to keep the vehicle travelling in a straight line.

Must be a common problem amongst women drivers, I remember saying to myself.

To demonstrate this, she held up a scrunched up piece of paper and demonstrated how light particles from the sun bent round objects such as planets because of the draw exerted on the beams by the solid mass of the rotating spheres. There was also the effect of acceleration on spacecraft - like in the film 'Armageddon' - when objects

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could be slingshot up to velocities which would have taken incredible amounts of fuel to achieve - and that was because the gravitational pull of the moon gave the acceleration.

Lee objected to the explanation, reasoning that the wooden mass of the forest couldn't explain the deviations which were occurring where there were open tracts of land. He suggested an alternative viewpoint to the one Billie had first espoused and said that the tread on the tyres may be 'un-uniform' causing the car to track towards the right or left depending on the camber of the road.

There was a certain truth to this for, even as a hamster, I can vouch for the problems we rodents experience when we wheel-run, and the almost uncanny knack an unbalanced pouch can have of throwing us physically from one side to another.

Neither of these three explanations were acceptable by each of the other three, however, but they did manage to arrive at an agreement that, whatever the ultimate reason, the fundamental problem seemed to lie in the nut behind the wheel.

This seemed almost incredulous to me - after all, hadn't Jeri just had the car serviced? Or was that just an improvement to the gear shift? But surely they would have given the car the once over, right?

But, no, my three human friends were adamant - the problem had to lie in that nut, was the sole reason for the consistent swerving and was what needed to be dealt with to keep the car on the road.

Well, at least that was sorted out - when were they going to tell her?

They weren't? Why not?

It wasn't that sort of 'nut'.

What sort of nut was it, then?

Oh, I see...

THE BOSTON CHEESE PARTY

I've been persuaded for some time that a lack of ancient history has caused most Americans to over-emphasise what little historical events they know about, elevating them to an importance that's often unwarranted.

I remember listening to Lee and Kath being frequently told 'This place *is* near to the place where such-and-such a thing happened' or that the place was historically important because, on a clear day, you could see somewhere else where a famous event had been recorded as occurring.

In that case, even unimportant sites took on some sort of sanctity which, to an English Hamster, seemed superfluous.

I had been standing under a viewing platform located on Pilot Mountain, a place associated with the Wright Brothers although the reason now seems vague in my memory. I have the recollection that they used to practice here before their famous fifty-nine second flight at Kitty Hawk but, if that was the case, perhaps their adventure was more vertical than horizontal - there didn't seem to be any strip of ground that they could've rolled across prior to flight.

Still, I was sure that you could probably see Kitty Hawk from the summit - and that must make it important. It always did.

As I stood looking into the distance, admiring the view, a field mouse shuffled up to me and introduced himself. I could tell that he was an unofficial guide as he bounced from paw to paw, almost unable to control his excitement at having found a rodent who knew very little about the area.

And he had a very strange concept of time as I was shortly to discover. Indeed, I'm not all too certain that he understood spatial limitations, either.

'The day after the Boston Tea Party,' he squeaked, 'the Wright Brothers took to the air not very far from here.'

I certainly didn't disagree with his dates, it had to be said. The Wright Brothers took to the skies on December 17, the calendar day immediately after the event that had occurred to the north in Boston - but they were separated by a hundred and thirty years!

I objected to his statement as gently as I could but was obviously on a hiding to nothing when he opened his mouth and retaliated, 'No, you're wrong. Everyone knows that the Wright Brothers developed flight for the transportation of coffee that the Tea Party necessitated. That's why they did it the day after.'

Puzzled by his logic, I asked him, 'And how did the news of what happened at Boston

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find its way to Kitty Hawk? We're hundred of miles from there - perhaps a thousand or more.'

He looked at me as if I should've known the answer. I knew his reply was going to be interesting but I wasn't prepared for it.

'The Internet,' he said. 'Why, it takes only a couple of seconds to send a message round the world!'

'Of course,' I squeaked, deciding that humour was probably my best option, 'and messengers could always have flown down overnight had they wanted to make the message more personal.'

'Exactly!' he concluded, not realising that the existence of a regular air service tended to undermine the importance of the first human flight in 1903.

I excused myself as quickly as possible, making my way to another platform where the voices overhead sounded familiar. They were just leaving for another area on the edge of the mountain, though, and the shuffle of shoes on wood disappeared into the distance as a greying hamster approached me - a tourist if ever I'd seen one - sitting on his haunches as I offered a 'hello' to break the ice (not that the day was particularly cold, you understand).

'Just arrived,' he informed me after we'd exchanged pleasantries. 'Flown down from Boston this morning.'

He thought for a moment, then concluded with a wry smile and a giggle, 'Plenty of coffee but no tea.'

I looked at him with an expression that told him I'd heard the joke hundreds of times before but with half a smile so as not to cause offence.

'I suppose you saw the boat?' I asked him.

'What boat?' he replied.

'The Boston Tea Party boat. The one that's moored in the harbour.'

'It took place on a boat?' he sounded surprised. 'I thought it took place in a canteen.' I decided to start with the basics.

'Just what do you know about the Boston Tea Party?'

He thought long and hard. Then longer and harder. Then, so long and hard that his face began to screw into contortions that told me there was very little information in his head that he was trying to draw upon.

Suddenly, he announced, 'It happened in Boston. Or, at least, I thought it did.'

'Which one?' I asked. 'Which Boston?'

'There're two?' he sounded surprised.

'Oh, there's more than two but there're two main ones. There's the one in America

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where the Tea Party took place and one in England where the more famous Cheese Party occurred.'

'The, the Cheese Party?' he stammered. 'I've never heard of the Boston Cheese Party.'

This hamster was less informed than I thought - he was certainly more ignorant than he should've been. How could that be? Surely these stories were told around the food bowls of the world?

I decided to educate my colleague-in-fur and instructed him, 'Settle down and get comfortable - and I'll tell you the facts of the most famous Cheese Party of them all.'

I've been to Boston and seen the ship that's reputed to be the one from which the men, dressed as Mohawk Indians, threw tons of tea overboard into the water.

It was closed when I was there, however, so I could do no more than look at it from the road bridge that spanned the river - perhaps they were on a coffee break? - but, nevertheless, it looked old, with masts reaching high into the sky and green weed clinging to the sides that told me it had been there for a great many years.

Apparently, though, it's neither the Beaver, the Eleanor nor the Dartmouth that were boarded near Griffin Wharf that historic evening of December 16 1773.

I still find it hard to believe that grown men would disguise themselves as Mohawk Indians to conceal their actions - perhaps it was the ancient equivalent of wearing balaclava masks?

Whatever, it seems strange that on a cold evening, grown men would strip to scanty dress in order to avoid identification. I would, personally speaking, have wrapped up as warm as I could've done, with earmuffs, gloves and eight padded coats had I been a human - and pulled over my face something that protected my features from frostbite.

Still, ours is not to reason why. The 'why' of human behaviour has long been a mystery and something that it's not wise for us rodents to dwell upon.

All that I can say with certainty is that the 342 chests of tea that were tipped into the river seem to have proven an incredible success and is the reason why coffee appears to be the main beverage wherever you go. If I drank the same amount of coffee, though, I'd probably look equally as spaced out and it may be the reason why Americans are generally more hyper than the English.

The drink determines the character, you see - and you'd be manic, too, if you'd that amount of caffeine coursing daily through your veins.

More famous than Boston's Tea Party, however, is the Cheese Party that receives little or no mention in most of the human's history pages - the 1867 twenty-seven volume

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tour de force by Jonathan Appleby entitled 'An Account of History' devotes an entire volume to events such as these but only two paragraphs to the incident (yet it gives four pages to the Rhubarb Crumble Rebellion of the English Civil War).

But this is no longer extant and is almost impossible to find second hand anymore.

Therefore, seeing as the memory of the Boston Cheese Party has virtually disappeared from human consciousness, it seems only right that it's recorded for instruction. And, as you'll no doubt realise as you read it, the consequences were far more reaching than the spoiling of a minuscule amount of tea in Boston harbour during the eighteenth century.

Hamsters had known of the existence of cheese for years.

They'd heard about it, read about it - they'd smelt it and seen it. Even more importantly, they'd eaten loads of it. Runny and solid, plain and flavoured. Filled with fruit and sprinkled with nuts.

Indeed, most hamsters had tasted the majority of cheeses available in their own vicinity - and Boston was an area in which a great many products were available.

When I speak of 'Boston', however, please don't think I mean that place where the Tea Party took place. No, this is somewhere totally different. As you know, *that* Boston was named after the original one back in England, a town close to The Wash in Lincolnshire from which some of the original settlers came to populate the colonies.

Indeed, it was one of Britain's most important sea ports in yesteryear although now, with the reclamation of large tracts of land, it sits 'high and dry' some four miles inland.

Even further back in the past is the memory of Botolph, a Saxon monk who founded a monastery near here on or before the year 654. And it's because of this monk that Boston received its original name - Botolph's Town or Botolph's Stone that was shortened into Bos-ton or Bo-ston.

It was this man who invented the world's first Food Buffet, now known affectionately as 'The Boston Cheese Party'.

On 17 June 661, being forty-one years of age, Botolph gathered together all his fellow-monks, friends and poor he could find to celebrate together in his monastery at Icanhoe or 'Ox Island'.

What it was they were celebrating no one was quite sure. But, if you'd've known Botolph, that wouldn't have struck you as anything strange - he was all for gathering together food for as meagre a reason as he'd just got up, the sun was shining or that there was rain falling for the crops.

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Indeed, morning sun and afternoon rain might well have prompted two celebrations had they occurred which, in Britain, they usually do (along with snow, hail and lightning - and usually during the Summer months).

He was, indeed, a strange monk - not one who you'd particularly consider 'normal'. If the Greek Orthodox had been in existence back then, he would certainly have been a contender to have started a breakaway sect called the Greek Weird - had he lived in Greece, that is, which he didn't.

That day saw strange goings-on at the monastery.

Well, let me rephrase that statement - the events were certainly strange in the eyes of the world who occupied the times in which Botolph lived but, to most present day westerners, not too much of an eyebrow would have been raised.

Even then, my clarification isn't correct - people take exception at the strangest of events and the most normal of circumstances simply because what cuts across the way they've always done things seems to assault their over-sensitive beliefs.

Throughout the day, different people brought different foods to share with others, less fortunate than themselves. The poor, quite obviously, could bring very little so the monk's friends and colleagues gathered together more than they needed to feed the mouths of the hungry.

Perhaps no offence would have been given if the numbers present had been restricted to those originally invited but Botolph, bless him, was all for a cacophony of people from all walks and cultures and it wasn't long before men and women the length of the region heard of the great feast and, not to miss out, descended on the monastery to take part in the world's first buffet.

Even visiting mainlanders from Europe prepared their regional delicacies and brought them along, raising eyebrows and turning stomachs in the process. When more offence began to be generated than goodwill, a monk ran to Botolph and urged him to step in.

'There're murmurings everywhere,' he told him with a glint of fear in his eye that betrayed his panic.

'The Jews are offended with those who brought pork, the vegetarians with the meat-eaters and the teetotallers with the wine-bibbers - the Jewish vegetarian teetotallers are at just about everyone's throats. I tell you, brother, it's bordering on a riot in there!'

At least one thing was sure - the hamsters weren't particularly offended by anyone. But, there again, they never are. Indeed, it's probably one reason why hamsters have never got mentioned very often throughout the pages of history - as they never raised a

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paw of dissent, they were often overlooked when it came to recording the battles and skirmishes that occurred.

But that's another story.

Botolph looked at the messenger with despair. 'Isn't it possible for these people, one and all, to accept each other as they also have been accepted by us?'

He thought for a moment before continuing, 'Brother Ethelwold, if we were to withhold grace and favour from those who are all around us, what value the grace and favour that we receive daily from the Hand of the Saviour?'

This wasn't a new problem. Botolph had seen it on all too many an occasion. The people who were reached with compassion and mercy became the objects of increasing disdain by the recipients who lived up the valley, in the wood, who'd been at war with the new group from time immemorial.

It was as if grace had defining limits over which it wasn't permitted to cross but, as the monks knew, whenever you restricted the advance of unmerited favour to those you felt didn't deserve it (a statement which is, in itself, contradictory), you not only turned yourself against others but restricted the grace that it was possible to experience - not because you didn't 'qualify' but because grace can only be experienced with an open heart and closing yourself against others naturally limits the abundance available to yourself.

Botolph rose to his feet, enquiring which delicacies were causing the offence and, entering the room where a vast menagerie of men and women were gathered, he deliberately ate from first one plate, then another - in full view of all - causing as much offence to everyone as he could, giving them all the opportunity to display grace.

No one was quite sure what to do - they could neither condemn the monk for eating offensive food items nor voice approval when he chose their own. For each of them, it was either acceptance or rejection and their minds struggled with the correct response.

'All things to all men,' the monk whispered under his breath, reassuring himself, 'that I might by all means save some.'

He took his seat in their midst, waiting for a positive response but, slowly, in groups of fives and tens, they drifted away, gathering up their plates but leaving the food as if contaminated by a disease-ridden hand.

As the last guests disappeared from the refectory, Botolph looked round at his faithful group of monks standing by with concern over their faces.

'If we have received mercy,' he began, 'then we are also obliged to give it.'

The hamsters squeaked their approval, gathered, as they were, into one family group around a plate of fresh vegetables and cheese, munching away...

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'...and so it was that monks and hamsters forged a close-knit relationship throughout the length and breadth of the land that even the Dissolution couldn't break.'

My hamster acquaintance nodded his approval.

'And what does this have to do with Tea?' he asked.

I slapped my paw over my eyes, mumbled something under my breath and walked off into the distance.

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HOT LEGS

For Billie Atkinson

The single track road was bumpy enough, with potholes and degraded asphalt that caused my head to swing to and fro like one of those dogs that you sit in the back window of a car.

The wooded track opened into a small clearing and there, a few yards in front of the dashboard where I'd been sitting, was what appeared to be some sort of sand pit or other, with two charred and blackened wooden steps discarded on the right and left.

It was difficult to believe that anyone had gotten out alive - from the stories I'd been told back in England - and here was the evidence before me that suggested that the one who'd escaped such an all-consuming fire had been fortunate indeed to be living and breathing. Even more, that she was walking round the site now, pointing to where the stove was, the bedroom and the door.

Sometimes, so Lee says, you have to see the devastation that can be caused by such natural phenomena and even go through what would kill someone else to be able to appreciate the greatness of God's hand of protection and mercy and to witness, at first hand, His protecting shield around those who are trying to follow Him.

Funny, there was a certain envy in my heart as I heard the story of that October evening recounted in my hearing - even though I wouldn't have wanted my fur to be singed as awfully as the human's had been (well, okay, they don't have fur, but you know what I mean) - of how Billie's mother and children had gone off on the spur of the moment to stay with her sister for the night and how she'd been left alone in the house and gone to light the fire as the evening drew on and the cold settled round the trailer.

And then there was the explosion that sent flames and sparks spinning through the house, the fireball that sped down the hallway as Billie made for the door and the explosion that threw her violently away from the trailer and to the relative safety of the trees which lined the wood.

I guess that some would look at the incident and ask where Billie's God was in all of it - but what Lee was quick to point out to me was that similar trials and tribulations happen to all men and women on the face of the earth but, to those who know the Creator, there's always a protection that others can't always perceive or understand.

For, had the children remained with Billie when the mother stayed over with her daughter on the other side of town, they would have been consumed in a moment as the fire spread through the trailer. Had the full can of petrol exploded that was stowed away to refuel the car, Billie might never have gotten out the trailer with the injuries

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she did.

Even so, there was still the recovery and the pain in the hospital - as Lee had previously explained to me - when he'd heard news of what had transpired.

First, they didn't think Billie would ever walk again. So badly were her legs burned and melted by the heat that had sped out from the exploding fire, that the doctors had even expressed the concern that they should prepare for her legs to be amputated. But now, as she walked round the burnt remains of the trailer, I couldn't help but marvel at the amazing recovery that had taken place in her life - not just physically in her body but, as Lee told me, in her soul as well.

From fears about walking and amputation from the third and fourth degree burns, had come an almost complete recovery - so complete, Lee told me, that even the hairs on her legs had started to grow back (much to Billie's frustration - at least you could hope that you'd never have to shave again!).

I've never fully understood about fire and have always thought of it as unerringly destructive and something to be feared, but Lee explained to me afterwards in the car that just about everything can be a tool for both positive and negative works. For instance, as one of the songs in his CD collection says:

'The same sun that melts the wax can harden clay,
And the same rain that drowns the rat will grow the hay'

and, with fire, the thought is no different. The fire which destroys the forest and lays low the mightiest of the trees is the same one that provides the heat needed for the seeds to germinate and to bring new life to the charred earth.

And the fire, which in Billie's case destroyed the trailer and wiped out a world in which she lived and in which she'd felt at home, was the same one which transformed her to have the opportunity to be a more useful tool in the Creator's hands.

Such is the strangeness of God's dealings with humans like Billie - indeed, His dealings with all men and women - that something created can both degrade and improve, destroy and create at the same time, in the same place and for the same person.

I guess that, as hamsters, we'll never fully understand the complexities of all that the humans experience but, standing there now in front of one of the scenes of a miracle, I felt privileged and I wondered why, many miles away from this place, shrines were being erected in remembrance of what *God once did* many thousands of years ago when God was ever so obviously on the move in other places and situations that men were failing to give Him credit for...

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THE MALTESE HAMSTER

'In 1941, centuries after the Knights Templar of Malta paid tribute to Charles V of Spain, the workers of the Malteser Factory, not to be outdone, clubbed together and had made the most exquisite of Golden Hamsters chiselled from marble and encrusted from nose to paw with the rarest of jewels. But hijackers seized the delivery van carrying this priceless token. The fate of the Maltese Hamster has remained a mystery down to this very day.'

From the Opening Titles of the 1970 epic 'The Maltese Hamster' released by the Metro Golden Hamster Studios

Kath is a keen ornithologist and has been for a great many years.

I remember back in England the hours she put in trying to collate all the birds that would likely be seen when they arrived in North Carolina and the check book she produced with much sweat and toil that gave her a simple way of recording her daily sightings.

So different were the birds in this part of the world that Kath, Lee told me, was excited that first moment she stepped out from their final plane and exited into the brightness of natural light, expecting to see the likes of the Cardinal, the North Carolina Wren and the Bluejay.

What Kath *actually* saw that first evening was a sparrow, a crow and two starlings - not exactly your regular American ornithological high spots that she'd been expecting. I think she also saw a dead Bluejay beside the road from the airport but, apparently, they don't count - they have to be alive or at least flapping.

Many of the mornings I spent with them in the trailer, Kath would get up even before the crack of dawn and exit into the semi-darkness of the park with a pair of binoculars and a bird identification book in either hand, trying to spot those rarities that hid themselves away as soon as the full sun rose in the sky.

It was quite a strange phenomena but it's true that the birds seemed to chirp louder when she didn't go out than when she did, and one notable bird used the edge of the trailer where Lee and Kath slept as his main declaration post - perhaps he was just trying to be friendly and give them their early morning call? From the words that came out of my owners' mouths, it didn't appear as if they took it as such.

Birds have always been a fascination to me, the way they can glide effortlessly into the air and, with equal ease, plummet from the sky to catch some tasty morsel that they

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see on the ground (like me).

I don't think I'd make a good bird - try as I might to stretch my paws outwards and glide down the tubes in my burrow units, I always seem to splat on the sawdust at the bottom - though I make a good hamster, I'm glad that I wasn't expected to be a bird.

Flicking through Kath's identification lists, however, made me question the accuracy of some of the names which were written here.

For instance, the Oven Bird (*Seiurus Aurocapillus*) just didn't fit this English Thrush lookalike and one wonders just how this bird ever managed to get it's name. Perhaps it's a direct ancestor of that bird I saw in Walmarts called 'Oven Ready' even though the size of the latter is so much greater that I had to question in my own mind whether or not there could be any similarity.

The names are so similar, however, that I guess I need to put aside my objections and accept that even hamsters don't know everything on occasions.

And then there was that bird that had inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novel. Although I'd never known that he'd made it to the States, it appears in my own mind that he must have, for my owners spoke about visiting a bird sanctuary near where they were staying and being able to witness the 'Grackle in the hide'. Never did see that bird, though, but there were numerous common ones that looked just like the blackbirds back home.

Pilot Mountain is a landmark that stands high above the lower farming lands and forests of the surrounding area and, though it's about seven miles away from the trailer park, it can be seen on a clear day, its white face standing proud against the skyline.

The Indians called it Jomeokee, meaning 'Great Guide', while the earliest settlers renamed it 'Ararat' after the Biblical mountain where the Ark came to rest - I don't know which version of the Bible they must have been reading but you couldn't get much more than a fishing trawler to rest on the top of that summit, much less something the size of the ark with all those animals inside - and, if you've ever seen Pilot, you'll understand that, as they would have come off the boat, that first step would've been their last, so sheer are the sides.

We were looking over a huge valley and some locals were discussing which birds were flying on the thermals in front. Kath, without a moment's hesitation corrected their assumptions, telling them that they were Turkey Vultures, not hawks as they supposed.

I'll never forget that look of absolute amazement on their faces as they found themselves rebuked by a foreigner and, had they been any less gracious than they were, I'm sure they would've pointed out that, as far as they were concerned, they could be any bird they wanted to believe they were! After all, didn't they own the country?!

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I was glad when they turned round and went their own way but quite shocked when I learned that they were bikers - in England, Kath may not have got away with the words she'd just spoken.

There were anomalies here, strange birds that shouldn't have been where Kath spotted them - like the five Killdeer that appeared on one of the lawns where Lee and Kath were eating one evening. We were a couple of hundred miles from the sea and yet, here in the dryness of the plain, a couple of waders had been nesting and raising young.

I guess that, what human Field Guides come down to is the most likely area in which one can find the bird. It can't anticipate the uniqueness of the animal or bird that chooses to do something out of the norm.

And that made me think - wonder whether any hamster guide books instruct their readers about literary hamsters such as myself?

Mmm, I wonder...

Allen County is a picturesque place where a single road can snake about for miles, winding its way through forests and small ramshackle villages that dot the area. Every now and again the trees part and you can see an old slag heap in the distance where coal once drawn from far below ground level has been sifted and dumped to make artificial mounds.

Rivers flowed strange colours here, no doubt polluted by the minerals dug below but, although one might think that the area was a dilapidated and polluted ruin, it was anything but. Sure, the poverty of the area showed in the shacks put up on plots of land, but the feel you got of the place was one of freshness and warmth.

Louise had chosen the 'scenic route' to take them to their overnight stopover, a lengthy stretch of tarmac that seemed to go eight times the distance of the motorway that they'd left some ninety minutes ago - but it was worth it. For me, that is - Lee and Kath tend not to make long car journeys so that, by the time they arrived, they were so goggle-eyed that they weren't taking very much in.

As the house backed on to the local stream - and having read up on the community of American voles who lived throughout the course of the river - I took leave of my owners and disappeared round the back as soon as I could, sniffing out a burrow entrance close to the main wooden support of the house and descending into darkness.

'Dak!' a voice shouted from below. 'Dak! We've been expecting you! We've been preparing for your arrival ever since we heard that you were coming this way!'

The feast laid out before me looked sumptuous - fit for a, er, hamster. A king

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would've wanted roast beef and venison but this was a bounty that any hamster would've relished.

Above my head, embedded in the wall, the words 'Allen County welcomes the Rodent Weekly' were emblazoned clearly, unmistakably, while I forgave them for misspelling my name in the sentence that ran below. I didn't think it was that difficult to spell, to be honest, but voles will be voles - a word of rebuke for the theory of Evolution, no doubt.

This was enjoyable.

I sat back and relaxed as courses of local seeds and berries were brought before me, but went over the story in my mind that I knew I'd have to recount when at last the empty shells were removed from before us.

The voles of Allen County delight to hear stories - just as the Community I'd found in Eastbourne did - and I'd been forewarned that they'd be most offended if I ate from their food dish but gave nothing in return.

As the hubbub died down, I rose to my rear paws, motioning with my hand that I was about to speak.

'Voles and Volesses,' I squeaked, 'it's with great delight that I come before you this evening, inspired to share with you a little about that most famous and exquisite of all ornaments, chiselled from marble and encrusted with the finest and most dazzling of jewels.

'Tonight, dear friends, I am going to tell you the truth concerning the figure known as the Maltese Hamster...'

Jade the Hamster licked an offending tuft of fur back into place and used both paws to straighten the hair between her ears. It was always difficult getting every strand in place when you'd just had a particularly lucid dream about watermelon and broccoli trying to escape arrest - and she'd known some pretty unsavoury pieces of broccoli in her time, it had to be said.

From where she sat, she could see the shadow of a visitor casting darkness against the bars of the cage, the make-do office in which she investigated for the rich and famous, the not as rich and unfamous, and the downright poor and infamous.

Her secretary pushed open the cage door and poked her head round the slit - a strange thing to do seeing as she could see her perfectly well through the gaps in the rungs but, even though she'd told her time and time again about it, she still persisted with her annoying habit.

'There's a wonderful hamster to see you,' she began, her face lighting up with enthusiasm. 'He's just come in from the other side of town, is anxious to locate a

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relative of his.'

Without further ado, a stocky figure of an elegant rodent slipped his way into her cage, taking his rest on a small patch of bedding that Jade indicated was for that very purpose.

'Austin Leblanc,' he squeaked, extending a paw towards Jade and licking the back of her hand with an affection that she'd seldom experienced.

'Jam Jade,' came the reply, 'but most people know me as Jade. How can I help you, er...'

'Austin, please.'

'How can I help you, Austin?'

Leblanc looked over his shoulder in case there was someone else in the cage, indicating to Jade that he wanted to keep this matter as private as possible. He needn't have bothered, the world and his wife could hear what was going on through the holes of the compartment.

'I'm trying to locate a close relative of mine,' he began explaining, 'a hamster by the name of Florin who left home nearly two weeks' ago to come to New York.'

'New York?' Jade interrupted. 'But this is San Francisco.'

'Yes,' agreed Leblanc, 'but if you knew my relative's sense of direction, it wouldn't appear to you anything strange. Now, as I was saying, Florin is in grave danger - I just know she is - and I want to employ you to find her for me.'

'If I do agree to search for Florin,' she began, 'I could ring you periodically and tell you if there's been any change.'

It was a cheap joke and one that she knew would be axed onto the cutting room floor, but sometimes these off the cuff remarks somehow found themselves into the final edit.

'I will give you two hundred grapes as payment, Miss Jade,' he continued, 'if you will but try. I asked round my acquaintances and your name kept coming up time and time again.'

'They said I was a good detective?'

'No,' Austin corrected, 'they said you were cheap.'

Jade accepted the photofit picture pressed into her paws and contemplated the assignment in her mind. She pushed the picture back into Leblanc's arms and shook her head.

'Truth is, Mr Leblanc, I hate murder.'

Austin looked at Jade with puzzlement. Had they been talking about murder? How had she thought they were talking about the elimination of a mutual enemy? But she

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explained after catching her breath.

'Sure we could go through this entire plot. I could lose a good partner and rodents could be threatened and murdered along the way as the story unfolds. But you know what?'

It was a rhetorical question, Austin Leblanc sitting quietly contemplating the proposition as he heard it elucidated so cleverly by this PI.

'I'm tired of it. Yes, honestly, tired. Let's cut to the chase, Mr Leblanc, let's go straight to the final scene in my apartment and get this web of intrigue over and done with as quickly as we can.'

Austin raised his paw to his chin, grooming his fur as he thought carefully.

'Yes,' he began, 'yes, I agree. Let's cut the plot to the bone. Let's make this low budget movie even cheaper than it already is. Shall I expect you in, say, half an hour?'

Jade nodded her approval. 'There are a few things I need to get straight before I scurry over. Do you have the address of my apartment?'

'No need,' Austin raised a paw, 'I can always look it up in the script.'

'It's obvious what you did,' Jade began, 'even though you tried to conceal it the best you could.'

'That day in my office, you pretended to be in search of a missing relative but, even then, I knew it was just a cover for a top secret KGB investigation into the smuggling of contraband walnuts into Europe. It was a dead give-away.'

'Was I really that transparent?' Austin asked.

'Walnuts were written all over your face,' she continued, 'indelibly - like with permanent, non-washable ink that stains your fur for weeks. It was obvious to me that you were on the run from the FBI and that you'd secretly concealed the whereabouts of a secret stash of nuts in the rear of a supposedly invaluable figurine of a Golden Hamster, the famous Maltese Hamster.'

'That's where your accomplice came in. Even though I've never before seen him, I conceived of his necessary existence - and that his name must be Willie Haddock - because I'm a fictional character and can exercise omniscience whenever I want to.'

'Very magnanimous, madam,' the Fat Ham observed. 'Very magnanimous, indeed.'

'What you didn't know,' Jade continued, 'was that the walnuts were fakes, switched when you had the artwork smuggled in to America on the Paloma Blanca.'

'Quite frankly, madam, I'd like to have you along in my quest to find the genuine walnuts. You're a woman of nice judgment and many resources, I'm sure that you'd come in very useful on my trip to Africa.'

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The Fat Ham pulled a loaded shell from his left pouch and faced Jade as she shuffled uneasily away.

'I leave the lead Maltese Hamster on the table there, as a little memento as I bid you farewell.'

The door clicked shut as the menagerie of accomplices departed, bound for foreign shores in search of the perfect walnut. Five minutes later, as Jade wiped the sweat from her sticky paws, the loud knock on the apartment door reminded her that she'd called the Police.

Detective Honey paced gingerly into the room, glancing about as he squeaked, 'Have they all gone?'

'They have,' she sighed with relief, 'but they've left me a souvenir of the adventure.'

The Detective lifted the Maltese Hamster into his paws and gave it a cursory glance.

'It's heavy,' he sounded surprised, weighing it in his paws. 'What is it?'

'The, uh, stuff that dreams are made of,' came the reply.

'Huh?' the policeham sounded surprised, then excited.

'Cheese? You mean it's made of Cheese?'

'West Virginian women,' said Lee with an air of authority that seemed to surpass any confrontation which might have come against his statement, 'are much more attractive than those in North Carolina.'

It was a strange statement and one that I contemplated for the next half an hour as we journeyed back from Allen County that Saturday afternoon.

It had been an interesting evening and night watching the Basketball play-offs with Lee and Kath after the meal in the vole burrow and, the following day, some WWF bout or other that seemed to use just about any piece of household furniture available in the ring to act out the contests of wrestling being displayed for the paying audience.

Even the walk along the river stream was great, seeing birds flit from tree to tree and being careful to avoid any poisonous snakes which might slither out from the long grass beside the road. The voles accompanied my owners every step of the way, waving to me in midstream the whole time as I popped out to wave back from the side-pocket of Lee's coat - although both my owners saw absolutely nothing.

But, how was it that West Virginian women were more attractive? What was it that made them so? I asked Lee as we sped under the first of the two tunnels back to NC.

'Well, for a start, they go in at the sides,' he said, 'and, well, they just are.'

He paused for a moment trying to deliver the ultimate statement that justified his first. In the end, he just continued with, 'I don't know, I can't explain it. You must have

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the same sort of thing amongst hamsters, right?'

'Er, no,' I squeaked. Why was it that humans thought that hamsters were like themselves? Didn't they realise we were more highly developed than they were?

For a start, would a male hamster really fall for a thin female? I know that this *can* and *does* happen, but a thin hamster implies a lack of ability in foraging. And what was human beauty all about? It was about finding the best female to breed the next generation, right?

'Er, no. That's not it,' Lee apologised.

'It's not?' I squeaked indignantly. 'Don't you realise that the success of your offspring depends on finding a good female who can bear and bring up the young-uns to a relatively good standard?! Why on earth isn't that near the top of your lists as humans?!'

I could see that this was proving to be a difficult question for Lee to answer - not because he'd never really given it much thought but because he'd never successfully been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion. It will shock most of my rodent readership to discover that humans tend to make lifelong decisions based on the shape of bodies and the colour of hair, on the hue of the eyes and the curviness of the waist - rather than with value judgments that satisfy the reason for choosing a mate in the first place.

If a hamster chooses a partner, it isn't because we get all gooey and fall about limply in the sawdust - but because we've come to a considered conclusion based on fitness.

Why should humans be any different?

Lee offered the suggestion that both partners should really try and assess the inner person which hides in the depths of the body they see, but the main problem he experienced was that he couldn't discover why most relationships and partnerships were based more on external physical beauty rather than such considerations.

'Anyway,' I squeaked, 'remind me again why the women in West Virginia are more attractive than the ones in North Carolina.'

Lee threw his hands up in a defeated gesture and commented, 'Okay, okay. You win. They're a different shape, I grant you, but beauty, quite obviously, must lie in the eye of the hamster...'

SHOPPING

'Y'all eat peas from offa yer knives,' said the shopkeeper, a sentence which immediately gave Lee the uncontrollable urge to leave the premises and go elsewhere. He could have chosen to point out that at least the English knew how to use cutlery and that his nation were less prone to bury the said article in someone else's back than the Americans were, but he decided not to waste his breath.

This shop was certainly intriguing and it seemed as if it had just been opened on a shoestring budget, with its vast array of differing lines and products ranging from compasses which hung by the door (each of which pointed towards a seemingly different, yet truly authentic, north) to lifesize kids in baseball hats and jeans which stood against whichever wall of the house you wanted.

Shopping was certainly becoming more and more intriguing with each passing day that we went out, with the bizarre and ridiculous already raising their profile in the shops that my owners were frequenting.

In a christian bookstore, Lee pointed out to me the endless rows and rows of ornaments, CDs and religious paraphernalia which took up more than eighty per cent of their range. Just how the shop could justify being a 'bookshop' was a little hard to imagine but there must be some logic to choosing to call it something other than 'Shop with very few products that will help you get to know God better' - even though that title was so catchy that I felt obliged to ask Lee to suggest it to the lady behind the counter. He declined.

Then there was the Y2K crash toy - I could've watched Lee play with it for hours - a simple Bumble Bee-looking soft toy with a pressure sensor in its bum which emitted a loud crashing sound whenever it was dropped. Yeah, really useful - I wonder how practical that one is around the house.

Two muppets sold to Lee in the CD store near Mount Airy. No, I'm being unfair - muppets are much more intelligent. Having rung up the wrong amount on the till, having not noticed that the CD was on special offer (an easy mistake to make, I admit), they then spent the next five minutes discussing how they might, first, deduct the money from the till so it wouldn't show up, how they would then need to give Lee back the twenty dollar note that he'd tendered (did they actually know which specific note it was or could they choose any one that had been taken through the day? They never discussed this point but I'm sure it was relevant) and then the options available to them as to how they might be able to enter the correct amount, seeing as the laser reader would input the non-sale price.

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Eventually, however, they seem to have followed the 'three basic steps to excellence in sales ringing' and got Lee and Kath out the front door of the store in well under the recommended fifteen minutes.

Angels proliferated just about everywhere my owners went - and in all sorts of situations that would beggar belief. It seemed to me - but, then, I'm just a hamster - that humans in these parts are fixated with angelic beings rather than being fully focused on the One who sends them. Nevertheless, angels could appear on ceramic motorbikes, notepads and as that most innocent of faces in a hundred and one different portraits and paintings.

And then there was the US Post Office - that was weird.

If one thing sticks in the memory it was that memorable afternoon when Lee, armed with seven postcards, went in to get seven postage stamps to be able to send them all to England.

Having ascertained that the amount of postage was fifty-five cents per card, the lady behind the desk proceeded to give him seven thirty-three cent stamps and seven twenty-two's. Now, it wouldn't have taken mastermind to work out how to apportion the stamps, but the teller looked Lee straight in the eyes and, with a serious and sincere voice, slowing noticeably to make sure she was understood, instructed Lee solemnly that it was important that one of each stamp was put on each of the cards - not any two from all fourteen but specifically one from one strip followed by one from the other.

Lee couldn't help wonder whether the American post clerk perhaps thought that the English couldn't do maths. After all, hadn't the US invented everything that's good in the world? And that must include numbers, right?

The higher postage stamp had had a picture of an American impressed upon it and, the lower denomination, flowers and fruits. Why didn't the woman simply instruct Lee that it was one human and a plant on each? If she thought that he couldn't add up, why bother referring to numbers at all?

Strange though it may sound, I got the impression that all foreigners were treated with the same sympathetic, though misguided, patience.

As I said in a previous observation, the traveller will find great delights as they travel throughout foreign lands - and not just in places where the local language is foreign to their own country. For, even amongst common languages and cultures, there's a wealth of untapped comical resources for those who have the time to plumb their depths.

THE CHURCH OF THE STICKY POST-IT NOTE

for Pavel Plasencia

I have already written about three experiences of churches I had in the North Carolina area in a previous article and, although they epitomised the type of mentality I came across, they were by no means the only places that I attended in my time there.

I travelled the length and breadth of the land that was reachable, searching out the large and small congregations that plied their trade with advertising billboards at the side of main roads on which they'd 'set up shop'.

On one particular hot and sticky afternoon as we were returning home, I caught sight of the statement 'We share our prophets' hanging over the entrance door to a church building.

Immediately, the implication sparked questions (although I treated Lee's cynical response 'I bet they don't' as if I hadn't heard it) - was this group of people committed to giving freely to others as they had been empowered? Did they really seek for openings for people to go out to other churches and areas with the message as they understood it?

This certainly would've been a 'new thing' and just so Biblical that I, too, began to have doubts in my own mind as to its possibility.

I made a mental note of the location and grabbed a lift the next time one of Lee and Kath's various shopping trips coincided with a meeting time, arranging a rendezvous in the parking lot when I knew that it should be long over. Even so, their legendary shopping experiences extended well past the time - as they so often did.

I squeezed my way through a crack in the wall, ran along the cavity space and through a small gap where a radiator pipe exited into the meeting hall, the organ fading out as a small woman motioned with her hands to gather the children together as a group at the front.

Now, when I say 'children', the truth is that they were mostly teenagers, some handcuffed to pews so they couldn't escape while others, their feet set in concrete, rendered immobile until the meeting had finished.

Even so, I was impressed by the numbers as the lady began recounting the day's lesson...

That was the problem with Bibles - it wasn't wise to put pencil to paper and write notes in the margins.

For a start, Mrs Flangesprocket in the front row would raise her eyebrows in

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disgust, as if something so holy as a thread bound book should ever experience the leaded expressions of its owner - if it was a matter of staying on the right side of that old dear then not so much as a piece of dust should ever alight upon the opened leaves.

And amend a translated word? My goodness! Was anyone as mad as to do that? Why, it was tantamount to disagreeing with God Himself seeing as the version had been authorised to be used in the churches. Besides, everyone knew that the apostle Paul had used the very same translation as was now being read in their midst and, to be honest, if it'd been good enough for him, why wouldn't it be good enough for them all?

But there were certainly 'things' that needed to be written down which a notebook just didn't seem to be the solution for. After all, when you opened the Bible again, how did you know what you'd seen there unless you were able to cross reference the notes into a Scripture index that would be continuously accessed each and every time the pages were opened?

So you can see the problem.

That's when he hit upon the idea of the Post-It Note - and what a stroke of genius it was, too.

Not only could you add personalised notes beside your favourite verses but, by leaving the yellow leaf slightly protruding from the edge, you instantly knew where each and every one was. The damage caused by the glue was minimal, too, and, so long as you didn't remove them permanently, the pages of the Bible didn't stick together after it'd been closed.

Admittedly, by the time six months had passed, the size of the book had quadrupled from being just three quarters of an inch thick to three - but you couldn't have everything now, could you? And the advantages far outweighed the small inconveniences of not being able to carry it around with you unless you'd lifted weights and trained for the best part of two weeks.

Then, one day, someone saw him writing a note and inserting it into the pages of his Bible.

It was in the middle of one of those sermons that occurred on a Sunday morning that proved in principle that eternity must really be endless for the sermon seemed to be designed to traverse it this side of the grave.

As the tea cups were passed round after the closing hymn, a brother pushed his way over and introduced himself - although it was as strange a phenomenon as there being hard biscuits to dip into the tea, the opening point with the finger at the yellow protrusions and brief 'Mmmm, them' drew the reaction 'Yes - neat, huh?'

Having already covered more meaningful ground in five words than had occurred in

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the past three years of meetings in that building, the stranger withdrew, flicked the top of his head with thanks and returned to his seat in case, somehow, the freshly made tea might have warmed up to room temperature. But, although miracles were often believed to still take place, a cup of tea seemed to be out of the scope of such wonders.

Next week, the originator of the sticky note reference system was struck by those who sat in front and behind, beside on his left and his right. For there didn't appear to be a Bible that lacked the notes protruding from the edges.

Although he'd kept strictly to yellow, here there was pink and lime green, blue and white. Indeed, there seemed to be just about every colour under the sun (and beyond it, too) and, for the first time, he noticed that the men and women who attended were now making notes - just as he did - as the sermon wore on.

Mind you, he wondered at the relevancy of the note '2lb carrots' to the minister's message on predestination but, he assured himself, it was probably some sort of word association that would instantly recall the message when stumbled upon. As if in understanding, he inserted a new sticky Post-It Note beside Rom 8:29-30 and wrote the word 'sprouts' in capitals to see if it would work for him as well.

Realising that he couldn't stand the sight of sprouts a few hours later when he returned home, he changed it to 'melons' and contemplated the allegorical application over breakfast the following morning. He saw no connection between his thoughts and yesterday's sermon but, as he could no longer remember the latter, it didn't really matter.

Over the coming weeks, the size of the Bibles grew proportionately to the length of each subsequent sermon until, after just a few months, when one opened any Bible, there were more Post-It Notes visible than there were Scriptures.

New members began to be herded together into special weekday meetings in which the right and wrong way to use the Post-It Note was explained while pastoral care was given to those who thought their use superfluous to following God.

Time and time again, leaders sat with those from the congregation to demonstrate how to peel a sheet from the pad, how to attach it to the page and, most importantly, to add letters and diagrams that would support its insertion. As revelation came to each person differently, it was expected that each person's notes wouldn't be identical.

And it was true! While one added notes about hedgehogs and cats, another recorded birth dates and anniversaries of important events.

It was clear to everyone concerned that God was doing a new thing in their midst and that anyone who opposed it was opposing not the voice of man but the clear will of God - that's how important it had now become.

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New members were given six months to mend their ways - a gracious period of 'opportunity' when they'd be led into the fulness of the use of the Note, would be encouraged to repent of pencil notes scribbled in the margin and told to forsake childish ways because they should be pressing on to maturity.

But, after six months, with sorrowful heart and quivering lip, profligate and totally depraved men and women had to be expelled for their own good, handed over to their own devices that some might see the error of their ways once they'd been pushed out from the one true people of God.

Although a sad time, members were consoled by reminding themselves that it was they who'd been granted to perceive the way, the truth and the life and that their faith had sustained them to hold fast to the sticky Post-It Note when all around them scoffed.

Not for them to dwell upon minors in their walk with God - let everyone assess the sincerity of their heart and the commitment of their lives to press on to maturity.

Within two years, the congregation voted on a change of name and a local sign writer was drafted in to erect the ministerial contact names and service times for the new 'Church of the Sticky Post-It Note' with a small line at the very bottom which read 'Sponsored by 3M'.

Within three, they were half the size they'd started.

In five, there were just a handful of attendees, holding fast to the tradition that had been delivered and all the while insisting that they were the remnant, chosen for the special days ahead who would shine a brilliant light into the darkness and stand as His own true witnesses when all around them were selling themselves for that which was 'of the world'.

Within ten years, the cobwebs grew strong and boards covered up what had been abandoned when the leader decided it was time to move on as a missionary to some far away land that needed to hear about the Gospel of salvation that had been written down so many centuries previous, that it might be delivered to all men everywhere, obscured by those sticky yellow Post-It Notes attached to its pages.

They had some grasp of the Truth, it was obvious - they knew that superfluous and inconsequential items were unimportant and shouldn't be raised up as gods over them and, try as I might, I couldn't see even the slightest indication that anybody used sticky Post-It Notes in their Bibles.

I listened intently as the 'adult' sermon continued for near on half an hour but was unable to determine just where these people were coming from, the message being more

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a word of general exhortation than something foundational.

As they sang their closing song, I slipped back into the entrance hall to see what I could find and discovered a table with a mound of WWJD badges with the price \$3 stuck on two pillars either side of the sales table.

On a large poster in front, I read the words 'Pastor Matthews will be teaching on how to get the best from your WWJD badge this Thursday in the main meeting hall at 7.30'.

SMOKING

Smoking cigarettes is common place amongst the vast majority of North Carolinians, even though there are many public health drives in and around the place we stayed. The airline with which Lee and Kath came over ban any smoking whatsoever on their International flights - quite some challenge to those people who struggle for even half an hour to leave the packet on the sitting room table.

Yet, amongst those who don't smoke, it's perhaps sad that there exists all manner of negative incentives which are employed to discourage others from lighting up.

Such phrases as 'You're gonna die if you keep smoking' really don't help and are easily countered by those who do with the phrase 'Heck! We're all gonna die whether we smoke or not!'.

Amongst the religious, more venom can be injected into such sentences by appeal to a higher, divine authority that causes the objector to insist that 'God doesn't want people to smoke' though the more logical necessary argument used in, for instance, flying, which says that 'If God had wanted us to fly, he'd've given us wings' simply doesn't work.

After all, the phrase 'If God had wanted us to smoke he'd've given us lips' is immediately seen to be worthless and redundant - simply because God did. Indeed, the human body seems to have been singularly designed for smoking by the same logic - for each person has lungs, air tubes and a mouth. There's also an ample supply of oxygen wherever smokers are found in the world to light up, and fire is readily available even if matches and lighters have not yet reached those civilisations.

I think that, perhaps, the greatest reason why certain people in the US don't smoke is that they're unable to do so.

For health reasons? No, not at all, that's not what I meant.

Some people seem to be hung up so much with their own self-importance and grandeur that to keep their lips together long enough to be able to smoke would mean that they'd have to refrain from declaring their greatness and it'd be just too much for them to bear - but see how easy it is to translate this into self-justification of how strong a will they have or how they saw the light of the health implications and stopped instantly, both of which draw attention once more to their own self-importance, something that should warn the wise that smoking isn't the issue at stake, but pride.

Now Lee's a bit different here and both my owners operate a strict 'no smoking' policy towards everyone who stays with them - not because they don't want to breathe the fumes but because Lee is partially allergic to it and because Kath doesn't want to

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have a nicotine-scented house.

But, for everyone who's ever stayed with them, frequent visits to the outside garden are the norm and, if a British winter could be thought of as doing anything beneficial, having to go out into minus ten to have a smoke is one of the best incentives known to man to cause more time to elapse between each cigarette.

Perhaps Lee even has this as some sort of ploy to contribute towards a less smoky world - I don't know - but I remember when the GFO came over and how she almost froze to death on the back porch when she needed to light up. Unfortunately, though, it didn't stop her.

Ebony, however, my colleague-in-fur, likes the smell of smoked clothes and will spend hours just sniffing and licking such garments - but that's something for which he's receiving treatment at the moment and I hope that we might get him to kick the habit soon. I blame it on the GFO's visit, to be honest - she has a lot to answer for.

Now I wouldn't like to spoil anyone's concept and image of the Marlboro cigarette but, back in the UK (and just the same here, also), the advertising boards picture western cowboys and desolate lands where cattle herding takes place amidst a backdrop of sandstone looking mountains and desert cacti. I guess that, if you want to feel yourself to be any bit the man you're not, you have to adopt the image - at the very least - of the man you'd like to be.

But Marlboro tobacco is grown in the Carolinas - and in Virginia - where the picture images aren't drawn from. Here there're rolling hills lush in green trees with odd herds of cattle securely fenced in woods and grass meadows. Where the cowboy comes in is, er, nowhere. Marlboro tobacco is grown in small plots in wood clearings, very often, where groundhogs and possums wander and graze.

Funny, isn't it, that humans buy the product that gives them the image rather than the product at half the cost that does the job?! I wonder how Marlboro cigarettes would sell if Ebony advertised them?

'Marlboro cigarettes - as sniffed by Ebony the hamster.'

No, wouldn't sell...

A FINAL EXPERIENCE

'How does it feel to have as famous an owner as me?' said Lee.

It had all started on Thursday when Mondee, one of the reporters with the local Mount Airy News, had visited the Trailer Park to interview both Lee and Kath as to why they'd come over to visit Louise and what they actually 'did'.

Of course, Mondee was extremely cautious - as any person encountering Lee for the first time would be (and especially when he was wearing his bright red Charlton Athletic soccer shirt) - and talked politely as the interview proceeded, making copious notes on a paper pad which she opened almost as soon as she came in through the door.

Although Lee'd been expecting the article to run Sunday, it got delayed somewhere in transit but, what was the worst thing imaginable, was that it wasn't held up until after both my owners had left.

I blame Mondee - I'd secretly discussed the issue with her shortly after her departure and had appealed to her good nature to have mercy on the Surry County area and come up daily with different reasons why it couldn't be included in that edition.

Looking at the picture now on the front page of Tuesday's release, I couldn't help but sit aghast at what was inevitably going to transpire. Even though Kath had hidden the Soccer shirt in question, Lee delved into the remotest corners of the suitcase and came up with it in his hands like some proud sportsman receiving a much coveted trophy.

'I can't deny my public,' he began, 'by failing to appear before them.'

And, with that, we walked out onto the streets of Mount Airy, stopping passers-by and signing whatever piece of paper they had on them - corn flake boxes, shop receipts and even some dollar bills.

I think it was Lee's announcement 'I'm someone famous - would you like my autograph?' that really perplexed me. If Lee had only taken the time to read the article, he would've seen that, had the locals actually read what he'd been quoted as saying, he would've been regarded more as notorious than famous - especially over that quote about the Altoids.

Oh dear, yes - that quote!

I must stand up for my owner - even though I'd prefer not to on occasions and, more frequently than anything, disappear from view when my testimony is requested. But I must state, with my paw firmly on my heart that, although he did say that Altoids sounded like a disease, he didn't actually say that they were *that* kind of disease - no way, he wouldn't even know what that kind of disease was.

That evening - the last evening before we were to fly back - we went for a

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McDonalds, Lee with his shades on as we entered the restaurant and having to be led by the hand.

'It's cool,' he told me, 'and my public want me to be cool.'

Cool it may be to wear shades, but to wave to people at tables when there was no one there? Come on! There was absolutely no sense in this at all! The hamburger laid out before him could have been anything whatsoever and Lee wouldn't have known but, as he must, he had to be there 'for his public'.

'You have to understand,' Lee told me, 'that these people have never met anyone as famous as me. All they know of fame is what they see on the tv screen - but here I am as large as life walking around in their midst. You seem to be somewhat deluded to think that my public don't want to see me!'

Why was it, I reasoned, that, if Lee was so famous, that people didn't come up to him? Why was it that, if the reporter really had been impressed with Lee, she hadn't put the web site address in the paper? After all, it's one thing reporting on an event but quite something other to record the url so that anyone can contact you and, thereby, to give a subtle endorsement to what's in print.

'It was to stop me being mobbed,' Lee answered, 'and I heartily appreciate it. It's not every reporter that thinks of the interviewee. Why, I bet there's been thousands of phone calls to their offices already...'

This was true as I was later to discover - but not for *that* reason.

'...and I bet that, even now, reporters are planning to meet us at the airport tomorrow to do follow up reports - why, this could even come to the attention of the President!'

Yeah, right.

Who was the deluded one, now?

I threw my paws into the air - not for the first time, I can tell you - and settled down to a short nap before the long journey home.

Fame?

Super stardom?

What did Lee actually know about either of those two things?

Bah! Humbug...

I knew it was going to be an interesting flight home when I heard the sound of the stewardess's knuckles dragging along the floor as she showed Lee and Kath to their seats, the two which were immediately in front of the Emergency Exit.

The door bore the large warning sign 'Do not let children sit here' which immediately

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made me realise that there was a certain justification for determining age not just on years spanned since the birthday but on the mental age as well.

Still, for now it was just determinable on physical age but my letter is already in the post to the airline company.

Lee sat back to rest his feet but was immediately accosted by the stewardess who shoved an air safety manual into his hands and said, 'Here! Read this!'

Apparently, sitting by the Emergency Exit doesn't just have its advantages - such as extra leg room, a location just a metre and a half from the toilet and not having to have the person in front of you chop your legs in two when they decide to put their seat in 'recline mode' - it also has its responsibilities.

Yes, responsibilities - and they were trusting Lee with that?

When - oops, I mean 'if' - the plane ditched in the sea (and, to be honest, when was the last time you ever heard of that happening? Don't airplane crashes normally come down on dry land or have broken up before they ever reach the water below them?), Lee was obliged to remove the Emergency hatch and instruct the other passengers 'Come this way! The door's open!'

I could hear Lee's mind beginning to work, however, and he soon called the stewardess over to ask for some clarification.

'When the passengers are getting off,' he began, 'am I also supposed to say "Thank you for flying Continental - please fly with us again" or should I only do that if there's no obvious danger?'

Her response was one that I'd half-expected - a move from the Emergency Exit row to a place in the middle of the 777 where even Lee couldn't escape from. They obviously wanted him as far out of harm's way as possible - a feeling which I can associate with.

However, the Chinese passengers who sat in front didn't seem too keen on the set up - especially when the recline button on their seat was firstly met with an equal force in the opposite direction making it appear as if it was stuck and then, when Lee removed his legs, they shot backwards suddenly with an orange juice in hand and then, in an instant, found themselves rocketed forward as a forcing hand accelerated them faster than the engines do at take off.

I've never before seen orange come out from someone's nostrils but it was an interesting sight, I must admit, and the sounds of gagging were particularly realistic.

For those of you unfamiliar with Intercontinental travel nowadays, I should just point out that it seems to have changed drastically since the days when the airlines were held together with string.

Nowadays, each seat has it's own video monitor, and headphones give each one the

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sound to the pictures that are displayed in front of them. There can be upwards of nine films to watch and even more audio channels - with interactive video games to play and geographic information about the flight including speed, estimated time of arrival and location of the plane on a world map.

Lee chose 'A Bug's Life' on the way home and then channel hopped through the music - the latter of which took him only a few minutes seeing as there were no real 'Rock' stations included and the statement which labelled one as 'The Best of Country Music' was most obviously a contradiction in terms - an oxymoron if ever there was.

There's something about the human toilets on board aircraft which fascinates me but which causes both my owners equal consternation. It appears that, upon their entry into the booth, a certain 'button' must be tripped because the airplane seems to always begin to go through unexpected turbulence - even in the bluest and clearest of skies.

Perhaps it's the shift of weight from one point to another, I reasoned initially, but, as I watched, it really did only seem to happen when my owners went in, not when others rose up to walk up and down the plane. Uncanny though that was, it just had to be something to do with them - as most things are.

Anyway, both my owners landed safely in Manchester early on Thursday morning and managed to get home that very same day. As I type this, Lee's still asleep and shows no sign of waking up even though he's had a full eleven hours kip to this point - that's jet lag for you.

What I most remember about the Carolinans is their friendliness - and I hope some day to be able to return. Until then, I trust that those who met me will always remember the fun we had, but especially that they'll stand up for my two owners when the things they did are misunderstood in weeks to come.

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The Final Remedy

INTRODUCTION

'Be part of the solution, not part of the problem'

I first arrived in Lee and Kath's household during the Spring when the first leaves of summer were beginning to push their way out from the branches of dormant trees. I was chosen from the pet shop specifically because of my writing ability and had to pass numerous written tests before either of my two new masters were convinced that I'd be able to handle the rigours of a life that would be word processor orientated.

My first task was to take the place of Lee's personal secretary in writing responses to emails that were taking an increasingly large amount time of my master's day as he worked relentlessly to put together teaching notes for a local group of people that he met with every Sunday evening.

I could sympathise with the workload - I've never before seen someone work so hard and such long hours as Lee (though I'm sure that there must be some) and for virtually no pay. At least I'd negotiated a fairly hefty food allowance, a fresh supply of bedding on a fortnightly basis and regular surprise treats on days which had a 'y' in them.

I became affectionately known as 'The Secretary Rodent' known in Latin as *Secretarius Limoodius* from which I took my name 'Limood' - not a new species of hamster, but a mimic of that African bird which goes by the same name.

I'd been struggling with the meaning of life for many years - and I was still trying to come to terms with the intricacies of the world when I moved from the pet shop to the palatial residence of the Smithhouse. It was here, though, that I unearthed manuscripts left behind by one of my rodent predecessors who'd stashed them away to work on at a later date, his untimely death preventing him from completing his intended work.

I've begun this series of stories with the problem - for this is where my thinking had led me - going on to observe the testimony from many ancient hamsters about a human that many of them encountered during a few short years a couple of millennia ago, before providing the reader with the chance to understand the solution to the ultimate problem and how *everything* seems to have been summated in this one individual.

These are things into which rodents long to look - and which we eagerly contemplate during the quiet hours of night - but which we don't always fully understand. However, as a colleague-in-fur once told me 'If there's a problem, there must also be a solution' and, as another testified, 'There's no problem that occurs without a solution being close at hand'.

I can testify to the fact that the ultimate answer to the ultimate question has now

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been made known.

I trust that the rodent reader will perceive that such a solution should be celebrated not just by a handful of humans who have come to realise it, but by all rodents everywhere who have been perplexed for years at the things which they've witnessed around them.

May each of us not take anything for granted - but test all things, perceive all things and hold fast everything that's true.

Limood the Hamster

THE ULTIMATE PROBLEM

My name is Limood.

I'm from Russian origin though I can't say that I remember too much either about my parents or my early, formative days inside the nest. Some can, I admit, but I seem to have let life slip by at its own pace and seldom strayed from the nest until I was confident of my faculties.

I don't regret it - indeed, I positively delight in it. Had it not been for those hours of silent contemplation when my siblings were running madly about their new surroundings, I probably would never have been sent off to the great rodent academies in our nation and wouldn't have had the ability to think clearly and carefully on issues with no stray thoughts and activities which were competing for my time.

I entered the Academy of Moscow when I was five weeks old and studied under the greatest and latest philosophers - and thinkers that the world has yet to see. I could reel off names that vied for my cerebral attention for there weren't many who were teaching at the Academy or who were visiting that I didn't make great efforts to both see and listen to.

Most of the philosophical schools of learning were here and were given free reign to announce to everyone their particular brand of perception of the world around them - disciples of Freud and Jung both had their adherents though I tended to side with the more fur-based thinkers who related hamster life to a world view that seemed to bring a harmony to one's overall perception of the universe, that seemed to be clearly perceivable at one's right paw and left.

Therefore, let the disciples of Freud speak about Libido - but where did that get the average hamster who had to find enough food to survive on frost covered highlands or the rodent of the plains who eked out an existence in a constant awareness of the threat of both flood and drought? For me, it was important to harmonise the simple life that every hamster knew by experience to the much larger picture of the universe - and the fundamental questions about life such as 'Why does this sunflower seed smell funny?' and 'Why does a soft, downy nest suddenly become lumpy when you lie in it?' - both questions which every hamster has thought about, even if only fleetingly.

Perhaps the greatest puzzle for me was this: if man had truly evolved from a perfect world, why was he now so imperfect? And, if he really did stand as the conclusion of a series of random impulses which had generated complexity and organisation from simplicity and chaos, why didn't he reflect it by displaying an intelligence that refused to destroy the very resources that were both his home and

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from which he'd come?

After all, while a human might be horrified to burn their dead relative to heat their house, why did they do the very same thing when they used the resources which had been formed from those who they believed were their own ancestors? And why say the survival of the fittest was the prime motivator in the evolutionary process when they then made legislation to forbid one man's subjugation of another?

There were so many contradictions in my own mind in those years that I began to struggle with the burden of complexity which seemed, to me, to be irreconcilable. Even though others embraced all the 'truth' that they were being presented with, I found that 'facts' contradicted - and this only made me unhappy, discontented and downright depressed.

While fellow hamsters went out after college for a day on the floor coverings, I would lie quietly in my bed, contemplating the mysterious wonders of a universe which seemed to rebel at every opportunity against the hand of man and the paw of us rodents.

I can't be certain just how long it was before I came to a dead end in my contemplations for I always tried to 'begin afresh' after weeks of contradiction - but maybe a year went by before I finally hit on the idea of rejecting *everything* that I'd been told and to start as if I was a new-born hamlet with no preconceived ideas or beliefs that I was forcing to be the conclusion to that which I was trying to arrive at.

After all, if one knows the end of the journey, one is more than likely to interpret all the 'facts' as being relevant, applicable and justifying that ultimate premise. It's far better to allow the facts to guide you and to change your course mid-stream, than to force a conclusion upon what's clearly observable and to arrive at a wrong end - or, perhaps better, to begin at a wrong end and to justify it by recourse to selective interpretation.

So, that's how I *rebegan*.

I abandoned my belief in whatever I held on to and allowed myself a fresh start - a bit like wiping a computer hard drive of all but its operating system so that nothing might be allowed to interfere with the newness of what needs to be installed. There are so many conflicts possible that a clean slate is what every being needs, to see things clearly for the first time.

I started by considering the concepts of both 'good' and 'evil' for this seemed to lie at the heart of every man and woman's life - hamsters are wholly different, of course, but if I was to understand this world, I needed to begin with what was being done to it. The more I'd listened to human media, the more I realised that life was intrinsically either 'good' or 'bad' and that a human normally lived by his own concept of goodness -

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which they called 'morality' - until some time came when what they *wanted* to do contradicted that standard.

At that point, it seemed to me that a human was faced with a dilemma - either he was sufficiently selfless to reject his own desires or extravagantly selfish to reconstitute his own moral code to allow for the conduct which he desired to carry through. That a human was the more likely to choose the latter made me realise that here I had something intrinsically truthful about them - namely, that a human tends to do what's wrong instead of what's right in his own eyes.

I was, perhaps, going a bit too fast in my thoughts for I hadn't, at that stage, even tried to define the concepts of both 'good' and 'evil' and to attempt a factual analysis of whether they were absolutes or merely abstract concepts that could be changed at will. But my first observation - which I've already noted above - actually led me on to a definition.

For I realised that, if man had a moral code, he must have been born with it - and, if it was injected into him at conception, it had to be something which had either evolved by pure chance or been put there by someone.

I considered my first option very carefully - simply because I was now asking myself about one of the greatest tenets of modern man's belief and challenging the very premises in which many had securely trusted. I challenged myself to think clearly and precisely and found fear and trepidation at every turn for, if I opted for random chance, I had to opt for an amoral world as being the only possible conclusion.

And that meant that no human had the right to tell any other human what was both 'right' and 'wrong'. Indeed, in a universe which had come about by chance, there could only be 'opportunities' which presented themselves to everything on the earth - and whether a being chose to kill, maim, build or destroy couldn't be condemned by recourse to any moral code.

Fact was, there couldn't be one - for what I saw around myself was about the survival of the fittest.

Who had any right to say that one being's behaviour was 'evil' if there was no absolute? If one person's 'evil' was another man's 'good', morals could only be defined by selfish criteria, by subjective phenomena which caused one to reproduce himself into another generation and to undermine the ability of another to do so. Indeed, the more a being put down another, the more he should be praised - not condemned as 'guilty'.

So I had to reject random chance and opt for an ordering of what I saw by some hand or other that, at that time, I had failed to define.

After all, when a human buys a new computer, no one in their right mind would claim

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that their operating system occurred by random impulses - that, somehow, the ability to operate within specific parameters has occurred by pure chance. Every human will tell you that they believe that *someone* put the information there - it's only as an operator uses the system that the perfection of that first state seems to degenerate into system crashes, hard drive failures and dropped Internet connections.

And then, like a bolt from the past, a tune came back to me and I racked my brains to remember. Something some human or other had written a very long time ago began to replay in my head and I saw - as if it had been for the very first time - what I'd failed to perceive all those weeks ago. That random chance undermined society rather than supported it.

Praise to the Random Chance

(Sung to the tune of 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty' - Tune by Stralsund
Gesangbuch)

Praise to the Ran-dom Chance
That brought us from sim-ple com-pounds.
For out of no-thing and
for no-one is ev-ry-thing a-round.
Phil-os-o-phy
Facts ev-er so scan-ti-ly
Praise to the great Evolution.

Praise to E-ter-nal Luck
From Big Bang we have ar-rived here.
Born from Prim-ev-al soup
From dirt we've come, we'll re-turn there.
The Spe-cies tree
Hu-man-ist The-ol-o-gy
(we're) Accidents of Evolution.

Praise to the Cos-mic Fate
Des-ti-ny is our own ma-king.
No mo-rals here (no fear)
Your wel-fare I am for-sa-king
Fit-test sur-vive

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Weak-est are sim-ply to die
My in-t'rests I'll be pro-mo-ting.

Now, although I'd arrived at the conclusion that there was a 'programmer' who ordered that which I saw around me, and though I perceived that absolutes were a part of a person's being because they were simply a reflection of the programmer - and that chaos and chance couldn't produce such a thing - I was still no nearer (or so I thought) to discovering who this programmer was.

So, I set about trying to discover who it was who could have done such a thing and I let my mind, once more, reject what my contemporaries were telling me so that I might be able to perceive clearly those things that were all about me. It was plain that the world must reflect the one who'd made it - in the same way as the computer program reflects the will of the programmer. If it says 'Microsoft' on the box, it's pretty certain that it's 'Microsoft' inside (unless it was a pirated copy, of course).

I asked myself 'What does the program tell me about the programmer?' and realised immediately that if the existence of a moral code implied order or 'rule', the program should also be controlled by them. In that case, the program had been given specific boundaries within which it could operate - if a corruption of the program took place, this wouldn't override the necessity of limits but it would, plainly, mean that the behaviour of the program might begin to contradict some of the predefined operating parameters.

And that's what I was seeing.

I was seeing humans cut against their own moral code, of undermining absolute statements which would cause them to interrelate with one another more favourably and of generally ruining the perfection of the program wherever they put their hand to work. Instead of the construction of great monuments and buildings that they prided themselves in, I saw the destruction of rain forests, the consumption of natural resources and the laying waste of tracts of land that had once contained a complexity of the programmed natural order.

Truly, whatever humans were doing was leaving destruction in its wake - *somewhere*. Even though order might be brought to bear in one small piece of their rule, for every inch a mile was being devastated.

And I realised at that instant that the problem wasn't with the original program - neither was it with the programmer. But that nothing short of a virus had been introduced into the program which was causing the order to turn to chaos and for the plainly visible corruption to promote and duplicate itself throughout the programmer's affairs.

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I can't begin to tell you just how liberating I found it all. I started to see the fallacy of those two statements which humans use where they'll happily say that something '...restores my faith in human nature' when perceived good happens, but that it's '...human nature' when something morally wrong occurs. Either human nature was good or evil - either it was generating itself into new levels of perfection or it was degenerating itself into new lows of corruption. I was of the opinion that the latter was the most accurate and I saw the evidence for it all around me which, until that moment, I'd refused to interpret correctly.

The problem, then, was the virus - neither the program nor the programmer - and the inability of those programmed to heal themselves.

And I saw just the two options - either the programmer was standing back, waiting for the program to crash completely to bring it to an end (perhaps he might even turn the program off?) or else the programmer was, even now, thinking about a solution to the ultimate problem - an anti-viral program that could rectify it.

Perhaps it had already been achieved - perhaps it was yet to come.

But there had to be *some* hope - there just *had* to be.

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TSARA

A new translation from Codex Nutticanus, a fourth century manuscript. Although recorded in a now extinct language, Nutticanus is regarded by many as among the world's foremost records of the times in which the story comes from and is attested to by other fragments which are several hundreds of miles apart.

The first that Tsara knew about it, there was a flood of sound that jumped her out of her dreaminess. It certainly wasn't unusual - not nowadays - for it was happening with uneasy regularity, but she remembered a time when a honest hamster such as she could lie all day on soft, warm bedding and drift through the quietness of the day without being disturbed even the once.

She lived at the foot of a small mountain which opened into a plain before the large expanse of water which nestled in the valley below and, when she first chose the site, she thought that the setting was both visually idyllic and practically wise, for a small community of humans lived a short run from the burrow entrance where she could retrieve ample food from the scraps which lay discarded on the ground.

It was just that - well - a hamster's peace was dependant upon more than just a sufficient food supply and all this trampling to and fro was really beginning to grate. She rubbed the sleepiness from her eyes, carefully plodded up towards the shaft of light which marked one of the exits to her complex and watched as the shadows flickered their way past.

She waited a couple of seconds once the light remained constant before she tentatively poked her head out above the level of the ground and witnessed the crowd which had caused the commotion. It puzzled Tsara as to what this was all about but it was happening, as I've previously said, with increasing regularity - early in the morning crowds would stream past her burrow, making for the summit and, some time during the afternoon, they'd stream back down again, making for the village which was her feeding ground.

Were they on some hiking expedition? What was it all about?!

She eyed the crowd carefully and noticed - for the first time - that they all seemed to be reaching for the centre, hustling one another to get closer to whatever held their interest within the multitudes that were moving slowly away. Very few people left the throng - indeed, more seemed to be joining them to increase the numbers.

As the crowds' noise began to fade and the echo of their voices ricocheted off the stones which lay all around, Tsara heard the shuffling and rustling of a human immediately behind her, growing increasingly loud and bursting into her consciousness

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with a start that had her spinning round to see the individual's approach.

Running at a fair pace, the man seemed oblivious to anything other than catching the crowd - but he wasn't like the others. Tsara knew from his appearance that this was no ordinary man - she'd seen them a few times before on the outskirts of the village and even then she'd wondered at their appearance.

The human wore torn clothes which hung loosely, the hair of his head flowing down his back as the breeze caught and tossed it away, his beard bushy and ragged where it poked out from under the covering which hid his mouth from everyone's vision. His forehead was about the only part of the man one could see and Tsara recognised the unmistakable whiteness that marked this 'breed apart'.

These men and women - as she all too well knew - were outcasts from the more 'normal' people who lived in the cities and towns.

Or was it the other way round? Tsara couldn't rightly remember, but she associated houses with the 'normal' people and that meant that these others must be the 'abnormals'. At least, that's the way they were viewed by the others.

As he darted past the opening where her head poked above ground, he let out the most desperate and heart-rending shout of 'Unclean!' as the crowd in the distance turned to see what they didn't want to see. The festive procession which had been continuing joyously to this point suddenly took on the appearance of panic, fear coming upon every soul that couldn't just be seen on the faces but could almost be felt.

Another 'Unclean!' pierced the scene, cutting the crowd in two and scrambling the humans over rocks and through thorn bushes to flee the approach of the human. It always made Tsara wonder just what danger such a person must represent to his fellows for the individuals carried with them no weapons and, to date, she'd never seen even one of them go after another to rob them of their possessions.

But Tsara accepted that there must be danger otherwise they wouldn't be scattering with the speed they were. It was as if water had been dropped on an elevated ridge and had been divided suddenly to the left and right, for the crowd eddied quickly away to allow this man to run through them.

Except...

Except there was one soul who'd apparently not heard the shout and, seeing the crowds dissipate about him, turned to look at the source of the commotion. Surely he'd move now!

But he didn't - he stood in the middle of the runner's path and awaited his approach as he slowed to a walk and the crowd stood at a distance, away from the scene.

'This is most unusual,' thought Tsara and she dived quickly underground, scurried

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along the burrow tunnels to exit a few yards away from the scene which was now developing. That was the great thing about having numerous exits - not only could one flee from an approaching predator, but you could eavesdrop on a conversation that took place over a wide area.

She poked her head above the ground in time to see the man who'd caused all the commotion kneel before the other, the crowd shouting their distress in the distance and bidding the other to come to them immediately. One or two ventured closer but they still kept their distance as if their presence at the scene was enough to kill them outright.

The man lifted his eyes into the other's and asked him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.'

Without a moment's hesitation he moved his arm forward and laid it on the other's head, the crowd gasping at the action while some women screamed before passing out. This was no fleeting touch as if a bird had flown past and brushed the face with the outermost tips of its feathers - there was a deliberate act of the will that grasped the man firmly in his hand as if he was trying to associate himself with the one knelt before him.

Tsara listened carefully for some great speech from the individual but all he said was 'I will. Be clean' as if the words were sufficient for what was about to happen. Suddenly, the whiteness on the forehead disappeared and Tsara rubbed her eyes to make sure she was seeing right. Could this really be? How was that possible?

Then the healer said something very strange - something that Tsara couldn't imagine anyone ever saying had they done such a thing as her own eyes had witnessed. Instead of encouraging the man to go out and loudly proclaim what had just happened, he told the man strictly to tell no one, but to go to some city or other that she'd heard many men and women went to a few times in the year and to do what was required of him.

Without a moment's hesitation, the man turned and disappeared into the distance, the crowds flowing back towards the healer but keeping their distance to see what fate might befall the one who'd barely moved throughout the entire scene.

As if oblivious to what had just taken place, the man turned and continued on his journey, the crowds looking towards the disappearing individual before they fixed their gaze once more on the object of their attention and gradually formed a bustling crowd around him as they approached the village.

Not only had the scene made a deep impression on Tsara, but she'd finally realised what it was that the crowds were finding so significant that they pressed in from all sides - it wasn't an object of human construction as she'd originally thought but it was a

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man.

Yes, just a man.

That was what was *really* weird. It was *just* a man in ordinary clothes who looked like just about anybody else. If you'd met him in the street, you'd've wondered what was so special about him. But what Tsara had just witnessed him do *was* special - the first time she'd ever seen a 'normal' make contact with an 'abnormal'.

Willingly, too!

This she knew was unusual - but she still didn't fully perceive the significance. But human affairs are difficult for us to comprehend for, although we live beside human communities, we don't live as active participants and the ways and means often go misunderstood.

Tsara, however, knew something. She knew that a new day had come, that something unique had just happened that was pointing towards a time that was dawning in the land where she lived that would change it to never be the same again.

If someone could now love the unlovely, that threw a totally different complexion on the way that humanity was going.

Even if it was only one man amongst many - it was a start.

A small one - it was true - but it could still be the beginning of something big.

If man had now learnt to love those it despised, where could it all end?

That evening, she passed the word on to as many as she could - and they passed it on further - and further still until every rodent eye and ear was alerted to the presence of this new man, this healer that had appeared on the scene suddenly as if from nowhere.

Very soon, reports of events were being spread everywhere that two hamsters gathered together for a squeak and a feed. That something special was happening in their midst, in their time, was exciting - and they didn't want to be the generation that missed the change.

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STEGGY

Taken from the Celeriac Version of the sixth century. That this manuscript survived is a testimony in itself to the painstaking care with which the hamsters of the north-eastern highlands regarded all the hamscripts passed down to them from previous generations. The text bears all the hallmarks of being early.

A roof may not be the best place to build a nest - that's true - but it's certainly not the worst.

Indeed, when you think about the mechanics of a house, it has a great many advantages for, as most of you are aware, hot air rises and there's never a moment when the floor area below could be at any greater temperature than the roof above.

Why humans ever decided to live below and not construct themselves habitations that were predominantly 'roof', I can't imagine. But mine's not the place to contemplate the way humankind developed and I'd be out of place if I ever considered that it was my duty to do so.

All I'm here for is to record this story and then move on.

So, Steggy had made his nest in the roof space from where he descended the walls to the eating areas where humans dropped discarded pieces of bone, half-chewed, and where the crumbs that went unnoticed were sufficient feast for many a night's hunt.

A roof was quiet, too - very quiet - in a way that a floor could never be.

For the trampling of leather sandals across the dirt of the interior reverberated the nest compartment with its deep bass that made only the heaviest of sleepers oblivious to their surroundings.

Having given you the low down on the siting of hamster nests - and all this is pure incidental - let me move back to the story at hand.

It was the daytime and Steggy lay fast asleep in his nest, way up in the roof, with the sun beating down upon the flat tiled upper floor, causing the space to become as cosy as cosy could be. That previous night had seen a good recovery of food that would see him through for a few days before he'd need once more to descend the walls and collect more stock.

He could hear faint voices in the room below but that wasn't of any concern - not now, not immediately. They could shout for all Steggy cared for all they'd be was faint whispers in the distance on a beautiful carefree day.

Peazzeful.

Szzerene.

Gorgeouzzzz...

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The grating sound overhead was only heard in his subconscious somewhere, lost amid dreams of perfect walnuts and fields full of ripe sunflowers dropping their seeds earthward. The clang of metal was more disconcerting but, being buffeted by the thick layer above, it did little to disturb him. What woke him with a start was the loud thud as a piece of metal shot through the upper roof, sending dust into the space that bumped him wide awake and made him sneeze loudly.

'What...?' he squeaked with fear, scampering to the other side of the cavity as the first shaft of daylight penetrated the perfect darkness.

Another thud and a clang pierced the roof, sliced through the bedding where he'd been laid only seconds before and exploded through the ceiling below, with screams of terror from those sat underneath. Steggy pictured the dust settling all round whoever was gathered and remembered those times of snow that occurred from time to time.

'Nearly there,' a human above observed. 'Just a little wider and we can lower him down.'

A few more clangs and the work seemed complete, while there was scuffling and dragging on what was left of a solid surface overhead. Then two poles cut across the void, followed by something resembling a stretcher on which a man was fastened securely with ropes, descending into the room below.

It seemed obvious to Steggy at that moment that the digging must've stopped and that, even if it continued, the scene that was unfolding in the house below him must be worth a look. Without any thought of personal safety, he ran to the edge of the hole and peered over the lip, startling himself as he saw almost a hundred human eyes staring directly back at him.

No! Wait!

They were looking at the man on the stretcher - all was well, they hadn't spotted him after all.

The scene laid out before him was unusual to say the least. A man stood at one end of the room, facing those gathered about him - like he was a teacher of something or other and the crowds there had come to hear him.

But what was with the man on the stretcher?

Then Steggy saw the door - or, rather, he saw what was blocking it. For the problem wasn't just the room that was crammed with humans, but there were perhaps six heads poking through the narrow entrance way, each trying to listen to whatever was being said - only now they'd given up listening and were looking roofward.

Obviously, the man being lowered couldn't be brought in to the room but - hey! - did action this drastic *really* needed to be taken? Couldn't he just have waited until the

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meeting was ended? Or had he booked the use of the house while the last group were over-running?

The man who stood at the end of the room smiled broadly, lifted his hand and addressed the man whose head had now cleared the roof space and was clearly visible to all.

'My son,' he began, 'your sins are forgiven.'

'Well that was something else,' Steggy thought, 'this guy must be the owner and he's letting him off the mess he's made of the roof!'

But, no. That wasn't it.

Or, at least, it didn't appear to be.

There was a general unease which displayed itself in murmuring the length and breadth of the room while the man removed his stare from the one being lowered and looked out over those present.

'Which is easier?' he asked them. 'Would you rather me say that he takes up his stretcher and walk out of here? Or that his sins are forgiven?'

No one said anything.

They stared at the man as if puzzled as to the connection between the two statements - but there had to be a connection, hadn't there? Some darted their gaze upwards once more as his friends on the roof let out more rope to bring him gently to earth.

The man took up his speech again and answered them, 'But you must realise that the Son of man has been given authority to forgive the things men do wrong.'

Returning his gaze to the invalid, he said - as if the crowd would have required it in the first instance and with a touch of resignation in his voice - 'Take it up and go home.'

There was a gasp and mutterings as the man threw off the strappings that had held him securely onto the stretcher, lifted up the contraption and walked out of the house in the sight of all.

The crowd continued to buzz with a cross between excitement and concern - though Steggy couldn't understand why that should be.

The facts were as plain as anyone could see - it was the implications of them that were so problematical. Not from a hamster's perspective, of course, for we're simple creatures. Present us with a fresh grape in front of our noses and we have no problem either scoffing the lot or pouching it for later - we accept what we find and take what we're given.

But these humans in the room were another breed apart and their questions seemed to undermine the very simplicity of what had just transpired. For, if this man was being

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truthful, there was something new that had taken place in their midst - instead of trying to achieve there was a release to accept, in the place of a struggle to reach a pinnacle of worth, there was now freedom of acceptability.

And all based on something which the humans below him had seemed to have overlooked - something which the rodents had taken for granted for as long as he could remember.

Steggy surveyed the scene once more before scampering away into the shadows of the roof space, descending the wall to nestle in a warm cavity to drift sleepily away until the approach of another night.

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KESED

From Codex Nutticanus - see under 'Tsara'

I liked Matthew the tax collector - he was a real pleasure to be with. And an outcast, too - we both were. His law said something about hamsters which I didn't fully understand, but I knew that it forbade him to eat me so I was always confident that I wouldn't satisfy any pangs of hunger.

I don't know much about his background but I know how I met him. I was in the small woodland close to where he lived that day that he came by himself to be alone for a few hours, when he sat down beside the great oak that must have been growing there for a great many years - probably even before Matthew was born.

You could tell a tax collector apart from everyone else, you know. They had an air of desperation about them that made them easily distinguishable and, had this been a scene from everyday life, most of those about would have turned to look the other way or even crossed to the other side of the street to avoid him.

It was quite true that they had friends - but only of their own kind, for their society treated them as outcasts and refugees, of enemies of the 'children of God' (whatever that label might mean) and friends of those who were ruling over the land. I think they called them the Rome-ones, but I'm not too sure - the word was seldom used in my hearing and, besides, I didn't feel it was all too important to remember.

But I digress.

Matthew came into the woods to be alone and he sat by the great oak. I was in the branches overhead, having climbed there to see what fruit I might find that I could store for the coming months, when the twig I was balancing on gave way and I fell with a thud and a crack that brought pain to my consciousness. As I lay there with a fractured paw, Matthew turned his attention towards me and gave me an intrigued stare.

Had he been any other Jew, he may have turned his back and walked away - as I've previously said, hamsters are shunned in their law (I must find out why, I really can't imagine - we're so cute) - but, instead, Matthew crawled on his hands and knees towards me and inspected the damage.

'You poor thing,' he said, scooping me up into his hands and clasping me firmly against his breast so that I didn't fall as he made his journey back towards the house. I decided not to bite him at that time even though all my instincts were telling me that I should - I just got this impression from his actions that I wasn't in any danger and, besides, I could use my teeth at a moment's notice.

Back inside the house, he found a small piece of wood and a piece of cloth and

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strapped my paw into a make-do splint that brought a fair degree of comfort. His children also gathered round me and cooed and ahed as I sat there on my rear feet feeling my paw throb alarmingly.

Somewhere from behind the crowd, I saw a small human push herself through to where I was sitting and offered me some fresh vegetables and fruit. When everything was considered, I had to admit that I was being gently coerced into staying - not that I wasn't convinced that I'd have to escape when my fracture was healed (for a hamster guards his freedom jealously), but I could see that a time of rest and recuperation was the best thing to do right then.

That evening, Matthew had some friends round - men just like him who seemed to be tax collectors themselves. If they weren't, then they must have been outcasts for whatever reason men had liked to make them so - but I was drawn to their conversation and the things which they were telling Matthew they'd seen. And very recently, too.

'I tell you,' said one, 'I ran too. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me when that leper approached us. But all he did was turn to look directly at him as if he was waiting for him to come closer. I tell you, it was weird - it was like another world had come down to us and we were experiencing at first hand the new law.'

'So, what did he do?' my friend asked.

The other paused to add some drama to the tale.

'He reached out with his hand and grabbed hold of the guy and told him he was cleansed. Honestly, I was standing a short distance away and I heard every word.'

'He touched a leper?' Matthew sounded perplexed. 'One of society's outcasts? He actually...*touched* him?'

'I'm telling you, Matthew, a new day has dawned in the land. And, believe me, if he can accept the leper, he'll accept you.'

I could see from Matthew's reaction that he wasn't convinced - that he wasn't at all convinced, not even in the slightest. Long after his friends had gone, my new friend sat down quietly in the centre of the room, rubbing his forehead and staring off into space as the fire began to fade.

Suddenly, he got up and went across to where a tied up scroll lay hidden inside its protective box and brought it back. He shuffled the scroll to a particular spot that he seemed to know well and began moving his fingers along the words, his mouth moving in time with the sounds that were playing in his head.

Eventually, he leaned back and, staring at the ceiling, he said, 'I wonder. Streams in the desert - I wonder.'

And with that, he lay down on a pillow and went to sleep.

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With morning came another bowl of fresh food, brought lovingly to me by the smallest of the household, who watched with delight as I ate some, pouched some more and gave her finger a friendly lick when she went to remove the bowl from me.

Matthew had work to be done and, seeing that I was gathering the attention of all the members of the household, announced to everyone that I needed some peace and quiet and so was taking me to sit at the booth where he made his living.

I was grateful for small mercies for, though I was enjoying the family's attentions, I could see that it wouldn't be long before they'd start grating on my patience and I'd be forced - as all good hamsters would be - to bite someone to make them desist. A peaceful kip at the tax office was what I preferred - and we didn't have far to go.

Matthew made his living by taxing both people and goods as they passed by his small make-do hut at the side of one of the routes into the city and he went about his business with unusual endeavour. You see, having bought the right to tax, he had to gather enough money both to pay back what he owed and to provide a living for those who were under his charge - he would've needed to tax *less*, it seemed to me, had society at large accepted him as one of their own for now, exiled away from the main centres, he had to live as self-sufficiently as possible, employing slaves and servants to buy those things that they wouldn't sell directly to him - and probably at a much higher price as well.

Even though you could tell that those being taxed regretted every penny that they were obliged to pay, there was a friendly dialogue exchanged between many as Matthew sought to assess what was right to levy, even waving past numerous of the more wizened looking humans (the ones that resembled raisins) who he must have considered as having scant resources to be able to afford a contribution.

Mid-morning, it went eerily quiet as if the way was being prepared for what was about to take place. Looking back now, I can see that it was the time that my friend needed to begin to think once more on the proceedings the night before and the events that had been related to him by those friends.

The phrase 'streams in the desert' came back to haunt my own waking consciousness as I looked at Matthew, a man sat hunched over a table, counting out the revenues that had been collected earlier that morning. There must have been enough here for a few days' living, it seemed to me, but not knowing what each coin represented, I had no way of knowing whether it was a large pile of worthless coins or whether each one was a living in itself.

Metal, as you're aware, means very little to a hamster - had they been cabbages, I

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could have assessed their worth.

Then there was the faint gurgling of noise from somewhere down the road which grew louder, until I was fairly certain that a crowd was approaching - boy, oh boy, that meant a *lot* of money.

But, no, it wasn't that type of crowd.

As the multitude rounded the bend of the road into the straight where Matthew's collection point sat, I could see one man leading the way down the narrow path, with a group of about ten or so men in tow trying to keep the crowds behind - that the man in front could walk more easily.

This was some procession - such as occurred on some great festival day - but Matthew froze to the spot as I turned to look at him and I could see that, instead of delight forming on his face, there was only a reticence that I remained bewildered at. Perhaps I even saw fear, for it seemed to me that the tax collector had suddenly come face to face with a situation which he would have gladly run away from for the rest of his life.

Then something strange happened.

The man in the lead stopped and looked over at Matthew. Matthew looked back intently, motionless, but he made no attempt to rise as he had at other times and ask for the toll payment. Instead, he just sat quietly, staring at the man like his life depended on it.

The man broke the silence, asking, 'Matthew?'

My friend didn't know what to say. He still was as frozen to the spot as if he was trying to avoid the gaze of a predator that was threatening his very safety. In a split second, the man continued, 'Follow me.'

Without a moment's hesitation, the tax collector jumped to his feet and ran to join the procession as the crowd continued on its journey down the road. The pieces of metal were left on the table where he'd been counting them up to a few moments ago and I wondered whether Matthew had suddenly seen the foolishness of treating with value those pieces of metal.

I followed at a distance once the crowd had passed by but they went only a short distance before they turned aside into Matthew's own house. I hobbled after them - for, in all the excitement, Matthew had forgotten all about me - and was greeted by the youngster who'd obviously been sent to collect. I was brought in and placed safely in a small corner of the room as I witnessed the scene laid out before me.

The house was a frantic and endless sea of movement. Women and servants ran to and fro from the kitchen bringing dishes of food and drink for the swelling number of

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guests. Tax collectors and others unacceptable to society came in and greeted Matthew with delight and fondness while those who didn't want anything to do with 'that sort of person' stood huddled in the doorway watching the man who'd called Matthew share food with him and those he'd brought in.

My position, close by the door, gave me a unique opportunity to hear both the harsh conversations of those who stood without and the friendly discussions which occurred within.

'He accepts the unacceptable!' one complained while another turned to walk away.

'What kind of man is this who eats with those we hate?!' another voiced.

I could see very plainly that this man wasn't everyone's cup of tea. Indeed, even though he'd come from the world of those outside the door, his presence within was what was causing all the consternation.

But why?

Then I remembered that Matthew had accepted me - that's right, me. Even though his law had said to reject me, he'd taken me into his home and paid attention to my present need. Hadn't this other man also done the same? Hadn't he seen the need in Matthew and paid close attention to meeting it?

The man turned from the table to address the multitudes which stood without and cried with a loud voice, 'Mercy! My Father requires mercy!' before returning to the celebrations which were taking place within.

Streams in the desert? The phrase came back to echo round my head.

Streams?

Mmm...I wonder.

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MAWVETH

From a hamscript of uncertain origin (given the scholarly demarcation 'Omega 4') but found in the vaults of the Furs National during a general clear out of the collection of valuable items which had been placed there for safe-keeping. No one's quite sure who put it there or when, but experts were able to discern a fifth century date due to the pawwriting with which it was compiled.

I won't eat a dead human - even though there're many scavengers who would stoop to such a level, hamsters tend to avoid such a situation. We recoil at the horror of ever sinking the teeth into the cadaverous flesh of a human and, while we might nibble the odd fish or piece of cooked meat that drops from the table of mankind, putting our teeth to work on their skin - except in self-defence - is definitely a 'no-no'.

Oh - we might also nip the odd corpse which we discover in a room just to see if they're really dead but don't label us as carnivorous, will you? We'd certainly never swallow - No! Absolutely never!

The corpse was safe with me, then.

I could be trusted.

Not that I'd been given charge over it, to guard it from would-be kidnappers - or that there was some purpose given for it other than a quick burial.

As far as I knew - and I'd been listening carefully as the woman and the servant talked - all that was intended was for her daughter to be given some honour in burial before the day was up as she said farewell to the vessel which had once contained the soul.

I did inspect the corpse - just to make sure.

I mean, I had to.

If I'd've taken it for granted that she was dead and paced around the room for food and she'd sat up in bed or coughed or something, I would've probably died with fright.

No, I had to make sure.

I do hope that she doesn't wonder how that scar came about on her thumb, I really do. I mean, it seemed like the best thing to do - a quick, fierce bite to make sure she was dead. I had to do it. You do understand, don't you?

There was no bleeding, no pulling away from the pain - nothing.

She was dead alright.

I don't know what actually happened when the mother and the servant left the room but it certainly went quiet for a time - then there was the most awful noise of flutes and the wailing of women who were crying loudly and lamenting at the sad loss of the girl.

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I don't know whether any of this was real grief for she had but few friends in her short life - but they certainly seemed to be making up for lost time.

'What a ghastly sound!' I thought. But at least it covered the sound of my scratching around the floor for food. I don't know how long the wailing continued, but the first thing I remember was that it abruptly ended and I froze to the spot so as not to be discovered.

It started up again almost instantly but, this time, instead of there being weeping, there was laughter. I may not be too knowledgeable about human affairs - I tend to avoid their company whenever I get the opportunity - but I couldn't help but wonder at the change.

Had someone told a joke? I couldn't believe so - these types of occasions seemed to be part and parcel of living - or dying. Or, perhaps, both.

But why the change, why the sudden transformation from sorrow to mirth? Beat me - I still don't know to this day but maybe someone, somewhere will have recorded that detail.

The next thing I knew, though, the curtain was drawn back from the doorway and in walked a succession of six people. The first two, I recognised - they were most definitely the mother and father, that much was certain, dressed in rich clothing but with a sorrow in their faces that was there for anyone to read.

The other four puzzled me, though - initially, at least.

The first man was very quiet - the last three were the sort of men that you wouldn't want to meet down a dark alley - that you wouldn't want to meet down a fully lit alley, let alone a dark one. They had that certain wild, unkempt look about them, with rough faces and hands.

But they were quiet, too.

Perhaps they were the embalmers?

Possibly.

I could picture them as such - someone has to do the work, after all, and I couldn't imagine the faint-hearted performing such a service. But this other guy - well, he was strange. You may call me foolish, I know, but it certainly seemed as if hope entered the room with him. I wasn't sure just what 'hope' there could be in the situation that was obviously laid out before them, but it was something that I just, er, felt.

Is that the right word?

It was as if what was in the room left upon his entrance - I don't remember ever having experienced that before - and, since that day, I never have again. Nor probably ever will. But I knew then that there was something that'd changed.

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I had no idea what was about to happen, though.

I don't think anyone did - except that man.

He walked gently across to where she lay as if trying not to wake her up by the noise of his approach and lifted her hand into his - I just hoped that he didn't see that bite, I really did. That was the last thing I needed to be found out at this sorrowful time!

But, no - he was staring directly into her face as he held her hand in an embrace that was tender yet firm. He opened his mouth and said, very simply, 'Little girl? Wake up now!'

I was about to squeak my indignation and loudly announce that I'd tested her for life and it was very much departed when the young girl sat up on the bed on which she was lying and opened her eyes.

Well, I guess everyone must've been dumbfounded - myself included - for I had to tell myself that this was all real and not some vision being played out on the consciousness of my mind.

No, this was very real.

The mother and father burst into tears as the three 'embalmers' gasped for breath from the shock. The man still stood by the girl's side but he was smiling - a smile that was so full of joy that I thought he was in danger of exploding with laughter.

'Don't tell anyone about these matters,' he informed them, 'but make sure you give your daughter something to eat - she'll be very hungry.'

Well, I had questions! Like how death could become life and how he'd managed to do it - the parents, also, must've been bursting with puzzlement. Well, no, perhaps they were just so overwhelmed that words failed them? I don't know. I do know, however, that they said nothing - not a word - and the man indicated to his three associates that they should leave immediately for elsewhere.

As they exited the doorway and returned the curtain to its position of barring entry to any and all, I returned my gaze one final time to the scene before me.

The mother and father clasped their daughter in their arms as firmly as anyone had ever done since the beginning of time. For death had become life - not in some abstract concept which was distant from their own personal experience, but in a tangible way when they most needed it.

And if death had become life - if what was certain had now become uncertain - then, well, what else could happen?

Where was the limit anymore to anything that prevented humans from continuing forever?

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KUMA

The bulk of this text is from a hitherto unknown fragment which many believe to be original. If it is, there are surely more manuscripts lying ready for the explorer to discover. I have had to supplement the text where there are obviously gaps by the use of Codex Nutticanus, but it would appear that there was little or no variation between the two at these points.

A fishing boat is a good place to find food and the moored boats on the eastern seashore were an ideal opportunity for Kuma to supplement his meagre diet with some invaluable protein. Even if there wasn't any discarded fish there, he could always suck at the wood to retrieve any oils that had been absorbed from the fishermen's recent catch.

The boats which had come here during the early morning showed no signs of being used that night, so Kuma made swiftly for their shape as dusk began to fall and slipped over the edge of the first to see what could be found.

It wasn't long before Kuma's valiant assault on the lower reaches of the hull were rewarded.

'A fish!' he squeaked and began rubbing his paws with glee at the find.

This was more than he could've hoped for. Perhaps a few small discarded tails or even a head, yes - but a whole fish? Wow! This really was his lucky night!

Just as he was about to tuck in to this unexpected feast, his peace was disturbed by the sudden trembling of the boat and the splash of the hull as it entered the water, numerous men jumping in to the vessel as the sail was raised and caught the wind.

Kuma cursed his luck.

The last thing he wanted was to be adrift on the sea with no hope of land - and the stories that he'd heard from other rodents in the area was that these fishermen of Tiberias were some of the meanest and cruellest that had ever plied their trade on this lake.

But this appeared to be no fishing trip even though the nets were ready to be let down. Kuma could tell - as only a hamster can - that the nets had been washed only hours previously in preparation for another night's work amongst the shoal of this inland lake. But, even though the signs pointed in that direction, the fishermen made absolutely no attempt to lift the net into the water.

That was one blessing, at least - being hidden under the mass of rope and knots which comprised the nets, its removal would naturally have been a problem when there was little or no other shelter that could be easily found. Even so, some of these

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fishermen were known to be fanatical and, had they found him, he couldn't envisage anything else than being thrown overboard - how he wished in that one instant that he'd enrolled for swimming lessons when he'd been younger.

The hunger that had forced Kuma into the boat also compelled him to sniff his own catch with anticipation and he risked a few small mouthfuls as his ears sat erect on his head like two radar dishes listening for trouble.

But nothing seemed to happen.

The men were more concerned to chat about the events of the day than they were to do anything else. Listening, Kuma gleaned the information that some 'great man' - so they reckoned - had put on an enormous banquet for thousands of guests close to the shore and that they called it a 'miracle'. Certainly, in the place from which they were now travelling, Kuma could testify to the lack of food that was his own experience, but he failed to fully comprehend the words which he heard at that time.

But this was a pleasant trip - the sea was calm, the breeze brought with it smells from the other side of the lake and the fishermen seemed to be in no rush to do anything.

Well, it wasn't *absolutely* calm, there were a few feelings of movement now and then.

Actually, quite often.

And more often.

That breeze on the face was beginning to take the warmth away and Kuma had to blow into his paws and rub his face to keep warm. Sheesh! What was happening to this weather?! It was growing positively treacherous out on the lake!

The band of men began grasping at pulleys and ropes, tacking the vessel from side to side in a vain attempt to make the destination they were aiming for. But the wind was plainly against them as they shouted to one another to pull - then push - then haul a line in and move from one side of the boat to the other.

Kuma began to worry - and he now felt that a watery grave was something worse than being found by these mad fishermen. The one thought that went through his mind was as brilliant as it was irrational:

'Perhaps, if we're a short distance from land, I could swim for it?'

He scrambled up into the top pile of netting and grabbed the side of the boat, leaning over the edge to be greeted by a billowing sea that'd taken on the appearance of a veritable monster. Sensibility won the day and Kuma realised that his own fate was tied up with that of the fishermen.

Being a full moon, the sea was illuminated clearly, but the lights of the shoreline were hidden behind the swell of the water which crashed against the bow like a writhing

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monster trying to overturn its victim. Kuma clung for his life on to a metal hook attached to the side and was about to descend into the hull once more when a fisherman let out a scream of fear that made the fur on the back of his head stand on end.

He spun round in time to see a hand outstretched pointing towards the midst of the sea as the fishermen as one man turned to look at a figure walking on the water beside the boat. Then Kuma saw him, too - a lone figure, calmly pacing past the boat, making for shore but turning to approach them.

'No!' he squeaked with fear. 'Go away from us you spectre of the night!' for the tales which humans tell of what takes place alone in the midst of a raging sea are enough to make anyone fear that such a situation will come upon themselves.

But the figure called to the men with a loud voice, 'Take heart, my friends, it is I; have no fear.'

'I?' thought Kuma. 'Who's "I"? What type of man can walk in the midst of a storm? And on water at that!'

The wind still raged, buffeting the small craft with unceasing ferocity, the waves audibly crashing against the sides and making it difficult for anyone to stand. Suddenly, a man ran forward to the edge of the boat and shouted back, 'If it is you, tell me to come to you on the water!'

There was a moment's hesitation as if the words hung on the air, as if the crashing waves and howling gale hesitated to allow their voice to be heard, while the others turned to stare at their comrade's audacity and cheek.

'Yes,' said the lone figure, 'come!'

Immediately, the fisherman jumped over the side of the boat as the others gasped and muttered words under their breath. And then there were two men walking in the midst of the sea! But, just as the fisherman approached the other's side, there was a sudden gust of wind and the waves seemed to rise higher than they'd ever been before. Paying attention to the storm, the man began to sink, crying out, 'Save me!'

I could picture it in my mind's eye as a wave took the men from view but, as the water rushed past, I saw two men again - this time walking towards the boat and being helped in over the side.

If I'd've been one of those who'd stayed in the boat, I might have ridiculed the one who'd got out. Or I might've been jealous that it wasn't me who was the one who'd had the courage to ask to be commanded to walk on the water. I might even have curled up in a ball and wished that the experience would just go away - being a hamster, I would probably have opted for the third.

But the men - as one man, yet again - fell down before the one I'd first seen on the

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water and began to say things about him which were difficult to believe.

I mean, *really* difficult.

I'd heard the reports about 'a certain man' but I thought he was supposed to come from west of the lake - I hadn't anticipated seeing him first hand because I lived on the east.

But see him I did.

At least, I think it was him - he certainly matched the description.

Almost immediately, the boat came ashore and the crew jumped onto land to be greeted by crowds which gathered about him. Two of the men stayed in the boat, however, to lower the sail and see to the water that had been taken aboard - I darted back under the covering of the nets as one turned to the other and asked, 'Did that really happen?'

The other stared back and raised his hands in wonder, finally answering, 'Don't doubt the testimony of your eyes - we both saw him walking on the water, however difficult it is for our minds to come to terms with it.'

As they disappeared over the side of the boat, I heard one whisper, 'Then what type of man is this?!' and they were off. I turned my attention back to the matter at hand - and took a large bite out of the fish.

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SOZO

From the Celeriac Version - see under 'Steggy'

Light doesn't often have much bearing on when a wild hamster wakes up - it does, however, have quite some import as to when he or she will exit their burrow into the terrain where they need to find food and water for, if they exit into the brilliant sunlight of a spring day, it'll only be a matter of minutes before they're snatched by a predator to feed their young.

We may wake hours before the sun finally goes down - or wake at repeated intervals during the day if we suffer from insomnia and rearrange our nests in a haze of tiredness - but poke our noses above ground to sniff for food would be foolhardy.

That day, my body clock was all out of flunter - humans can probably tell you that they experience the same when they go to bed wide awake thinking that it's time to party or when they get up in the morning and all their body wants to do is sleep. These are difficult concepts to understand, but we all get them from time to time - throughout the human and animal world - and we each have to master them the best we can.

This day was different, though.

I had been drifting in and out of sleep for most of the day but, for all that restlessness, I was quite at peace. I guess that it must've been about midday that I got up from the nest to relieve my bladder in a corner of my burrow complex that I'd hollowed out for just such a purpose, when I passed by one of the tunnels that led directly up to the surface and realised that the light that I'd have expected to have seen cascading down into my face was non-existent.

It genuinely appeared to me as if night had come.

Puzzling though this was, hamsters normally accept the observable even though it can sometimes get us into trouble - big trouble - and, being almost fully awake, I decided that I must have overlaid.

Although it was my normal practice to spend at least an hour or two grooming before being seen above ground, I realised that, if I'd really got my timings *that* wrong, it could be close on sunrise before I knew it. I decided that the best course of action would be to get up above as quickly as I could and find what food was lying around *first* before I did anything.

What I remember as I poked my head above ground was the presence of people - loads of them.

Some stood at a fair distance from my burrow entrance while others seemed to be almost standing on top of me. Those far off were gathered together in a huddle on a

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small hillock that stood in thick shadow and I could see their silhouetted forms pointing with their fingers at a structure which seemed to pierce the sky in front.

Five or so soldiers - it's difficult counting in the murkiness of blackness - seemed initially to be the object of their scorn but - wait a minute! - they were pointing much higher than where they sat, rolling dice and gambling the time away.

Then I saw.

There was a man on that structure to which they were pointing, suspended between heaven and earth with his face touching the upright stake behind. He seemed to gasp for each breath as he raised himself up repeatedly in time with his inhalation and a steady stream of blood dripped from his torso onto the ground beneath.

This was gruesome - what had I stumbled upon?

I turned my eyes away from the scene only to find myself apparently in the midst of a group of women who were weeping with loud cries, huddled together trying to console one another at the scene which they tried not to keep their eyes from.

'So much grief,' I thought, 'yet so little hope.'

For, as every animal knew who lived amongst men, they had some very sinister dealings with one another that seemed to undermine the very reason for which they'd come into existence.

But there was darkness.

Then I remembered my reason for ascending into the outside world and it hit me suddenly that this wasn't night.

It was darkness - true - but it was a darkness that had a strange 'feel' to it like the curtains of heaven itself had been drawn closed to prevent anyone from seeing what was taking place.

What I felt then is difficult to put into words - there seemed to be a compression of time in this one moment on that rocky outcrop as if everything that had ever been since the beginning and all that was to come somehow found meaning and purpose in this event - that everything was being fulfilled that needed to be - that past and future were uniting in the present.

I know you'll think me foolish - I did when I found myself trying to put into words the same ideas - but that's how it felt.

Everything that was going on around me seemed to pale into insignificance and the experience began to become so personal that I became scared - though of what, I have no idea.

These were only the impressions I got, you understand, but they were very tangible. Though I could see hate in the group a way off and sorrow behind me - it was only

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momentary before I heard desolation in the cry of the man suspended above as he shouted with a loud voice, 'My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?'

A frenzy of activity greeted the announcement as one ran towards the soldiers and begged them that they might offer the man something to drink. As if in obedience to an order, they raised a sponge on a long pole to the man's lips as he pushed himself to full stretch once more and cried loudly 'It is finished', his voice echoing from the bare rock into my ears two or three times before fading away to quietness. The man slumped over, his head now motionless on his chest and his tired frame still from any effort of struggling for breath.

With his death came a quietness and a change in the mood of the scene. The crowd way off began to be sorrowful as if the implications of their own actions had been demonstrably brought home to them - the women still cried but there was some comfort in their voice now that the object of their grief had slipped out of suffering.

But the air was different - I could swear I sensed it.

Instead of the darkness that I'd felt, I began to feel a dawning as natural light returned, but a freshness that I couldn't put into words. It was as if every burden and oppression that had ever existed had been taken away from the shoulders of the world - as if what weighed down had been dealt with, that one could stand tall.

I didn't understand it - I admit.

I can't say that I'll ever fully understand what I saw that day.

All I know is that something changed - something fundamental.

And if you understand what darkness means, you'll understand if I simply conclude by saying that light had come.

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NIKOS

Despite the comparative early age of the Celtic illuminated manuscripts, I decided to translate directly from the 'Book of Peanut Shells' now housed in Dublin University. The carefully coloured pictures which accompany the text served only to bring to life the message of the writings and they helped me perceive much of the hitherto unrealised meaning in the story.

The first I knew of their presence was when I felt the heat from their fire and the glow drew me to warm my chilling paws. I hadn't seen them in the moonlight which cascaded down from the skies, but they must have heard the rustle of the undergrowth for a couple turned their attention to where I scurried and their faces reflected both the fire and the celestial light from above.

Initially, I didn't know why they were there - I nearly always hunted out food on my own, save only for the little foxes which tried to sniff me out for a quick snack before running through the streets of the nearby city to rummage through the trash that had been thrown out of the residences there.

I knew that they weren't there the previous night for here - yes, just a few yards away - was the place I'd found a few grains of the new year's first ripe barley that must've either blown there or been dropped by a recent visitor. Not that it was that sort of place to attract many visitors, you understand - the place was dead - literally dead.

A couple of evenings ago, the latest resident in this city of the dead had arrived - not that I'd seen him but you can't help hear the trudging to and fro of relatives and friends who see to the humans' last concerns before the grating sound of stone upon stone sealed the small, hollowed out tomb.

That was what really got to a hamster - the grating sound.

It was like someone running their nails down the length of a blackboard that sent cold shivers down the spine and set the teeth on edge. Still, after it's completion, it was all over - just another human who'd arrived at the inescapable conclusion to his life.

These humans loved to try and cheat death, you know. They loved to think that they'd found the ultimate antidote to the disease that they called 'old age', but time always caught up on them and they all ended up the same way sooner or later.

Dead, deceased, stiff - call it what you will. There was no escape from the inevitable.

That's what puzzled me about this group of men - it didn't make sense. Well, not to me, anyhow. Perhaps to someone, but not to me. Never to me. I still don't fully

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understand it now that I know.

When they first heard me rustling through the undergrowth they seemed alert to put an end to whoever was approaching but, when the nearness of the sounds were understood, they turned back to the fire and continued warming themselves.

But what were they doing here? It made me wonder!

I'd never before seen a military presence here - on the city walls, yes. I'd regularly seen an armed guard and when the night was as bright as it was now, the glint of their spears regularly caught the eye as I wandered about the place.

But not here - not in a graveyard.

Intrigued by their presence, I allowed them to return to their warmth and quietly paced over to where a bush protected me from their immediate gaze. I knew there was a hollow here which I could dive down in a moment's notice had they spotted me - but they seemed more content in their gaming than they were with cataloguing the species of the land.

'First light,' one said, 'you two go into the praetorium and get fresh provisions.'

Practicalities over, one of the others asked, 'So what's with this duty? Why'd we get it?'

The heads turned towards the first speaker as he opened his mouth and sarcastically answered, 'I just guess that we were born lucky.'

There were sounds of mirth which soon settled while another asked, 'Why a corpse? Why are we guarding a corpse?'

'I hear he was an insurrectionary - that's what the buzz is amongst the others,' another suggested.

'Ours is not to reason,' the leader began, 'but let's just say that it's about the easiest assignment you're ever likely to get - guarding a corpse to stop him from getting away.'

There were various sounds of cackling while one spoke over the noise. 'Here, if the dead man tries to escape, can we kill him again?'

The soldiers laughed at the stupidity of it all but were drawn back to the apparent danger when the head reminded them, 'You have nothing to worry from the corpse - just be careful that you remember that his followers could, even now, be planning a surprise attack to steal the body away. Just remember - and be on your guard.'

This was rich! Guarding a corpse?

'This must be some corpse,' I remember thinking, 'that someone would want to steal him.'

The night drifted along its usual course and I foraged around the camp in

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expectation of dropped bread and meat - my instincts weren't disappointed and I transported away a fair amount of food to the nest which would see me through the following excessive temperatures of sunlight.

It was now growing dusk - not light, you understand, but a hamster's awareness of dawn is a long way ahead of any human's - and I chanced one final reconnaissance to the camp before the day's rest. The soldiers still sat there - though the fire was being allowed to flicker and fade with the anticipation of the first warming rays of the sun - and a couple were reaching into their bags to retrieve some last remaining scraps of cheese that I'd gathered a couple of hours previous.

Perhaps it was unwise of me to try this close to dawn. I decided to quit while I was ahead and turned to make for the burrow before the first light alerted my presence not only to the soldiers but to any airborne predator.

As I turned to remove myself from the band of soldiers, I experienced the biggest shock of my life for, in the twinkling of an eye, the quickest sunrise I'd ever known took place, accompanied by the sound of the grating of the stone which shook the ground on which I trod and which I remembered hearing a couple of evenings previous.

I turned round towards the sun and realised that the first visible sign of its rising didn't have the capacity to do such a thing - besides, it was most definitely scarlet and this illumination was white, clear intense brilliance.

Where the fire once flickered its final throes of life, I could see the soldiers, knocked over like some bowling ball had been thrown and achieved a clean strike. They lay in various positions, trembling with what I took to be fear, their instinct to rise up and attack the aggressor totally removed with the perceived strength of the assailant.

But who was their attacker?

All I could see past the men was a someone dressed in white, sitting on top of the stone, rolled away from the entrance to one of the tombs close by. What had he done to dispel courage from these hardened warriors?

What on earth was going on?

It beat me - and I think it was the suddenness of it all that caused me not to comprehend what was being presented before my eyes. Hard as I might, nothing that was in my mind made any sense.

Then, suddenly, I heard footsteps.

Well, more like footscuffs - the ground was fairly soft and the soles of the approaching sandals were brushing against the grass with a swish that scattered the early morning dew in front of them.

Women - all women.

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On seeing what was before them, they slowed to a crawl while one, near the back, turned in blind panic and sprinted away from the scene as fast as her legs would carry her.

Was she frightened? It didn't look like she was, but I'd understand it if that was the truth - it was just that everything that they must have seen with their eyes was so, er, unreal.

A man in brilliant white sitting atop the gravestone, lighting up the surrounding scene where soldiers lay like matchsticks on the floor. Not something you'd encounter most days of the week.

As they neared the now-open tomb, the man in white spoke serenely to them and assured them that he knew who they were seeking. He reassured them by informing them, 'He's not here, for he has risen.'

Reassuring?

Perhaps I'd best reassess that comment. I don't know why I interpreted it that way for I can't think of anything *less* reassuring than the corpse that was buried a few days ago has since got up and walked off. The only positive thing to be said was that it was no longer night and the sun's rays were beginning to compete with the man's own radiance.

He continued, 'Come and see the place where he lay,' and he stretched out his hand to encourage them to enter the open tomb. As they neared the entrance, I ran full speed to be close by when they peered in - after all, I reasoned, if they were so puzzled by what they saw before them, they'd hardly be perplexed if they caught sight of me.

And it was empty!

Honestly! The tomb was empty!

I rubbed my eyes just to make sure and opened them once more to witness two more men in white apparel *inside* the small enclosure, lighting up the dinginess by their presence. I couldn't see any fiery torches in their hands and I know that it puzzled me a great deal but, perhaps, they were torches in themselves - I don't know, it was only a suggestion.

All I know is that there weren't any light sources that I could see but it was still illuminated inside that place.

On top of a stone slab was the form of a human - but covered with what looked like linen cloths and, where one would have expected his head to have been, a separate covering lying on the stone.

What? No head?

One of the women reached over to lift the face cloth and peered inside the neckpiece of the strips of linen, expecting to see the body of the one they'd been

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seeking.

She turned to the others and whispered, 'It's empty - look!' as they gathered quickly to observe that what had once wrapped the body tightly in death was now a hollow frame of garments that held nothing more important than air. Some gently pressed on the wrappings which would have engulfed the chest and they let out mild surprise as the cloths gave under the light pressure.

The first lady folded the facecloth and laid it to one side, as if she was tidying a habitation of the living rather than the final resting place of the dead.

Me? I'd seen enough.

I ran out of the place as fast as my paws would carry me, realising that the sun had now blown the cover of darkness. The soldiers were long gone but I had no idea where - I didn't even see them disappearing over the small tussock of earth that the path wound round, but I could see that they'd obviously left in a hurry for their spears and sacks were piled together around the smoking fire.

As I descended into my burrow, I couldn't help wondering - indeed, my mind was working overtime and I got little sleep that morning and afternoon. I couldn't help but be puzzled about the goings-on - about the tomb and the empty shell of linen that had lain there.

The most logical explanation for it all just didn't appear to be the most obvious - that death no longer had the final word. But the alternatives seemed implausible at best.

It was suddenly that it hit me, though, and then I woke up to reality as if someone had turned on a light in my darkened mind. If death had now been conquered then surely I was living in the days of the final remedy - if man could no longer be restricted by the inevitability of death, that meant a future for *all* men.

The final enemy really did lie dead.

Nothing any longer could stop life.

OROS

Many don't realise that there exists a Masoretic Text in the Hamster Archives. I decided upon using it here because some of the words employed give slightly deeper shades of meaning than either the Celeriac Version or Codex Nutticanus.

A mountain is not the ideal place on which to eke out an existence amongst the wild vegetation but it has its advantages for less predators come here than do the lower plains near the lake which retain a fair degree of warmth even in winter.

But Oros had never known life in the valley where many of his descendants had migrated a decade or so ago and was content with the way things were. Had he known what happened 'below' by experience, he may have greeted it eagerly with outstretched paws or shrunk back from the dangers which lurked there.

For Oros, life on the mountain was good and he could even risk daily reconnaissance outings from the burrow to creep along the cover of the bushes which grew here to discover freshly discarded berries and nuts.

The time was Spring, however, and much of nature's harvest was still being produced, but the fresh shoots of edible plants were particularly succulent at this time and gave Oros a particularly good supply of liquid that supplemented the pools of rainwater that collected close to his burrow entrance.

It was on one such forage that Oros became aware of a strange event that caught his attention - for the most that he'd ever seen of a human was, perhaps, one or at most two who'd climb here for some peace and quiet from the hustle and bustle of their own way of living to sit and stare off into the distance 'somewhere' and do, well, whatever humans did. Oros wasn't quite sure what that was but they didn't seem to be competing for food, so he never invaded their privacy to drive them off the mountain.

But, today, there was a steady stream of them - in twos and threes, families and individuals, all talking about what they were coming to see.

Truth was, no one seemed sure.

As he eavesdropped on their conversation, he got the impression that there was some great sight to be seen there today but that *exactly* what was to happen was difficult to describe. One thing these people did seem to hold in common, though, was that they appeared to know the man - the one that the hamster community had been spreading the news about but who, as far as Oros knew, was now dead and buried in the great city to the south.

Still, he was sure that the general request - to report back by word of mouth to the main group of hamsters who'd spread the word - covered such an incident as this, a sort

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of epilogue to the man and his ways that could be committed to the hamscripts as a sort of 'ps'.

Oros ran across a group of bare rocks to reposition himself to overlook the small flat area on which the humans gathered and was amazed to discover that there was more than one route here and that, even though he'd been watching a substantial number ascend, their number was swelled by multitudes of people who'd found another path.

It was impossible for him to count the number because his paws only let him reach ten - he could start again and see how many 'tens' there were but, even then, he realised that there were well over ten 'tens' - perhaps even ten ten 'tens'? It was difficult to say - all he could do was report that there were 'lots', a technical description that hamsters knew to be far too many to count.

As the humans continued to arrive, a cloud descended at the far end of the plain but few of those gathered paid much attention to it. It caught the hamster's eye, however, because it obscured the old tree he'd been squinting at to see if it was putting out buds - it'd always been a good source of fresh roughage at this time of the year - but it was late and recent journeys there had given him nothing to show for his efforts.

Suddenly, a man walked out from the cloud into the daylight which shone all around. The crowds stopped their discussion and turned to greet him. Him? Oros wiped his eyes as if the sleepiness was making him hallucinate.

No, he saw clearly. The man who'd stepped out from the cloud matched the description that the community had sent out of the one on the plain - the one who Tsara had seen at first and which had caused her to spread the news quickly throughout the land.

But it couldn't be - could it?

Moving towards him, many knelt and grabbed hold of the man's hands and held fast to his feet, while others pushed their way to his side only to be replaced by others. Some stood at a distance, however, as if what their eyes were telling them was being rejected as impossible.

Oros wasn't sure just what to make of it - even days afterwards, he still questioned in his own mind what he'd witnessed that day.

What he *knew* was that, if he hadn't known that the man was dead, he'd've believed it was him. Fact seemed to conflict with the rationality of his own eyes that caused him to question what was being played out before him.

Oros wanted to get closer, to see for himself what was happening, but he could tell that the crowds would pay no attention to what was beneath them and that he'd get crushed by their excited feet - so he reluctantly stayed away, crouching behind a rock

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and puzzling over the events below.

The man motioned with his hand for the crowd to be still and quiet and Oros heard the hubbub gently reduce to silence as he opened his mouth and began:

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations...'

Yes, it *was* him! It *had* to be!

But, how?

Oros had never been one to be able to explain the inexplicable - how one night a tree might be stripped bear of fruit but, come next evening, more berries might be found around its base. These things are difficult to explain - and this was even more perplexing.

But a dead man living again? He doubted it.

He knew that that was what they said - and he had it on good authority, for they'd seen him breathe his last with their own eyes - but to *accept* it stepped over the mark of possibility.

'And yet,' Oros began to question himself carefully, 'there *was* a certain logic to it all.'

For death had always been the limit on life since before he could remember - not only the expiration of a life but the attitudes he'd heard were displayed by humans who lived in the valley below. If there was ever to be a solution to one, it implied a solution to the other - where one is a shadow of the more extreme problem.

That was it!

Oros realised it in a moment - finally he saw it all!

The man had come to solve the ultimate problem and, far from this being the end, it was simply a new beginning.

CONCLUSION

When I first starting facing up to the problem with mankind, I wondered at whether there would ever be a solution found but, as I began comparing the ancient hamscripts, one with another, I discovered that there was already a testimony which pointed towards the final remedy.

What amazes me now as much as it did back then is the apparent disregard with which men and women the world over have towards it. A solution which chips away at the very foundation of their lives is certainly how many of them see it - actually, it's a solution which destroys the foundation completely and replaces it with one of its own.

For the personal radicalism that I've witnessed in the sons of the remedy has been clear evidence that a move away from a selfish lifestyle to one which bears the hallmarks of being as much selfless as can be attained must necessarily start by a complete overhaul of the basis of living.

The remedy doesn't expect to change a few, unwanted characteristics but it demands an absolute change within of the will to follow after a lifestyle outworked through an individual rather than simply resting upon free, initial acceptance.

I guess that's why only a few humans in each and every generation have embraced the solution with the commitment needed from the One who brought it into being.

But the previous testimony of the hamsters - carefully translated from the original hamscripts - is a clear indication that, if one man should give up everything to found the final remedy, then there must also be a commitment from those who wish to follow after him, a total repudiation of everything that everything might be granted them.

I'm not saying this is easy - and, for many, a lot of what's given to the One who provided the way is given back to them to use for the advancement of the remedy - but the evidence of the hamscripts bears no testimony to there being any other path down which a man may tread.

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The New Beginning

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INTRODUCTION

In my first work , 'The Final Remedy', I recorded events from the world of hamsters living at the same time as the man who did strange things and in the same area in which he lived. I also went on to record - as faithfully as I could - the events surrounding his death from hamscripts that have been carefully copied in successive generations of rodents, eager to preserve some vestige of accuracy surrounding the facts that were eye-witnessed.

Here, I've devoted myself to deal with the events which took place in the years after my first work ended. There was such a wealth of information that, at times, I found it difficult to know which stories to include and which to omit, but those who wish to read a fuller record of the hamscripts available should consult 'Voices from Past Generations' by my colleague-in-fur Ersee Liagin who's put together a comprehensive source book for anyone seeking to gather together the extant hamscripts.

My studies have taken me, so far, to many colleges and libraries scattered throughout Eastern Europe where the manuscript tradition has been immaculately continued for centuries. I am in debt to so many scholars who've gone before and librarians and keepers of the scrolls in the present day that I trust each will accept a summated word of thanks here to save cluttering up this popular account with a list of names.

Unlike my previous work, there are very few different versions of the events which I'm now about to relate and I've declined to give the reader the same type of explanatory introductory notes about the hamscripts concerned. I've chosen, rather, to rely upon the collective work done on the handful of extant hamscripts in marrying the slight variations together and will be using the established text in all my translations.

I have given the reader some pointers where necessary to indicate where I obtained the manuscript and the significance of the story in the context of the New Beginning.

There were, however, a number of oral traditions which have been passed down through the hamster community over the millennia since this all happened and I've paid attention to these in a couple of places where their testimony seems to fill a couple of gaps in the written testimonies.

Apart from this, the hamscripts have remained unaltered.

I also discovered the written manuscript of a story told to Kesef in his journey to Greece a couple of years ago. That the manuscript differs in only a few ways from the oral tradition is reassuring that hamsters have faithfully recounted the events of that century accurately, but I've preferred to use the written record which was committed

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to parchment at a much earlier date.

When the events of my previous work had taken place, Tsara endeavoured to commission recorders throughout the length and breadth of the land to accurately record those things that hamsters were beginning to witness. While some of these recorders had the skill to cross-question the witnesses and to order their report into a more professional account, others simply committed to parchment what their fellow hamster squeaked.

Some of the stories here contained, therefore, are somewhat personal and rough. I trust that the reader will forgive me if I feel that to radically transform them would be to undermine the sincerity of their testimony. I have left the text almost totally alone, therefore.

Limood the Hamster

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NEPHELE

There are two versions of events which seem to have been compiled of this story. I write 'seem to' because the more modern (in relative terms only - the version is dated to as early as 65AD) strikes me as a hamster's attempt at simplification for a different type of audience.

This version is the earliest available to me and was needed to be emended in only two places by a text I discovered in one of the old libraries of the ancient world which has only recently been excavated, the findings being published in May 2000 in the pages of The Rodent Weekly.

It's amazing what you can see on a busy thoroughfare. Humans are all too busy in their daily lives to stop and take stock of their surroundings that they often leave unnoticed the events which take place all around them that are both interesting and downright weird.

Take this road, for instance. If you'd care to stop by the wayside and watch the travellers, you'd see a wide variety of men and women going about tasks that remain almost hidden through lack of observation to others who may even share the same piece of road at the same time.

There! That's a woman on an errand for her family. You can see it in the haste with which she's walking and the money that jangles from her side. Probably off to buy some wheat or barley to grind at home and bake bread with. You see a lot of these types of people here. Sometimes they have jars on their heads which they take to the well a few hundred yards beyond that small summit in the distance, coming back full of water.

You see a lot of men here, too, but what their trades are is far more uncertain. Without a doubt they're headed for the great city to the west to buy or sell - or both - and to make some profit for their families.

Others you can see all around you in the fields that're laid out everywhere that the soil covers the bare rock. The fields are green at the moment, even though the first harvest has already come - there are still a great many times in the next few moons that other fruits and cereals will need to be gathered into the barns for the winter or sold in the markets for pieces of silver.

That's the great joy of living somewhere like here - the face of the landscape is always changing, fluid, unfixed. And the expressions on the faces of those travelling on this road where one of my burrow exits faces always gives me something to think about.

Why, just the other week, there were two rabbis on their way to the great city, discussing the uncleanness of rodents and whether their law forbade contact with the

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living rather than simply the consumption of the dead. It all sounded a little macabre to me but I was fascinated by their discussions as they journeyed on by, their faces set towards the place from which their law would be made and announced to the nation.

Yes, fascinating.

The kids are funny - so full of energy that they must walk twice the distance of the more direct adults who seem unconcerned that they insist on playing tag round the other travellers - and much to their consternation, it has to be said.

Then there was that group that lost someone.

Mmm. I remember that clearly. That was what you wanted me to relate, wasn't it? I thought so.

Well, it was a fairly overcast day, I recall. Not a hundred per cent cloud for there were blue patches everywhere and occasionally the sun would shine through to cast shadows.

But it wasn't a typical summer's day, anyhow.

They captured my attention when their heads appeared over the tiny summit in the distance because of the speed with which they were walking - actually, it was the lack of speed. They seemed to dawdle as if the place they were travelling to was the place that none of them wanted to reach.

I ran through the burrow to the furthest exit hole I had and sniffed that the coast was clear before poking an ear above ground to listen to the conversation. Who was speaking I couldn't tell, for there's very little cover there to disguise a rodent head as there is above the main entrance, but I clearly heard one of them ask whether the time had come for something to be restored.

That was quite a unique question for this road - I'd never before heard questions like that. I'd heard discussions about possibilities and events which were likely, but it was the first time I'd heard a statement which assumed that something had to happen.

I'm not saying that it *never* occurred on the road - only that I'd never before heard it. That got me listening intently to whatever answer was about to be given. The answer was more perplexing than illuminative and began 'It's not for any of you to know the fixed moment when my Father is to bring this to pass. But you will re...pow...whe...'

Rats! They were going out of earshot!

I scampered hurriedly to the main burrow entrance and poked my head above the ground in time to hear the concluding words '...Samaria and to the end of the earth' wondering what had happened in the middle.

Even though I tried to reconstruct what they *might have* said in the following period of night, I could come to nothing that I felt happy about. I guess it will have to remain a

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mystery - unless the humans who were with him that day heard the exact words and have written them down in the pages of their own history.

Anyway, that isn't the main point of my story. It was what happened next which was unusual - and the reason for me telling you what I saw. For, as far as I could tell, they were the only group of people who were on the road - a way in the distance, I could see another speeding from the scene, their back set to press on to their destination but with no concern for what was happening behind them.

The group who'd been talking seemed alone.

Suddenly, one of the men rose above the others - as if he'd jumped on top of a boulder - and the others stopped in their tracks as if something unexpected had happened. It took me a while to work out their surprise and it wasn't until I saw the man's feet clear the heads of the crowd that I realised he was rising up into the air with no strings attached.

Upwards he ascended as the group's eyes followed his shrinking form in the distance until, abruptly, he disappeared from view as a cloud rolled across the sky.

They must have stood - staring upwards - for a full five minutes. Time passed so quickly that it could have been longer, but all of us were expecting something else to happen.

A passer-by saw the crowd and, like humans do, looked casually into the heavens as he quickly journeyed away, glancing back once to wonder at the scene which had confronted him. The group seemed to be oblivious to his presence, however, so taken up were they with an expectation that some other event was about to take place.

Suddenly, there were two more figures standing beside them in white robes, catching their attention by asking them why they were standing in the middle of the road looking up into the sky. It was a fair question, I had to admit, for I was beginning to wonder myself whether they might be here until nightfall - and, perhaps, forever - until something demonstrable occurred that they were expecting.

But the two men were unusual - almost strange. They didn't seem to come from anywhere but, even so, there they were, as large as life, asking them a fairly pertinent question. I guess that the question must've been rhetorical for they continued almost immediately by saying, 'He who was taken up from you will come in the same way as you saw him go.'

This seemed to answer any questions they might have been forming and their eyes drifted back to earth one by one - from those things that were purely above their comprehension to the reality of everyday life. Or was there little difference between the two? I'm not sure.

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The crowd turned towards the great city from where they'd just come and began moving slowly down the path when one of them span round to face the two men in white and began 'What...' before realising that they'd disappeared from view in an instant.

It was like some conjurer's trick and I had to rub my eyes to make sure that I hadn't missed them disappearing into the distance. But, no - they weren't there. I was in no doubt that they'd appeared or that, just moments ago, they'd existed for all to see a handful of yards from the burrow entrance - I can take you to the spot if you like, I can remember the exact location - but they weren't any longer.

Weren't 'what'? No - they just 'weren't'.

They'd ceased to be.

The crowd looked about but soon gave up the search, returning to their walk back towards the city.

Me? I wondered about the things I'd just witnessed. I didn't know if anyone would believe me until you spread the word everywhere that all the stories that seemed unusual needed to be recorded on parchment for future generations.

I wish I could give you a better explanation of what I saw but the event perplexed me. I guess that all we need to do is to record the facts, right? Let someone else bring an understanding of what these things mean.

Yes, absolutely.

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KARDIA

I would suggest that, if you intend reading this out to any young hamsters, you go through it first to consider whether it's suitable for them or not. The subjects which are dealt with here could send hamlets a little loopy. The hamscript comes from a thirteenth century copy but is substantiated by the oral testimony of the hamsters of Albania.

There was a change in the city that could be felt, though just what it was seemed impossible to translate into words. It wasn't as if the walls had been daubed with bright decoration or that the rickety old stalls of the market traders had been replaced with solid and more acceptable structures - it wasn't that sort of change.

Neither was it that there was another building project that had captured the imagination of the inhabitants and which channelled their attentions off their problems and onto higher and more noble ideals. It was none of that sort of thing - and yet, perhaps, it was all of it.

Indeed, like I've just said, it wasn't easy to describe what had come about these past months - but there certainly was something tangible which could be felt, something that you saw in the faces of the people you sometimes met in the city.

Yes, I guess that was it - there were...people.

People make a difference - good or bad - you can't overcome the influence of humans whether they affect their world positively or negatively for it bleeds over into every situation around them. For now, though, it was all the former and it was good.

It wasn't a random group of them, however, that had made the difference - there were a certain people who'd been coming together who had that 'something' in common. Followers of the Way, they'd come together with a singleness of experience in those previous months to form themselves into one group, one people with all things shared where one would give another only to be supported by yet another who had the solution to obvious need.

It was all very strange, it was true. But the hamsters had perceived the change along with most of the other animals throughout the city, the birds being the first to bring tidings of the events that were being witnessed on nearly every street corner that you'd care to mention.

Kardia was one of those who lived in the meeting places of the Way, a large courtyard that'd been given over by the owner as and when needed. It wasn't that it was given over solely to their use for it still remained part of the owner's property at times when the gathering was dismissed but, when men and women began to gather, you knew

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that it was worth poking one's nose out from a hole in the floor or a crack in the wall to eavesdrop the goings-on.

That particular day, the owner was away on business and those of the Way who'd little business to perform in the city were gathered together in the courtyard, discussing matters as they impinged upon the people they knew and 'the Commission'.

Kardia wasn't altogether sure just what this 'Commission' was but she knew it had to be something important because it was what they seemed to talk about for a great part of that morning until they broke off their discussions to see to the preparation of some food around midday.

As they settled back down to their conversation, there was a shuffling of feet which heralded the approach of another who came in with haste into their meeting and placed a bag of money before them all.

'The proceeds from the sale of our field this morning,' the offerer announced, 'for the use of the people of the Way.'

There was a movement from the shadows as two lifted the bag, moving it to the table where the coins were poured out to be counted, while one amongst the number stepped forward to face him. There was a silence as he looked carefully into his eyes - Kardia imagined that he was trying to find words to express his gratitude, that such a gift to support those amongst their own shouldn't go ignored, but that didn't tie in with the words which followed.

'Why did you lie, Ananias?' the man began, which caused heads to be turned throughout the courtyard. Two or three silver coins rolled across the stone table and jangled onto the floor below as the counters forgot what they were doing and gazed at the two men standing eye to eye.

'You could have retained possession of the field,' he continued, 'and it wouldn't have been counted against you. But to say that you sold the field for such a sum and to have kept back a portion to make yourself have the best of both worlds? Ananias! Why have you lied against the leader of those who follow in the Way?'

Kardia swallowed hard - this was unbelievable. Did the man *really* know this or was he just guessing? After all, hadn't this man been here throughout the morning with the others, discussing the matters about which they were continuing when Ananias made his arrival? How *could* he have known, then?

In that split second between comprehension and a possible response, the air went cold with anticipation. Then, as suddenly as the man had entered the courtyard, he fell down in a crumpled heap before his accuser.

Dead?

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Two or three of the group rushed to check him over, putting their ears to his mouth and nose to test for life, touching his flesh to feel his fading warmth.

Yes, dead. Absolutely.

Now that was scary.

A group of young men emerged from behind the scene to gather up their fallen brother while a couple found a small room off the courtyard where a sheet was removed, bringing it to the corpse and wrapping the body within.

Kardia stood motionless, sniffing the air for any sign of life that she could detect. What puzzled her most was the speed with which this had all happened. Within the space of no more than a couple of minutes, Ananias had entered in glory and, as she sat there, was being carried out in ignominy.

As the group settled down once more to discuss matters, she had to pinch herself to wake up to the reality of what was being witnessed. For here, although these followers of the Way were committed to supporting one another in their need, there appeared to be an unseen hand that was protecting them from deceit and treachery.

That was real scary.

And then everything was normal again - for the next few hours, at least. As the sun began to sink in the sky, more people gathered with those already present while others left and Kardia could hear faint whispers recounting the events of the day.

Hushed tones were all she could make out, but the look of fear which fell upon all who were being told was a clear enough sign that what had happened was causing many to rethink their own sincerity of commitment.

Kardia couldn't take her eyes and ears off the scene - maybe because it seemed so unreal, maybe because she wondered what might follow - but within a few hours, the second half of the scene unfolded itself before her.

Enter, stage left, Sapphira - oblivious to what had taken place, pondering the whereabouts of her husband who'd been away from her side all that afternoon. The hair on the back of Kardia's neck stood to attention as if the apprehension of what might happen was pointing to only one possible outcome.

But these things weren't fixed as many might imagine - there was the choice of a response, the decision to conceal or reveal which was an integral part of human life. Try as a human might to say that reaction was forced upon them, most actions that a human participated in were the result of their own choice.

The same man who'd confronted Ananias stepped forward, attracting the widow's attention and asking, 'Tell me, did you and your husband sell the field for the amount that we've counted?'

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She turned her attention to the pile of coins stacked on the table on the far side of the courtyard and returned the man's gaze, affirming, 'Yes, that's right. It's the full amount.'

With no hesitation, the man asked her, 'So why is it that both yourself and your husband have conspired to lie?'

Almost in mid-sentence, there was a shuffling near the entrance door as the man continued, 'Listen! The footsteps of those who are returning from the burial of your husband! They will also carry you out!'

Suddenly, the woman fell to the ground, motionless. The young men, returning from the previous burial, saw another corpse at the man's feet and stopped in their tracks, puzzling the scene that confronted them.

As if someone had pressed the 'pause' button, everyone stood motionless for what seemed like an eternity until one of the young men shrugged his shoulders and disappeared into a back room once more from where he retrieved another sheet, bringing it to the corpse and wrapping the body firmly before it was carried out of the courtyard as before.

Again, the scene settled into normality and Kardia remembered thinking, 'How many more? Where's this going to end? How many sheets have they got in that back room?'

But she needn't have worried - the meeting resumed as it had done earlier in the morning but, as the sun fell, more followers of the Way entered the doorway to learn of the day's events and to share a meal before returning home to sleep.

It all seemed so, so unnatural.

As if she'd been a witness of something surreal - almost supernatural - that day. As if there was a sharp dichotomy between sincere sacrifice and imminent judgment - as if there was grace being poured out upon all who followed in the Way but an expectation from its recipients that lifestyle would match receipt.

Kardia found it hard to explain but it gnawed at her brain for weeks as she watched, daily, the numbers grow and the strength of the movement develop. What was certain, however, was that those present never forgot the warning that the days' events had taught them.

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HODOS

This is truly one of the most remarkable discoveries amongst hamster literature. That a hamster was present in this place at this time is remarkable in and of itself, but that travelling hamsters should have chanced upon Hodos in their endeavours to record the development of the New Beginning is equally fortuitous.

When a force meets another, something has to give - somewhere. Especially if one's infinitely stronger than the other - and fatter.

I'd been explaining this concept to my brother only that previous evening as we met, face to face, down one of the burrows that served as a common route way between our two complexes - but he seemed not to understand my point. He pushed and squeaked at me like some madman trying to compress some great width of material down a hole too small to receive it.

I have no idea why he didn't back off and try some other route - and, to be honest, it wasn't my intention to request that sort of information. I simply stood my ground and let him try his hardest to get past me. I knew he had to retreat cos there was no way round, over or under me - I knew because I'd constructed that particular tunnel myself and, sometimes, even I found it difficult to get through the gap when my pouches were full.

But he tried.

Now my brother is well-meaning but a little on the thick side - he has all the necessary faculties when it comes to survival but his IQ is such that the more complicated puzzles baffle him repeatedly until he shrugs his shoulders, lifts his paws into the air and goes off to contemplate the problem through a short nap which alleviates his frustration.

If only he'd the perception to see matters the way they really are, he'd immediately find the solution to his problem. It's just that, to date, he's never once been confronted with a solution that's made much sense to him and his brutish efforts to make something occur has more the effect of prohibiting it.

Still, he did have the wits about him to desist after a very short space of time, to turn his back on my presence there in the tunnel and to try an alternative route away from where I'd started grooming. It would have been quicker, though, if he'd listened to my initial remonstrations.

That's the problem with humans, too, no doubt - at least it seemed to be the problem in the incident that I'm about to relate. And you thought that my opening remarks had no purpose to them? Really! You should pay particular attention to what I've

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just told you for, in those words, you'll find an interpretation of what unfolded before me during that midday scene.

It was warm - really hot, I mean - and the sun was high overhead when I poked my nose out from the hillside overlooking the valley floor below. It was a sort of 'pass' in the rocks - natural, though, and easily navigable - along which travellers neared the city at the conclusion of their journey.

And this band of travellers weren't anything special - they weren't typical, either. They were just going about their business as other men like them do.

I was already squinting as a result of the light of midday - not just because of the direct light which was overhead but through the reflections on the rocks which caught the sun and the metal buckles and tools on the travellers which flashed into my eyes.

Then, suddenly, there was more light - or, should I say, a different light - on the road in front of where this band were walking and it seemed to knock the entire group over like some bowling ball in a clean strike. They fell to the floor like blossom does in the Spring - well, no. Actually, it was much quicker than blossom for that tends to cascade gently to the floor - these men fell violently to the floor.

I don't think anything had hit them, knocked them over - I think it was just the fear that the presence of the light had brought with it that made their ankles weak. Then there was a voice - I remember it clearly but I didn't see anyone speaking.

What I mean is that the band who were now outstretched on the ground were clearly in no fit state to say anything - neither could I tell that their mouths were moving - the voice seemed to come directly out from the white light that was opposing them in their journey but, as to a human shape or form, my eyes were unable to be sure.

The voice was calm, too. Not weak, you understand, but peaceful. It was as if it had a knowledge of its own authority but that it didn't need to use demonstrable force to make it known. I'll never forget those words - not because they were so earth-shattering as to be unforgettable - but because they weren't what I was expecting at all.

All the voice said was, 'Why are you persecuting me?'

Well, okay, there might have been a name or something which preceded it - it took me a couple of seconds to come to my senses when at last I heard. But that's hardly important, is it? I clearly remember the substance of the message.

The next few words I heard were strange, too. One of the men who'd been staring directly into the light asked, 'Who are you?' as if he could see someone in the blazing light. I strained and squinted my eyes as hard as I could but it was just impossible to see anything - the brilliance seemed to merge all figures - if indeed there were any -

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into one.

I would have thought that the question 'What are you?' would have been more accurate - but who am I to doubt what the man saw? I guess he must have seen *someone* there in the light or else he wouldn't have asked him the question directly. Or was he supposing there was a figure there because of the voice?

I know, I know - I was a little confused. And I've become even more so since thinking about it these past few days. I remember what I saw clearly - it's just that I don't fully understand it.

Then there was another voice, almost immediately following the man's question. It was the same voice as had begun the conversation - I could tell. It had that same air of authority but was level and consistent. It began by answering the question and stating that he was the one that the man was persecuting.

That made me smile.

'Bad choice,' I thought. 'Very bad choice.'

If an enemy could demonstrate that sort of spectacular display before you, personally I'd want to know how to become their friend, how to ameliorate their anger. Wouldn't you? Humans can get very noble with belief in their own cause but, if your enemy holds all the weapons, what good's a peashooter?

It couldn't have occurred to the man that he was opposing a power that was so awesome that it could snuff his life out with the click of its fingers - his fingers. Well, I didn't see another form - as you know. I guess he must have suddenly realised in that instant that the force that he'd been opposing was actually far greater and more powerful than he'd previously imagined.

I couldn't tell whether the man had a change of heart or not - those things are internal and impossible to observe - but I know that *I* would have done.

The voice continued speaking, instructing him to enter the city from which he was just a few miles distant and to wait for instructions. This was getting to be like a spy thriller, the more I watched. You know what I mean?

The light disappeared with the speed with which it had first burst onto the senses and those who'd been on the ground around the man gathered about him, lifting him from the ground as he stumbled for a short while and was steadied by their outstretched arms.

There was something not quite right here - something I was missing. Surely the man was capable of walking alone with no helper? Ah yes! Then I realised.

The man was blind...

...Blind?

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How had he seen the figure in the light? Then I realised what I'd witnessed *before* it'd all happened. The man was most definitely walking alone, unaided - he must have gone blind by looking into the light. But the others had looked, why hadn't they had it happen to them?

That was strange - but it was the fact of the matter. I certainly can't explain it but I'm making sure that I report what I actually saw with no embellishments. Well, not many. The bit about my brother and the tunnel wasn't embellished, I just thought it would...never mind.

What happened to that small band of men as they disappeared from view, I have no idea. Someone else told me that they'd seen a man with the same description in the city walking around the streets and declaring positive messages about the one who'd spoken to him on the road.

Well, I guess that's possible - but they didn't say he was blind so I have my doubts. But who am I to judge these things? There've certainly been some strange goings-on in these parts for the last few years and this is only one that scratches the surface of them all.

KOINOS

This is one of the classic stories of the New Beginning, which has been told around food dishes across the world by hamsters and mice alike. The significance of what took place is difficult to adequately describe in our own understanding but, believe it or not, the people who followed after the Creator actually believed that they were to put down those who weren't from their own people.

Yes, I know - curious, isn't it? This was the event that sealed an understanding in the people of the New Beginning to realise that the Way was for all humans everywhere.

The first Koinos knew that something unusual was happening in the house, was when the centurion began pacing to and fro in the small room waiting for the arrival of some men. He hadn't seen this happen very often but, when it had done in times past, there was always something unusual or important which occurred immediately afterwards.

This, though, was different - somehow.

Koinos wasn't exactly sure how that could be but the urgency in the man's pacing, the look of concern on his face and his frequent looking out from the doorway to see whether those summoned were coming in haste, all contributed to his realisation that something must be about to take place which was unique in all his dealings with this family.

When I say 'dealings', the reader shouldn't misconstrue my meaning. For Koinos wasn't generally known by the household - they only saw a shadow on occasions as he flitted from one piece of furniture to another or ran into a hole with pouches stuffed full of food that had been gleaned from the floor where they prepared it.

But, in his own unique way, he 'dealt' with the family and, when Koinos thought about his involvement, his mind wandered into a consideration that he was providing the family with the service of keeping the house clean and spotless by his continued Hoovering up of discarded and waste products that gave him a bounteous meal most nights.

He'd seen important events before and always with the same type of procedure - the centurion would pace to and fro in his favourite room. Some people were later to define the rooms by certain labels but, as history records for us, not once is a room ever referred to as a 'Pacing Room' even though this was what was very often done in this household in particular.

Even today, archaeologists give labels to rooms by the type of discovery which they unearth within the walls of the enclosure but, unless they were to find a small, shallow strip of floor that they could accurately determine had been worn away due to the pacing of a human millennia ago, they'd probably never give such a name to the room.

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But, that's incidental. Koinos certainly knew this room to be the pacing room - the place where the evidence of important events that were about to happen took place, sometimes days prior. This was one such occasion.

Koinos waited with some anticipation from his vantage point high up above the action as, eventually, two servants and a soldier greeted their master and entered the room to hear his instructions. These people were always around and their presence, in and of itself, meant very little - but they certainly seemed to have come there in some haste.

'I'm sending you to Joppa,' the centurion began, 'first light in the morning. And you're to find a Jew there called Peter who's lodging with a man called Simon who's...' the centurion thought carefully before finishing his sentence, '...who's a tanner.'

That certainly came as somewhat of a shock to the three stood before him but it prepared the way for the next piece of information that was shortly to be disclosed.

'I've seen an angel,' the centurion continued, 'and I've been instructed that this man can give us all the answers to our questions.'

Koinos could testify that this was something *big*. After all, angels might well be talked about amongst the family during their times alone together but, as far as he could remember, this was the first time any of them had actually claimed to *see* one.

Yes, definitely.

Koinos began to puzzle it through and was immediately struck by the very strange character of this entire play that was unfolding before his own eyes. A Jew who was living with a tanner? Wasn't that illegal? Didn't their law say something about that that would make Peter's lodging there somewhat of a contradiction in itself?

And yet he was the one who was to give the centurion the answer he was looking for - this was weird. But, there again, ever since that other man had been killed, there'd been some very peculiar reports of goings-on in this part amongst a small group of people who'd been scattered here a few years back.

The hamster community was also buzzing with the stories that were repeatedly being told wherever two or three hamsters gathered together. For now, however, Koinos accepted what he heard even though his mind remained acutely aware that all didn't appear to be what it seemed.

The three men departed as soon as the centurion dismissed them, presumably to make ready for first light and their departure south to the city to which they'd been sent. Koinos wished he could've gone with them but knew that such a risk was tantamount to suicide. Especially in those days when hamsters weren't as accepted amongst humans as they are today. And the men were to be travelling light, no doubt, to hasten their journey to the place.

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It was certainly going to be a long journey.

For the next few days, Koinos busied himself with observing and gathering.

The first because he was curious. There didn't seem to be much unusual about the household that he could tell, even though the women were busying themselves about the house in a manner which was more frenzied and intense than he could ever before remember.

Special food was prepared in the kitchen area on the third day towards evening but there seemed to be something wrong in the house that forbade most of it being eaten. Still, that wasn't as much of a concern to him as it was important to gather as much of it as was possible into his store for the coming days when food could be scarce.

And he fairly filled every space that was available, too.

On one of his last journeys, he overheard the centurion muttering something in the room below and he peered out to see him, once more, pacing to and fro.

'Where are they?' he said under his breath. 'They should've been here by now.'

His wife sat close by, working with some thread and cotton on what looked to be a tambourine - or was that something else? Koinos wasn't sure - replying, 'You don't know how hard it may be to find him, my dear, or in what state the man is.'

Then, as an afterthought, she added, 'Suppose he's old? How long would it take them to journey back?'

The centurion seemed to see sense and stopped his movement with a suddenness at the end of one of his courses. 'You're right,' he began, 'but I shall wait only until tomorrow. Then I must send others to see what's become of them.'

Koinos struggled with human time - there was no getting away from the illogical character of it all. For, to him, the event that he was about to see occurred on the third day after he'd first seen the centurion pace to and fro in the room. To the humans, however, it was the fourth day - perhaps they counted the day on which the event began as the first? - and Koinos had to check all his calculations to make sure that he hadn't missed a day somewhere, a very easy thing to do when one's prone to sleep right the way through both day and night.

But, no, it was purely down to the way that humans counted time.

Koinos had slept peacefully during the day but with one ear open for the sound of anything which would bring to a conclusion what he'd seen begun a few days' previous.

Sometime in the afternoon, there was a stirring below that jumped him awake with a start. He peered over the parapet into the room below, to discover a large gathering of

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men, women and children, all gathering together and facing the doorway as if some great king was about to burst upon them.

The centurion hushed them down and announced, 'This man is very special. He will show us the right way to serve God. We must listen to him carefully and take careful note of all that he tells us.'

The words were barely out from his mouth when the three men were heard entering the building and the centurion rushed out to meet them, leaving behind the bewildered crowd. Koinos quickly ran along the hollowed top of the wall to witness the greeting in the ante-room...

...and, yes! There was an old guy standing at the back of the group who must've been responsible for the long journey.

The soldier pointed to the one that his master had summoned, the centurion rushing forward and falling down at his feet. Koinos had seen this type of behaviour before and had always wondered at how it was possible for a human's ankles to give way so easily in these sorts of situations. It surely must be a genetic weakness for there were many to whom it seemed a regular occurrence.

But Peter was having none of it.

He lifted the centurion to his feet, confessed that he was just a man - he certainly didn't look like anything else, it was true - and was brought in to where the crowd had gathered, the children already peering round the doorway to see what was so special in their newly arrived visitors.

To Koinos, there was nothing unusual that he could make out in their approach. True, they wore beards as most of the Jews did but that didn't make them look anything special - just different. Their clothes were what you'd see when you looked out into the streets most days and there was no glow of light radiating out from them, sticker attached to them that said 'I'm special' and none of them were wearing a printed garment that announced some deep and meaningful purpose behind their arrival - something that Koinos thought would have been along the lines of 'Peter kicks butt'.

It all seemed very plain and ordinary.

Koinos wondered at it all and began to think that nothing much was going to happen. But those stories he'd heard made him realise that the outward appearance of men and women was of little consequence and, not being able to see what lay beneath the hair and skin, he took up his position once more, overlooking the crowd and waiting for the fireworks.

There *had to be* fireworks - there just had to be.

If an angel had appeared to this guy as he made out, something unusual just had to

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take place very soon. Koinos braced himself for the building to fall down around them or for everyone to begin dancing on the ceiling but, as he was soon to find out, what was to happen was much more significant than anything he could've imagined.

As Koinos continued to contemplate what might suddenly happen, the centurion's guest acknowledged that it was an offence for him to be here - that he found it an affront to be standing in a foreigner's house talking and conversing with them.

Koinos' jaw gaped wide - and this was the man that the centurion had declared was 'special'? Thankfully, he noticed that there wasn't a sword strapped to his side, for he could clearly perceive that Peter's head might suddenly have parted company with his shoulders and neck.

Asking for an explanation of why he'd been sent for, the centurion explained briefly about the angel, keeping his words as concise as he could without omitting any of the poignant details. As he drew his words to a close, Peter seemed to accept whatever he'd just heard, as if this sort of thing happened to him on a regular basis and that it was no surprise.

Koinos sincerely doubted whether everything was under control and what was about to happen convinced him that it wasn't. The guest opened his mouth to speak and began by explaining the Way - he'd never before heard this message directly from a human but had heard many a hamster squeak about it in conversation.

So this was what all the fuss was about? Koinos began to see its significance in a way that, until that moment, he'd only found perplexing.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a rushing wind blowing through the house, which made Koinos dart his eyes through the opened window to see how the weather had changed but, no, it was as beautiful a day as it had been for the past week. Before Peter had the chance to finish his message, those in the room began shouting loudly in a language which he didn't recognise but which those who'd followed the three servants of the centurion began to look shocked at.

Their eyes darted from one to another as each of the household began announcing words that a few said they half-recognised from other places of the known-world. That was strange, indeed.

In fact, the entire scene was unique. As the crowd of men and women exited into the daylight, following after Peter in search of water, Koinos began to wonder at what he'd seen.

Was this a regular event?

Was this something that had taken the visitors by surprise?

Koinos didn't know the answer to these questions immediately but he did sense in the

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twinkling of an eye that something had happened that day that had changed the course of the Way for good.

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PHOS AND KAI

While I was working on a translation of the testimony of Phos, I discovered a small fragment of a parchment - complete and unedited - which seemed to relate to the initial incident recorded by him, but written by a hamster called Kai. Despite my most stringent efforts to make sure that the two stories interrelated, I was unable to do so.

However, I've placed them together here as each seems incomplete without the other.

Phos

You smell them, sometimes - their character, I mean.

It isn't a sure fire way to tell one from another but I've had more than my fair share of positive identifications using that piece of essential equipment that goes by the name of 'nose'.

Dogs can smell fear, you know. That's what they say, anyway.

Who's 'they'? Not quite sure but that's what the hamster community say. In fact, they begin a lot of sentences with those words. Like 'They say that winter is just around the corner' and 'They say that a peanut is better for putting on weight than a pecan'.

I've never been sure just who 'they' are myself but I guess they must be some group or other who meet regularly to decide on such matters as are important to all of us. So, yes, they say that dogs can smell fear.

I haven't the first idea why I told you that because it's not important to the story I'm about to relate - I just threw it in as an aside. After all, it seemed to parallel my opening statement that us hamsters can sometimes smell them.

Oh. Who's 'them'?

Sorry, I thought you said 'they' which was why I was explaining. 'Them' is criminals - are criminals. Which sounds better? No worries - I've put both down so you can make up your own mind. Committing stories into hamscrip has never been one of my strong points and I'm only doing this now because I was asked to by the community.

Yes, criminals.

I mean, just because a man's a prisoner of someone or other, it doesn't follow that he's even guilty - let alone a criminal. I guess that most humans would say that they were, that there's no fire without smoke - or something - but just because a man gets arrested and chained to a wall, it doesn't mean that they're guilty of the charges levelled at them. Or that the charges, if true, are what's wrong at all.

Men have some funny ideas.

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Where was I?

Ah yes. I was saying that you can tell a criminal by his smell - sometimes. This new prisoner, though, he didn't smell right. Not for a criminal. He had that same human odour that a hamster can detect from each and every one, but there didn't seem to be much 'criminal' about him.

He didn't appear to be afraid, either. I've already stated that dogs can smell fear and, to a lesser extent, hamsters can as well. But we rely more on what we observe with the eye than the witness of the emotions and what I saw in that cell in those few short days was enough to tell me that he seemed to be trusting in something other than his own innocence.

Very peculiar that. I've never before seen it in any other man - though I've heard the stories about that man they killed a few years back and how calm and serene he remained in the face of what he knew was soon to take place. This prisoner in front of me, though, *wasn't* that man - he didn't bear the right description at all. Not from the reports I'd heard.

The first couple of days passed smoothly enough. He was given a small portion of food a few times during the day though he seemed not to be too hungry judging from the amount he used to leave. That was the great thing about him - the other prisoners who'd been detained here used to eat every crumb that fell from the crusts they were offered, so ravenous did their appetite seem to be, but this guy left most of it.

I've never known a more bountiful time for gathering food as I did those couple of days. I was sad to see him go - when he eventually did. But I'm rushing ahead of myself and you've probably lost the plot of the story I'm trying to relate.

That's the problem when I start to speak about food - I get carried away. You must excuse me but, being a hamster living in a prison cell, food is one of those items that's high on the agenda.

So, anyway, the prisoner had been there a couple of days.

From where I poked my nose out from the hole in the wall, I could tell that they must've regarded him as a very dangerous felon for he was chained to the wall with shackles that seemed so thick as to weigh him down.

As if this wasn't enough, two soldiers stood beside him - one on his right, one on his left - to guard against the chains accidentally falling from his hands - fat chance! - and, outside the cell, two more stood guard at the door of entry.

I wasn't quite sure just what they were for - it puzzled me. Were they to stop the prisoner getting out or from friends trying to get in? Perhaps the latter - I certainly couldn't envisage the man getting free from those leaded chains, let alone being able to

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overpower the two soldiers who stood by his side. Whoever was holding him captive here must have thought that there was a very real danger that some sort of liberating act was possible.

As it happened, what they hadn't expected was about to take place.

I know - I saw it with my own eyes.

That evening, the two soldiers who stood beside the prisoner were relieved by others who looked bigger and more sinister than the previous. Perhaps it was just my imagination - in a darkened cell that has little natural light, the shadows from the burning torches can play tricks on one's eyes.

I remember the changing of the guard particularly because of what was said. Yes, I remember it as clearly as if it was happening this instant. The relieving couple had dismissed their counterparts with the words 'Get yourselves some sleep for the morning trial' to which they'd replied 'Tomorrow?'

'Yes, the king has decided that now the festival is over, he'll bring the prisoner out to the nation for sentencing with first light.'

I know I was really sad when I heard the tidings - the prisoner didn't seem to pay it much attention - not because I'd made friends with the captive or that I was necessarily enjoying the dialogue that I'd been overhearing, but because there simply couldn't be another person who'd leave as much food as this guy did. It was a veritable feast.

Still, I'd managed to store up some decent stock so it wasn't too bad, I guess. It was just a shame that they didn't offer him a 'final request' of a special meal or something, cos I just knew that it would be the best time I'd ever had - but the customs of the soldiers prohibited such a kindness.

And so, the prisoner settled down to sleep. Strangely enough, the soldiers seemed to find sleep a pressing necessity as well. I could understand their logic, however, cos there was no way that the prisoner could move in those chains - let alone sleep - and the guards on the door would surely raise the alarm if there was an advance of a liberating band of men.

So, yes, I understood. And they could rest assured that I wouldn't tell anyone. Not that they'd probably listen - after all, a hamster's word against a soldier's? No, they wouldn't listen.

I don't know precisely what time it was, but I remember that I'd already made three trips back to the nest carrying both food and bits of tunic from the soldiers' clothes for bedding when there suddenly blazed a brilliant white light in the cell, startling me to look round at a lone figure who seemed to have come from an entry point apart from the door.

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Was there some secret panel in the rock wall?

I rubbed my eyes to peer in the direction from which the man came, but all I saw was a firm and solid barrier. Quickly, I took cover behind one of the two soldiers' bodies and raised my head above the general level of the torso to look out at the scene which was unfolding before me.

All three figures were sleeping as the man in white slapped the prisoner on the side and ordered him 'Quick! Get up!', the chains falling from his hands and feet as if they were wax that had just been exposed to a heat source.

The prisoner seemed to be still in some sort of daze - I could sympathise with him for I know what I'm like when I'm woken in the middle of the day. It takes me ten minutes or so and a long groom to be able to concentrate on anything that needs my attention.

Humans don't groom, though - well, this one didn't. He rose to his feet and put on his discarded clothes at the command of the man in white that had been folded into a pile beside where he stood.

I began rubbing my eyes once more to try and make out whether this lone figure was some kind of Special Forces vigilante come to bring the prisoner out to the awaiting crowd. But wouldn't the soldiers have been woken up and relieved? This was a very strange way of taking the prisoner out to stand trial and one that I'd never before seen employed.

The angel moved towards the door and commanded the prisoner - well, ex-prisoner, I guess - 'Follow me' as he pushed the cell door open and walked out with the prisoner in tow, still trying to get his garments into a more comfortable fit, rubbing his neck to relieve some of the cramp that he felt from his unusual sleeping position.

I heard them shuffle down the hallway and, after another creak of a door, silence descended once more while the light dissipated, leaving behind the old familiar shadows that were part of my usual experience.

Everything seemed to have returned to normal - except that there was now an empty space where the prisoner had once been, while the two soldiers slept soundly guarding a vacuum.

Back inside the nest, I began to wonder at the events that had just unfolded before my eyes. I couldn't make much sense of them, it was true, but I remembered the story that I'd heard repeated from the hamster who'd been in the village synagogue in Nazareth that day a few years back when the man who'd been crucified attended one of the services there.

Yes, it all came flooding back to me now - but that's not what she'd said it had

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meant, had she?

'To proclaim release to the captives,' I quietly squeaked. Was it? Was that what the man had meant? I kinda thought I was seeing something that might point towards the reality of what I'd heard had been happening outside this prison but the more I struggled to apply those words, the more I realised that he hadn't meant that every literal prisoner was to be led out from the cell by a man in white.

No, that couldn't be.

But the literal event did give me the belief that what had been announced years before was possible - even more, that it was probable - in the lives of those who were following after him.

At daybreak, there was a commotion outside the nest in the cell, a movement of many people to and fro, with loud voices that seemed to proclaim innocence following accusation.

I wasn't interested in any of it, you understand.

They should have been here the night before.

Kai

Sometimes, a hamster can't get a good day's rest. Even though she may be a good hamster, has never stolen from any fellow rodent and has always maintained a good relationship with the humans from whom she makes a living, events seem to conspire against her to wrest sleep from her body.

This was one such time - and it had continued for days. How many, I wasn't sure, but I knew that I'd been conscious for many hours over the past day periods and now, with another night, I was feeling just a little ratty.

It was those humans - they just wouldn't stop talking! Day and night it had continued unceasingly, with loud shouts and declarations that made little or no sense to me. For they were talking about some rock or other being imprisoned by an evil king - what had a rock got to do with anything?

I knew that humans regarded pieces of the earth with a great deal of favour even over and above the welfare of their fellow man and woman but, the way they were speaking, you'd've thought that this rock was human.

They spoke about the need for *his* release, that they couldn't do without *him*, that *he* was fundamentally important to all the followers of the Way. Were these guys nuts or what? It certainly seemed that way.

Deep into the night, there was a loud banging at the front door and a maid came to

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the entrance to answer the call. There was something in the way the door was knocked that seemed urgent, desperate - as if the opening of the door shouldn't be delayed a moment longer.

'Who is it?' the maid asked, her hand hovering over the wooden beam that secured the entrance.

'It's me! The rock!' replied the voice.

'Yeah, right,' I remember squeaking indignantly, 'and who wheeled you here on a barrow?'

But, no, I was wrong. That must've been his name. In that one split second, all the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place and I realised my misunderstanding. The rock was a person - a real live person. Arrested and held prisoner, no doubt, by the king.

This was exciting! He'd been released?! Perhaps that group that had been meeting had done the business like they were trying to.

'Just wait til they see him,' I thought, 'they'll be delighted to know it's all worked out.'

I lifted my sleepy eyes into the dim light of the hallway, expecting the maid to lift the beam and allow the rock to enter but, no - in her delight, she turned quickly and ran into the meeting, shouting excitedly, 'He's here, he's outside the door.'

The room grew silent as a couple emerged into the hallway with the maid, complaining, 'You stupid girl! How can he be outside the door - he's in prison!'

'I tell you. It's him!'

'You're seriously unhinged, woman!' another insisted. 'We might have been praying for his release for days, but this is impossible!'

The knocking continued - even more urgently than before - and, in curiosity, the wooden beam was removed from the door and, hastily, the rock came in, motioning with his hand for the others to be silent and to contain themselves.

From that moment on, there were hushed whispers - at last! peace! - and my soft nest seemed to call to me from the wall cavity. I was torn between sleep and intrigue, between listening to the call of my tired body or of earwigging in the other room.

It wasn't a hard choice to make - though, had I known the importance of what was going on in that room, I may have decided to fight the sleep and stay awake.

I regret that now.

But, at the time, it seemed like the best option.

CHOLoS

The teaching of Cholos is a timely one and, to all humans who may be reading this, I want to make it quite clear that the generation amongst whom I currently live still suffers from the same misunderstanding now as it did then.

If Cholos were allowed to speak into human society, there would be many who'd forsake putting men and women on pedestals, of deifying past followers of the Way and of elevating one great man over the heads of all - rather, men and women would rely upon the Creator who gave these individuals to them all.

On a textual note - this hamscript isn't found as part of the compilation of stories concerning the New Beginning in many of the libraries of learning in the East. But this may be due to human influences that have not yet been fully studied and reported on.

They were just ordinary men, I was sure of it. I'd watched them at close quarters and there was no doubt at all in my mind that they lived and breathed - and ate and slept - just like every other man, woman or child on the face of the earth.

If you got near them - and there was plenty of opportunity to do just that when they slept - they smelt like any other human I'd ever got close to. Their faces didn't radiate with light and they didn't float about the place instead of walk with their feet making contact with the muck of the earth.

Yes, they were most ordinary - extremely most ordinary.

I'd been gleaning on the far side of that part of the city that was more rural than anywhere else when sunrise surprised me. I really should've been watching the signs of the lightning of the horizon but, to be honest, the time sped by so quickly that I forgot all about the need to get to ground before the sun's rays hit the cold earth.

But that was why I'd made a temporary burrow here - as I'd done in a few other places I could mention - because I tended to forget about safety when there was food that could be collected.

As chance would have it, it was exactly where my acquaintances were headed that very morning and their voices awoke me from a fairly heavy sleep during the early part of the morning.

Curious as to what they were doing here - I'd only encountered them in the house below which I had my main burrow before this moment - I poked my head out from the hole and witnessed a large gathering of men and women, nestling down before them while they began declaring to them the news about the Way.

That was the first time I'd heard that particular message - I had no idea what it was all about even though there'd been itinerant recorders travelling through the city on

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their way to other reported incidents in towns around here. But, being the kind of hamster who likes to keep himself informed of human affairs, I decided to forego a little sleep and to pay close attention to what was being declared.

It was all straightforward, I recall, but don't ask me to repeat what they said because my mind isn't built for the word for word recollection of human speeches. I could tell you with some accuracy the discussions I had with the other hamsters in these parts, but human words are two a penny and I usually pay them no heed.

You couldn't get away from what took place at the end, though. No, that was more memorable than anything I've ever seen or heard before or since - it impressed itself upon my memory to an even greater extent than the time I found a hoard of sunflower seeds at the entrance to my burrow at the house.

I remember that moment of discovery, that exhilaration of my body, that...

...what? You don't want me to tell you about that? Okay, okay. I'll stick to the story.

As I looked around those present, I could tell that there was a great mixture of people from all walks of life - the rich and poor sat close together, those with authority over men's affairs and those who were the object of their legislation.

I noticed one man in particular - sat not too far distant - who I'd seen being carried back and forth in the city on repeated occasions. Sometimes I'd see him sat at street corners - though what he was doing there I have no idea. He didn't seem to go hungry, though, and he at least made enough of a living to put clothes on his back and feed himself.

What intrigued me the most was that the speaker kept looking at him - he'd run his eyes over those gathered, picking out very few individuals on which his eyes would stop, but his gaze always returned to this man for - what? - three or four seconds, before he moved on once more to look about those present.

Then something very alarming happened - and it was this that seemed to cause all the subsequent confusion. The speaker stopped speaking almost mid-sentence as his eyes once more fell upon the man in the crowd and, with a loud shout, he ordered him, 'Stand upright on your feet!'

I slapped my paw across my eyes in disbelief - hadn't someone best tell the speaker that he couldn't conform to the request? That was the problem with outsiders, they tended not to pay much attention to the situations that the locals lived in, let alone the physical state of many. And this scene outworking itself before me was certainly no exception.

If only the visitor had taken the time to learn about the locals, he wouldn't have made the same crass mistake.

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But that's my problem, you see. I tend to assume things about people. I know that's how I felt when I heard the command - what I wasn't expecting was for the man to jump up on his feet and to start dancing and leaping about the place like some young hart.

I looked once again at the man to make sure it was the one I remembered - yep, sure was. This was the lame man - the one who couldn't walk about the city cos his legs didn't function as ordinary people's did. And here he was, restored, running around the place as if he'd just, er, just been given a fresh pair of legs.

Well, yes. That's exactly what'd happened, hadn't it?

The crowd rose to its feet. Initially in shock, it began to realise the enormity of what had just taken place and, faint at first, they began to chant 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' falling down before the speaker in some attribution of divinity.

Yeah, right.

As I said at the very beginning, these were ordinary men - they were no different than the hundreds and thousands of the city's inhabitants that I encountered each and every day as I sought to get enough to feed myself. They talked in the same language, they ate the same food, they were needful of sleep like anyone else and their body odour marked them out as identical.

Did this crowd realise what they were saying?

The speaker at the front of the crowd turned to his colleague in absolute horror, wondering at how an action had turned a passive crowd into one that had so misinterpreted the event that they were bringing the priest of the local temple out into the street to conduct their offering of sacrifice to them.

They retreated from the scene as fast as their feet would carry them but I managed to catch up with them an hour or so later as I made it back to my regular burrow in time to see crowds standing outside their lodgings.

'Zeus,' one shouted from the back, 'we've always served you!'

And chants of 'Hermes! Hermes!' echoed off the vertical stone walls that abutted the area where they'd gathered to encourage the speakers to come back out to them.

As both speakers exited out into the street to confront the crowd, one motioned with his hand and shouted, 'Please!' above the noise of crowd. Then, again, 'Please!'

They began to settle down, aware that their gods were now about to speak once more to them. The crowds cowered before them like some child before the master who's to reveal their transgression. He motioned with his hand and began:

'Men, why are you doing this? We are men just like yourselves - but we've come today to bring the good news that you should turn away from these empty and foolish

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things which you do, to serve the one who created everything which you see around you.'

A silence fell over the crowd as he concluded by repeating, 'We're men - we're just men. Don't worship us - worship the One who sent us.'

'Yes!' I squeaked. 'I can vouch for their words!' but my voice was lost in the stirring of the crowd who reluctantly turned their backs on the building and wandered off into the distance, kicking at the dust and pebbles that lay along the path.

'I don't think I convinced them,' one speaker said to another.

'You did all you could,' the other replied, 'but they seem intent on making us out to be something we're not.'

At least these men were under no illusions. Some would have accepted the declarations about themselves, would have ever-so-humbly acknowledged that they were that type of man that others considered to be great. Some might even have accepted the sacrifice that was to be offered to them.

Not these men.

They seem focused on their purpose for being here and there was no one - absolutely no one - who was going to sway them from what they knew they had to do.

But, as I've previously said, they were just men.

AGORA

This is by far the most obscure manuscript that I found and the reader is called upon to read between the lines to understand what it is that Agora saw. Kesef, a previous hamster of literary fame, brought this manuscript to the world's attention from an oral record passed on to him by a local hamster living on the summit of Philippi. I here reproduce the documented scroll.

Something strange was going on in the city that day, something that never seemed to be duplicated afterwards. Of course, Philippi was a Roman town at that time - very important she was too - and we supplemented our diet with the crumbs and morsels that were dropped by the centurions up here on the hill.

From where we lived, we could see it laid out before us like a playing card propped up against a mountain. The forum always glistened in the sun because of the slabs that reflected the light and the streams of water that flowed round the four boundaries, fed by the two pools on opposite sides of the bema.

There were colonnaded walkways and tiled houses then, but I know that we always used to be drawn back to the forum where crowds milled about seemingly aimless and where the magistrates decided on issues for the sake of the town - yes, it all seemed to turn on the bema seat.

As I've said, something strange was happening that day, but it'd started a few days previous.

I think there were four of them - but it's not always easy to distinguish between forms - who set out west on the road. No, that wasn't particularly strange in itself, but they stopped shortly after leaving the city and seemed to be milling about by the river that flowed in the valley.

Then there was all manner of splashing in the water - it was so bad that we thought someone must have been drowning. But, as quickly as it began, it ended - and then they walked back into the city, a number greater than those who had marched out.

Next day - I seem to remember it was the first day of the week - it happened all over again. Only this time, there were more than four that left the city.

Was it ten? Twelve?

But the same fun and games seemed to be going on in the river just like the day previous, so much so that our hamlets wanted to go down and do the same. We barely managed it but our insistence that hamsters sink like stones rather than float like wood constrained their exuberance.

Then they returned to the city.

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Next day, more went out, they splashed about in the river, they returned.

The following day, even more.

And even more after that.

And after that.

Now it seemed as if the entire city was going out to the water each day - it wasn't the entire city, you understand, but the numbers were growing daily so that it appeared that way.

I guess it could have gone on forever had it not been for that day, that very strange day...

It'd become a daily event for us - partially of amusement but mainly of intrigue - so we lined the Acropolis from the eldest to the least to witness the march, the splashing, the return.

This day, however, it was different.

We had heard a loud voice for about a week - a woman's voice, it was - accompanying the procession. I remember it was something about 'salvation' and 'servants' - or was it 'starvation' and 'croissants'? I can't remember. It was loud, anyhow, and the voice reverberated from the valley floor, echoing against the hard rock faces.

That was normal - or so it had come to be - but what followed next was unexpected. A man's voice pierced through the other noise like a trumpet sound announcing some important event. Now, let me see, what was it about? For the life of me I can't remember but I know it was something resembling a command.

Suddenly, there was a commotion and a human form fell to the ground - seemingly of their own choice. No one pushed or touched them (but it's a long way down from here) and they lay on the ground almost motionless while the crowd resumed its march to the stream, splashed about a bit and then began to return.

The human form by this time had risen to their feet and returned into the forum - and beyond - followed by numerous people emerging from one part of the square, looking about them at the people who passed by, stopping some and seemingly engaging them in conversation.

As the crowd re-entered the city from the stream, the rabble in the forum massed together and walked quickly up onto the main road to confront them. Two tides of people met and the air was filled with shouting, hands raised and gesturing which, I'm quite sure, was far from pleasant.

Then the crowds moved in unison into the forum, a man being dragged forcibly in their midst and released in front of the bema where the magistrates sat. There was

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more shouting - fingers were pointed - the crowds pushed and pulled at the man. And then he was grabbed, beaten and thrown into a small stone building that we'd never seen him enter or depart from previously.

That could have been the last of it, had it not been for our curiosity.

When darkness fell, the sound of singing floated up the hill. This wasn't unusual - it was normal for song and dance to fill the air - but it was unusual for it to continue long into the night and for it to emanate from the building that the man had entered.

We were about to send a group of hamsters down to investigate when the mountain began to shake and rocks cascaded down its side into the valley below. It was by no means unusual for such a thing to happen but it also wasn't an everyday occurrence.

We abandoned our reconnaissance mission and sat tight, repairing the damage done to our burrow complex and endeavouring to settle the minds of our tiny hamlets.

Morning came soon enough and a crowd gathered around the small building where the singing had been heard.

Well, what can I say? Nothing that happened seemed to make much sense to us. What hamster can honestly say that he understands all the affairs of men and women?

But there was one final paragraph to be written.

That same day, a crowd - just like days' previous - walked out the gate and across the stream.

But this time there was no splashing, no water games.

The crowd stopped briefly by the stream, milling around together - then six (or eight? It was very difficult to see) separated themselves from the crowd and walked into the distance, the others returning within the walls and dispersing quickly to its four corners.

And that was the end of the daily spectacle.

I'm still not sure what it was all about.

But they said it was important that we record it - for posterity, they said. After all, since that man died, there've been some very unusual things take place throughout the places we live.

I don't see the significance now, you understand, but we might one day.

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THURIS

I've never been too sure what to make of this story but that's not to say that there are great differences between the hamscripts that have come down to us. I've no doubt as to the authenticity of the event but I've found it hard to place it in its correct chronological position.

I've followed the traditional citing of it, however, for lack of any internal evidence that may indicate otherwise. It's always been accepted that this event took place late on in the life of the man in question.

A hamster has to be careful when he goes on his nightly missions to hunt for food for he never knows where danger might spring from. After all, one might presume that most of the potential assaults on his life would be from the horizontal plane such as foxes and weasels - or even from fellow hamsters - but, in truth, the most sinister of all areas from which an attack arises is the air.

No doubt you've heard the humans' expression that 'It's raining cats and dogs' which, although non-literal, is the sort of thing that we rodents have to concern ourselves with. It's very common for a moggy to have ascended the branch of some tree or other, awaiting the approach of a victim, before mewing some word of attack and throwing themselves off the branch to surprise us from the skies.

Owls are equally a problem for they sit in trees and, with their acute sense of hearing, can pinpoint the faintest of movements as we scurry about the place. Their presence is virtually imperceptible - and their sound in flight is almost a reflection of the silence of the night - so we've learnt that the safest place to walk are the edges of buildings where an attack from the skies is increasingly unlikely - especially from birds who'd crash into the solid stone walls if they attempted such a difficult manoeuvre.

Rain is also problematical - though it's seldom fatal - and can actually help disguise the sound of our movements from predators, for they aren't clever enough to distinguish between the pat-pat-pat of the raindrops on the ground and the similar sound of our paws. But water makes the fur become matted and waterlogged - it makes a pleasant summer's excursion into a damp drudge through mud - and we don't enjoy the nights as much.

One also has to be careful of the odd falling human that plummets out of the night sky with no apparent warning.

What? You've never experienced it?

Then you're the lucky one, indeed - when it happened to me, it scared me half to death.

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Whether it was someone who was trying to mimic the great Icarus, I doubt. For I carefully inspected the body for residual odours of wax when it landed a foot away and there were certainly no feathers that cascaded down behind him. Neither was it a particularly warm evening when one would've expected the wax to melt and the human to fall earthward.

But what the man was actually doing 'above', I have no idea. I couldn't even explain his presence there by recourse to an overhanging branch or some structure built into the wall of the building. All I could see was the vertical side that seemed to rise forever into the night sky and a small opening a great way into the distance.

My first feeling was one of flight but I quickly stifled that urge and turned, instead, to the crumpled pile of flesh and bones that lay motionless beside me. The thought struck me that, perhaps, the lad might have some food in his hand and, even though I knew this wasn't the most noble of thoughts, a hamster is forced to be practical when food's scarce.

But, examining each hand assured me that there was nothing useful. Then, my instinct turned to curiosity and I pressed my paws onto the lad's wrist to see if I could detect a pulse. There was little - if anything - I could do, but I was intrigued by the scene that had played out before me and was eager to know whether there was any life in him.

Nothing. Not so much as the faintest throb of life. His chest was motionless, too, which wasn't a good sign but, before I had the chance to listen at his half-opened mouth for the movement of air, I was disturbed by footsteps on stone which echoed round the courtyard.

I quickly backed myself up to the edges of the wall - I was fortunate that the moon was casting its shadow into the recesses of the corners - and waited for a group of men to appear, running with haste to where the young lad lay.

They bent over, shaking him in a vain attempt to rouse him from what they seemed to take to be sleep. A couple of others lifted him into their arms, his hands flopping lifelessly behind his body and his head rolling about on his shoulders.

There was no doubt about it - the kid was dead.

I'd been right in my first assessment of the situation and turned to re-embark on my hunting expedition when I heard the voice of one who was pushing his way through the crowd, instructing them, 'Move aside there. Move aside.'

An older man approached the body and reassured them, 'Don't worry - the boy's soul hasn't departed yet,' and lifted him into his arms, hugging him close.

In a split second, the lad breathed deeply, his ribcage filling with air for the first

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time in a few minutes and a couple took him from the arms of the man to carry him away elsewhere.

The crowd were astounded - and well they might be - I, certainly, had never seen anything like it before. Neither have I ever witnessed anything from that time on to match what I saw that night.

The older man turned to enter the building once more and, as he did so, he looked back at the crowd that was following and said, 'Well, I haven't lost anyone yet while I've been speaking.'

And, with that, he disappeared from view.

PLOION

I must note here that the significance of the story only came to light within the past hundred generations of hamsters or so. It wasn't collected as Tsara's original command to hamsters everywhere but was found by myself as I was examining ancient manuscripts in Eastern libraries for my previous work 'The Final Remedy'.

I'm indebted to the Curator of St Petersburg University Library for allowing me to take a copy of the manuscript for inclusion in this work.

My family hail from Myra in Lycia, an important port by all accounts and certainly one in which both small and large vessels weigh anchor to take on fresh supplies and to trade with the buyers and sellers. I'm the fourth hamlet in a litter of seven - or eight, I'm not sure - and had enjoyed my adolescence along with most other rodents when the responsibilities of adulthood began to burst onto one's awareness - but all with a fair degree of youthful exuberance.

How I ever managed to get onto that ship, I have no idea. Well, I do have some idea, I confess - but the actual mechanics of it all is beyond me.

I sought a living on the docklands of Myra where fish could easily be spilt and bags of grain torn open accidentally by the metal fixtures that were nailed into the oak beams. But that Summer hadn't been the best of times and I remember that my store seemed to indicate that, unless I increased the quantities of food I was finding, I'd be a couple of weeks' short when Spring came.

Although I could've retrieved food all the year round - so fruitful were the supplies here - the winter is such that I tended not to want to venture out into the night much after the shortest day of the year until the warming winds blow once more.

You could call it carelessness, I guess, for I was too eager, too desperate in my attempts to store up food, that I let my heart get the better of my mind. I remember finding a small hole at the corner of a wooden container and the smell of fresh nuts was too great a temptation to pass up. Entering the box, I found a fair treasure of supply and I quickly set about eating one, pouching another, eating one - well, I needn't tell you that this all took time.

I didn't pay much attention to the thumping noise on the wooden sides, nor the shaking with which I was being rolled about the floor - my one concern was to eat and pouch, eat and pouch as quickly as I could.

That was my mistake. When I exited the container, I found that the place I thought I was, I wasn't. The scenery was totally different and my scent routes were all gone. Besides this, the floor beneath my paws was unnervingly unstable. It wasn't that the

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wooden beams weren't solid under me, it was just that the entire floor seemed to be swaying from side to side, up and down - gently, it has to be said, but, nevertheless, I could still detect movement.

It was dark, too - even though my internal clock was telling me that sunrise should be imminent, if not already taken place. I sniffed skyward and detected shafts of light in the ceiling. Ceiling? There wasn't a ceiling here when I came in.

I heard someone above shout 'Away!' and the sound of water rushing against wood began to increase in my ears til I came to the horrible realisation that my container was now aboard ship, afloat on the seas and bound for who knew where.

I began grooming out of sheer panic - it's a common trait amongst us hamsters as you're aware and, in the circumstances, I couldn't think of anything else that was worth doing. The one thing I *did* know was that I wouldn't starve, but that didn't seem like too much of a consolation when, unless I was very careful, I could be thrown overboard by the rough sailors who plied their trade on the open sea and drown in the depths of the ocean.

I'd always known of the dangers of life in the docks but, until then, I'd laughed at the possibility that this could ever happen to me. Me? No, I was too clever, too sharp to ever be caught on board a ship when its time had come to sail.

Rats! I was just like everyone else - too concerned about my own existence that I'd committed the fundamental error of letting my stomach rule sound judgment.

The voyage was taking forever. Or was this the normal length of journeys on the open sea? I'd spoken with many a rodent who'd disembarked at Myra and discussed with them what sort of kick they got out of travelling the world by human agency, but it was never that important to me to ask them how long a voyage might take.

The black rats were the most prolific of all migrating rodents - they'd conquered continents because of their sense of adventure, staying close to humans whenever they could and using all the means at their disposal to remain hidden deep below the deck when most of the humans went about making the boat sail.

They were a breed apart, you know. I envied them on occasions when my dockland life got boring because they seemed to have tales to tell that so put my own experience into a shadow that I wished I was like them - well, I was now, wasn't I? I know it hadn't been out of choice but, if I made it to the other side - wherever that might be - I, too, would have a story to tell.

Only, I'd have to change the start of my story to something more elaborate - like, 'Bored with life on terra firma, I secreted myself aboard an ocean going ship and threw

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in my lot with the tempestuous lady of the deep.'

Yes, that sounded good - no one was here to say otherwise and I could rehearse a few lines to paint even harsher pictures of self-sacrifice and heroism once I was on dry land. I'd heard the rats tell tales, you see, so it wouldn't be difficult.

That evening, I chanced a journey on deck and peered over the side of the boat to see, far away in the distance, lights. Stars? No, they were definitely lights - but we were sailing away from them and, within an hour, they were gone from the horizon.

There may still have been land out there but there was certainly nowhere to weigh anchor and to get one's paws back onto dry land. There was a shuffling of feet behind me and I dived into a circle of rope that lay close to the edge as two men walked by - or was it three? - one saying, 'The master of the ship knows better the times and tides of this sea.'

The other man seemed to be restating his position - yes! There was the clanking sound of a chain, I heard it plainly at that moment - when he said, 'But I perceive that there'll be much injury and loss if we continue this...' and they were both gone in the night.

Shortly after that, I remember the sudden bump with which I awoke, as the ship reeled violently back and forth. I'd been lying at the foot of the nut store but found myself outside the hole, being rolled around the floor like a bean bag.

Although I struggled to regain some sort of pawhold and stability in the cargo, I found it almost impossible and the best I could managed was to claw myself across to the side of the hull and sink my nails into a beam, rising and falling with the ship as it raged in the midst of the tempest.

Humans were all about me, grabbing crates and boxes and lifting them high above on pulleys and ropes. I thought I occasionally heard a faint splash in the waters, but there was so much noise that it could've been my imagination. Whatever, I was sure that they must be throwing the cargo overboard to try and save not only the boat but their own lives.

And there went my nut store!

But I wasn't feeling in need of food right then - indeed, it seemed to be the furthest thing from my mind. I could also see that the hull appeared to be filling with no small quantity of water and I began fearing for my own safety. In a vain attempt to reach higher ground, I grabbed for a rope that hurtled past but missed.

It was then I noticed the beam to which I was holding. It circumvented the hull to a place where a small opening existed in a funnel-shaped structure that seemed to pierce

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the deck. Carefully, I paced round to the opening, pushed my way into the void and climbed upwards into what turned out to be a cabin where many of the sailors and passengers were trying the best they could to remain stationary.

I found a small cavity at the back of a fixed container and pressed against the sides to secure myself while a man came forward and approached another wearing a sword at his side.

When he spoke I could tell it was one of the men who I'd heard a few days' before and the sound of iron grating on iron made me realise that it must have been this man who was the other's prisoner. Here I was, thinking that I'd only sailors to watch out for and there were criminals on board!

Sheesh! If I'd only known what fate would've befallen me, I would've been more careful at the quayside.

'You should have listened to me when I told you not to sail,' he began. I could tell that he wasn't going for the tactful approach - this was most definitely 'plan B'. But he had a point - it *had been* him who'd been speaking about not continuing on their journey!

'But, have no fear for, this very night, an angel of the God I serve stood by me and has told me that I'll be brought safely to the destination to which I'm bound. And you also will be safe - I have it on good authority - but we may need to run the ship aground on some island or other.'

Well, that was *some* speech, I can tell you. I was all for standing on my rear paws and giving him a round of applause but the others didn't seem to be too impressed. They waved their hands for him to be quiet - but they heard, nevertheless, and they would have remembered.

The ship had taken a fair pounding and, even though the wind had lost its strength, we were adrift on the sea with little control over the direction we were headed (the sailors had thrown the tackle from the boat earlier when they were trying to lighten the load - I may not know much about sailing a vessel on the high seas but even I know that that's the *last* thing you'd do - or, perhaps, it was the last thing?).

I found a supply of wheat in the meantime, incidentally - just thought I'd throw that in. It'd been reserved into a container in the cabin I was now in, taken from a supply below deck that had been saved in case needed.

At least I didn't go hungry - which was more than could be said for my fellow sailors. They looked haggard and exhausted, having been without sleep and food for numerous days, trying to conserve what they had for as long as possible.

Suddenly there was the sound of a man shouting, 'Twenty fathoms!'

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Then, after a little while longer, 'Fifteen!'

The men rose as one man and rushed out into the pitch blackness of night. There was a commotion as men began panicking, ordering 'Anchors from the stern!', the deck sounding like the main street of some great city.

They were soon back in the cabin, resting and waiting for daybreak, while the man who'd been right about this voyage all along encouraged them all to eat. They didn't seem all that encouraged, it has to be said, but he announced to them all that none of them would come to harm.

I think some were cynical, I'm not sure. But you had to judge the man by his previous success rate, didn't you? After all, he'd warned them not to sail and said that this would happen if they did. I think they saw sense in the end and took large bites out of the bread they'd been saving before they grabbed my supply of wheat - along with all that stored below - and threw it overboard.

The cheek! Well, at least the man said we'd soon be all saved - I could look for something to eat when we got on to dry land.

I'm not quite sure just what happened - all I know is that the boat began to break up. I don't think it was the sailors who made it happen for they seemed to be as panic-stricken as everyone else.

Besides, the men seemed to be throwing themselves overboard as fast as they could and a sudden sense of panic gripped me firmly in its power. I hastily ran to the side of the ship and peered out over the sea to see wood, broken away from the hull, floating towards the beach in the distance.

Now wasn't a good time to remember that I couldn't swim but it came flooding back to me in an instant. Putting it aside, I clambered up onto the side of what was left of the boat and jumped with all my strength away from the listing ship.

I can't say it was skill but I managed to land with a splash beside a large piece of wood that a human was clinging fast to - except on the other side so that he saw the plume of water rise into the air but he failed to see me at all.

What else can I say? I simply waited while the human paddled his way to the shore and safety. That was it, journey over. I quickly lost their company when I saw bushes at the sand's edge and darted there for cover and protection.

What became of that man on the boat, I have no idea - but he *did* say that all those on board would be saved and I have no doubt that he must have escaped. I didn't wait to make sure, though, I was more concerned to hunt out a few berries to alleviate my hunger.

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Never again, though, would I sail the seven seas - or even one of them.

No way!

Leave that to the rats.

Besides, I found a thriving community of hamsters here that delighted me no end. It was they who recorded this story for posterity.

CONCLUSION

The last verse of hamscript that I translated in my previous work, 'The Final Remedy', was one that was committed to parchment by Oros the Hamster in which he perceptively noted that 'The man had come to solve the ultimate problem and, far from this being the end, it was simply a new beginning' and I felt inspired to take his last phrase and use it as the title of this short work on more translations of ancient hamscripts.

Part of my reason was that, being such an old writing, I wouldn't be forced to pay copyright but, more than this, I felt it summarised quite accurately the development of the work that that one man had come to do.

I've faithfully translated the hamscripts to the best of my ability and been careful to ascertain the present meanings of some of the words I've used in order that the reader might have pictures formulated in his mind that are accurate representations of the events as described by those hamsters present.

I could have researched into archaeological excavations and made some of the statements here reflect current thinking, but I felt that an eyewitness account must necessarily be more accurate than any modern interpretation about scattered stones and layers of dust. I know that some would have wanted the stories altered but I've refused to undermine the accounts of the rodents who were there when it happened.

Finally, I note with some disappointment - and with encouragement - the continuation of the New Beginning after the close of the final story of this compilation. Almost two millennia have passed since that half century occurred in which the events of my two works transpired and subsequent history has not always given the researcher evidence of the continued successful establishing of the Way.

True, there must have been individuals in every generation of humans who were faithful adherents to the pure teaching which originated in the man but, as I turn over the pages of human history (and steel myself away from nibbling them), I'm faced with testimony that men and women soon forgot the ways they were taught, forsaking them for a manner of life which, at times, contradicted the plain and simple truth of those who immediately followed after.

I can't help feel - and most of the hamsters I've met agree with me on this - that those humans who confess the Way as being what they've given their lives over to follow, should return to the simplicity that was declared to those early followers.

A lot of what goes under the same present day label is so complex and confusing as to be self-contradictory. So, in concluding my two volume work, I would appeal to any

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human reading this to pay careful attention to the old ways that were at first delivered to people like yourself, the people who defined what it meant to be followers of the Way.

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An
English Hamster
in
Holland

To Boldly Do What No Hamster Has Done Before
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FOREWORD

'When in Greece, eat like the Italians'
from Lee's 'Tourism for beginners guide'

I love Holland.

Even though many a hamster told me that I'd grow bored with the endless dikes and flat lands of Friesland, I didn't.

I found the land a remarkable one - one that has truly been redeemed from the sea and restored into a place which is useful to both man and beast alike with smiling faces that greeted you at most street corners and in homes too numerous to mention.

I'm not the first to compile a diary of my experiences - and I'm sure I won't be the last - but I decided to pull away from attempting a day by day account of my visit there between 9 and 21 May 2002 - as previous hamsters have done - because it seemed that there were themes which needed to be grouped together and a restrictive dating system would have prevented me from flowing them together.

I must also note here that I've tried to give the reader some indication as to how the Dutch pronounce the 's' in normal conversation. Their 's' is a cross between a lisp 'ss' and the sound of the 'sh' as in 'fish'. While it makes everything sound much softer than when one listens to a German speak, I felt it important to note the unusual pronunciation by an extra 's' whenever a Dutch human is speaking

Hamsters speak a similar language the world over and so I've refrained from adding the extra letter when I've quoted them, even if they were Dutch.

As Enkhuizen is visited by a great many Germans, I should point out for the visitor that, even if one doesn't know the language, it's very easy to tell the two races apart by listening carefully to the conversation for, while the Dutch person might cover you in spit with the use of the s, the German language is so guttural, you'd be more likely to be covered in phlegm.

I should also extend warm thanks to those special people who made my own stay all the more comfortable.

Firstly, to Caesar, the dog who repeatedly came to my aid when Smurf the Cat was paying me far too much attention. He also rubbed himself against the wet red paint to distract Anita, the human house owner, from realising that there was a hamster at the window waving frantically to attract his attention. And, even more, when I found myself stranded in Enkhuizen, he was pivotal in accessing the computer during the night when Anita and Ed were in bed asleep.

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Snouck van Loosenpark, my Dutch guide - and more than a guide, a friend - showed me round the town on many days when his studies weren't being interfered with. I'm largely indebted to him for checking out the accuracy of the stories I was told while I was over there and of supplying me with other stories which he'd gleaned from the annals of naval history.

I should also thank Anita and Ed - even though they're probably not aware that I was ever in their house. Yes, I should thank them on Lee and Kath's behalf and apologise for the Guest Book entries - the reader will understand what I mean when they reach that part of the series of articles.

And also to the late Bente, the hamster who lived there before me. His information scrawled on the wall of the bedroom gave me a good insight into the psyche of the Dutch people.

Van Bleiswijk also needs a mention - it was here that I was able to eke out a fairly decent meal most nights and, judging by the quantities of hamsters who frequent the place, it must be the best restaurant in town. Let me mention you all by name to show how special my times there were - Jeroen, Monique, Peter, Alies, Miranda, Jan, Martijn, Lianne, Eva, Maaïke, Sylvia and Gyonne.

I'm also indebted to the author Geoffrey Regan, one of whose books I found in a small bookshop before my visit ('Geoffrey Regan's Book of Naval Blunders' published by André Deutsch in 1993 and 2001). It provided some perceptive insights into the mind of men and women throughout the ages who have so often striven for excellence but failed sufficiently disastrously for them to serve as fitting examples to subsequent generations.

Limood the hamster

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INTRODUCTION

'In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure,
oxygen masks will descend from the ceiling.
Stop screaming, grab the mask, and pull it over your face.
If you have a small child or husband travelling with you,
secure your mask before assisting with theirs.
If you are travelling with more than one small child,
pick your favourite.'

Part of one airline's safety announcements prior to take-off

Lee and Kath are not nervous flyers - they may occasionally feel a little sick when they hit pockets of turbulence or when the plane bounces into a landing but, on the whole, they're more likely to get up and dance than most other passengers are.

My late colleague, Dak, has already noted some of the weirder eccentricities of Lee on his return trip from America a couple of years ago and I would urge the reader to consult those notes to give themselves a good understanding of his mentality.

I have to say, though, that Lee, once more, found himself in the 'Exit Seat' - that part of the plane where when - er, I mean 'if' - the plane goes down, he's responsible for opening the side door to facilitate a way of escape.

Once more, though, he had 'words' with the stewardess - fortunately, this time, she was in a more tolerant mood for, when he asked her 'When the plane goes down, do you want me to say "Thank you for flying KLM" as they get out or just exit as fast as I can?' she replied with a smile and 'No, it would be best if you just evacuate the plane as quickly as possible'.

Again fortunately - for Lee's sake, I note - the same lady was the one handing out the 'light refreshments' as the plane reached its cruising altitude and levelled out. Both my owners had anticipated at least a sandwich but, in the short seventy minutes flying time, there was little possibility of that. Instead, the passengers were offered a soft drink and a cookie, or an alcoholic one with nuts.

This was patently obvious because they were both watching the distribution of the snacks as the stewardess approached them. When she finally reached their position, her question 'What would you like, sir?' was answered by Lee saying 'Two Quarter Pounders with cheese, fries and two chocolate milkshakes - to go, please'.

Two teas and chocolate chip cookies must have been a great disappointment, I admit,

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but at least it was preferable to being handed a parachute and thrown off the plane over the North Sea.

Amsterdam's Schipol airport must rank as one of the largest airports in the world.

I don't mean that in the sense that it has the largest buildings or the biggest capacity to hold people - I mean it in the sense that, if you find yourself arriving at one of the high numbered gates, you have about a thirty minute walk to the baggage collection point if you're a human - and that's even with the use of walkways which throw you off violently at the end.

On a couple of occasions, I fully expected to be thrown to the ground in the bag I was being carried in as Lee stumbled on impact, slipped on the newly polished floors and then had his legs taken from under him as the next one was jumped onto.

If they moved just a little bit faster, there could be a major airport disaster, the likes of which has never yet been experienced. I must also commend Lee - and there are few enough times when I can genuinely do this - for saving me from bruising when two old dears 'backed up' at the end of the moving floor and were in danger of causing all those behind them to concertina together.

It was only Lee's quick thinking of pushing them out of the way and into a trolley fully laden with bags that prevented his fall. I can't think why the old people were singularly unimpressed, however.

Getting to the train station and, from there, to Enkhuizen was simplicity itself and I lay there amazed at the skill with which both my owners navigated the difficult route which they'd chosen for themselves.

The Dutch train system is extremely good, though, and I could hear the ticket seller advise Lee in almost perfect English where he needed to change. Soon we were in Enkhuizen and I was getting more excited by the minute as warm greetings were being mouthed at their accommodation and the bag was dumped on the bed while the suitcases were unpacked and sorted.

I'd taken the risk of staying put in Lee's rucksack because I'd anticipated them both getting a few things sorted before getting out into the town for their first look round - I wasn't disappointed. Within an hour, I was left alone in silence and exited into my new temporary place of residence - I could see the sun blazing hot in the sky as it shone through the window and I found the most perfect snugly bed in the corner of the drawer.

This was going to be an interesting holiday, to be sure.

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SNOUCK

Once upon a time in a foreign land,
Where Beachey Head doth gleam and stand,
There once was a couple who'd made a plan,
To feed Lee and Kath til they dropped.

First they gave them Thornton sweets,
Next came pudding and loads of cheese,
All washed down with numerous teas
And their bellies got bigger than big.

Inflated, then, their stomachs grew,
Til both Kath and Lee were the size of two.
It was then that each one of them definitely knew
That they'd outgrown the world's biggest man.

Their waistline swelled and their belts wouldn't fit,
Their jeans were so tight that the seams became split,
The chairs all collapsed - there was nowhere to sit -
And a crane had to carry them away.

The moral, my friend, you should mark very well,
If you're here as a guest then this truth's to tell,
Put a knife to your throat or your stomach will swell
And you'll leave this place twice what you came.

From a Guest Book entry of 1994 in Eastbourne by the dynamic duo

I took my ease at the Van Bleiswijk that evening along with a hundred other hamsters who dined under the floorboards of this eminently lovely and most friendly of restaurants. Had I had the choice I would, no doubt, have opted for this immediately but, having to rely upon Lee and Kath's travellings to get across town, I was happy to let myself be taken to where they assessed was good.

As you will, no doubt, realise - Lee and Kath know how to eat and where's best.
I was once told by Lee that, if you ever go into a strange town and want to know

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where the best places are, never ask a thin person. After all, they carry the evidence with them in their own body that they have no idea what a feast is and they're more likely to recommend you a small place which prides itself on the presentation of the food rather than on the quantity.

I'm in total agreement with both Lee and Kath who assess a meal on the volume or weight of food one gets for the money first and foremost. At the Van Bleiswijk, they always came away full and rarely needed a dessert - when they decided that they'd go for the sorbé one evening, they had to scale down their main course simply to make room for it.

The artwork in the food hall was unusual, too.

I remember hearing Lee and Kath discuss the big Friesian cow (no, I'm not referring to one of the waitresses - how could you imagine such a thing?) hung in one of the rooms when they got back to their accommodation one evening and the intrigue compelling me to poke my head above ground level the following night to see what they were on about.

There, some five feet square was the most unusual picture I'd seen - certainly in a very free and modern style but with loud colours that accentuated the drabness of the black and white hair.

With most modern paintings, one's challenged to come to terms with why the artist thought the butt looked better on the head than how it occurs in real life - and pink cows with green tails are an unusual phenomenon which, to date, I haven't yet experienced, though, from what I know about Sizewell B, I understand that such animals *do* exist.

There were Celtic sculptures in bronze, too, scattered throughout the restaurant - with crosses and forms resembling men and women that blended into the feel of the establishment excellently. Built in 1703, the mood of the place was kept alive by deeply marked and pitted tables which seemed to have been there just as long as the restaurant itself.

But, I digress. That was the human part.

My seat was downstairs, underneath the floorboards, with a host of other hamsters who'd come here from all over the world (though most of them had sailed with humans that had hired boats for a week or so. Most originated from Germany). I ordered my meal and sat back to relax over a Dutch blend of VOC spices and nut oil, a rare delicacy that, to date, I've not been able to find bottled. Perhaps it was a house speciality?

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a Dutch hamster looking at me inquisitively - you could tell he was from Holland because of the large clogs which adorned each paw and the round of Edam cheese which hung from his neck to ward off flies.

I motioned him to come over and he didn't need a second encouragement. Before I

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knew it, we were sitting discussing matters like old friends. I learnt from our conversation that his name was Snouck - Snouck van Loosenpark - a descendent of one of the great families ever to have lived round here and who, even today, have an area of Enkhuizen named after them in honour.

He was a clever hamster who'd read much literature and could converse on a great many subjects. However, as Enkhuizen was predominantly a seaport with access to the Ocean in times past (though now it's a port which has been dyked off and is a completely freshwater area), his main centre of interest was in naval history and especially the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, who had had this city as one of the main centres of storage when their ships returned from far away places.

He was awash with stories, too - there didn't seem to be a situation that couldn't be explained by recourse to some great event at sea. And he knew them all. From the most intricate of details when hamsters had been present to the clearest of psychological profiles of those who went to sea when he had had to rely upon human eyewitness accounts.

Being able to read Dutch was a great asset for his studies (especially when I was able to find only one book in English throughout my entire time there) and he employed it for my own benefit as he graciously offered to spend time with me showing me around the sights and sounds of the town.

Hamsters have a great advantage over humans for most of the places are locked - rodents have no difficulty accessing even closed places because the small cracks and gaps in masonry are immediately and easily used. These were things about Enkhuizen that both Lee and Kath got frustrated with but which meant that myself and Snouck could have an untroubled look at some of the great architectural wonders of the place.

I was never fully happy with Enkhuizen's buildings, I must admit. They seemed to have been constructed at weird angles to one another and, even though they hadn't fallen down, their precarious leanings were sufficient to warn me not to get too close.

'It's the ground,' Van Loosenpark assured me, 'it dries out, moves, gets wet, moves again. Most of the humans have to bind their houses together with metal poles to stop them from crumbling apart.'

It was a strange system for, in England, no one in their right mind would buy property that had ties on - here it was expected and natural, though why the new houses didn't have them built in automatically was a mystery. It seemed as if the intelligence of the town planners was seriously deficient.

'Intelligence!' Snouck sighed with an exasperation that surprised me. 'You would wonder at the stories of intelligence!' and he fell silent staring off into space, recounting

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them all in his mind, no doubt.

I could hear Kath and Lee upstairs, directly above me, trying to fathom out the menu (and arguing about what English translations like 'squid-ink pasta' and 'cod cheeks' actually meant - and there are stories about what they ordered which would make you think I was writing fiction) so I knew I had plenty of time.

I encouraged Snouck, 'Tell me a story, then. Tell me about the sea and what we can learn about the great events of history.'

And with a gleam in his eye, he began speaking...

One can surely appreciate the depths to which humans can sink at the times that they call 'war' but it also seems that the intelligence which is normally associated with the commanders of fleets and regiments gets numbed by the desire to be seen to be the victor supreme.

On the one hand, there's a very real need for accurately assessing the strength of the enemy, the strength of one's own forces and whether rushing headlong in to battle is, perhaps, the best option.

Some would even refuse such simple calculations, relying more on the bravado and pride in their own hearts than any skilful logic being employed in the situation that is presenting itself to them. Truly, some battles have been won this way - by the blood and guts of those who refused to give in despite the odds that seemed to overwhelmingly condemn them to defeat.

However, normally, small forces overcome greater powers by tactics and intelligence, by slyly determining the course of the battle that would suit their own cause and sticking to it even when the opposition tries to dictate a much different strategy.

As was said a great many years ago, when a king goes to encounter another in war, he first sits down to take counsel to determine whether his smaller resources are able to overcome the much stronger one that approaches. And '...if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace'.

But, as I've said, such calculations are often lost in the heat of war when intelligence is less of a commodity than the desire to unsheathe the sword and rush headlong into battle. After all, human newspapers are forever exalting the brave and deifying their assumed courage when it would be, perhaps, of far greater use to the genetic pool to tell it the way it was on occasions when a simple act of restraint on the part of the leaders would have prevented unnecessary carnage and destruction.

I say these things only to inform you to be discerning in your own considerations of

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human history because the years are littered with people who like irrational animals threw themselves into situations that would otherwise - in times of peace - have been shunned.

When the Crimean War began in 1854 orders were clearly issued on the British side that battles should be engaged only against those who were seen to be real enemies and not the common people who eked out an existence on land or at sea and who, through no apparent fault of their own, seemed to be caught up in the middle of two opposing forces.

Whatever the weight of such a statement, it seems to have gone unnoticed - or at least unheeded - by Admiral Plumridge, a leader of a small group of warships who set sail for Finnish waters to blockade the inland harbours of the Gulf of Bothnia and to determine the strength of enemy activity near the Aland islands.

Such instructions were clear enough and served to reinforce those which the army and navy were given, to be sent only against the Russian forces which were armed to do battle against their own. However, trying to get through from the Baltic Sea to the inland Gulf past the Aland islands proved impossible due to the thick fog and dangerous floating ice and, as if opting for a plan B which had been tagged on to the end of the naval instructions, the Admiral decided to plunder and generally wreak havoc along the Finnish coast because the nation was supposed to be weakly allied with the Russian enemy.

In the space of five weeks during the May and June immediately after the outbreak of war, the fleet succeeded in destroying so much of the economy of the coastline that the local industries were decimated. Thirty-five per cent of the annual production of tar were destroyed, and the fishermen's boats were seized whenever found and set on fire so that the fishing industry was laid low through the rampaging British fleet, bludgeoning its way up and down the coastline.

Had the original order concerning the blockade been seen to be impossible and the fleet anchored in safe waters awaiting better conditions, no one would have minded. Had Plumridge pressed on against known Russian positions and suffered losses, it would have been unlikely that the Admiralty would have been overly concerned. But to take it upon himself to 'bravely' and 'fearlessly' attack the indefensible was a clear lack of judgment and, as it proved to be, a clear case of a lack of knowledge on the part of those in command.

For, as was pointed out, the decimation of the Finnish tar industry was actually an assault against Britain herself - for the ports and lands here had been invested with British entrepreneurs' money in anticipation of a bountiful return that was to be

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exported to their own shores. Timber, too - some used in the continuance of war - was being burnt and spoiled wherever the industries were found to be prospering.

What Plumridge had assessed as being a direct assault on the Russian ability to wage war against the British was actually undermining the very war that they were eager to participate in.

Not only had the Admiral brought economic hardship to both the Finns and the British but his assaults had the effect of pushing the local population away from friendly relationships with their trading partners and onto the benevolence of the Russian military forces who were petitioned for protection. Indeed, instead of winning enemy controlled lands, the actions were effectively removing sympathetic allies and undermining the ability of the British to go to war.

Bravado, therefore, must be informed.

Had Plumridge pressed on bravely through the Aland islands and into the Gulf of Bothnia, one might have forgiven him losses through the ice floe - but aggression which undermines one's own position is hardly an endearing quality to one's superiors who tried to distance themselves from his actions as soon as news reached them back home.

'But what we can learn,' concluded Snouck, 'is that a human's mind often refuses to give heed to sound reason when it's confronted by a desire to bring about its own ends.'

That was something that I'd also observed.

And other greater hamsters before me, too.

The problem wasn't that humans were one of the most intelligent beings on the planet (second only to caterpillars and hamsters, of course) but that they were unique on the earth in refusing to use it at most, if not all, times. Very often they suppressed logic to go off at some tangent that could only bring them failure.

'Of course,' continued Snouck, 'it's very possible that I'm being unkind to Admiral Plumridge. It's just possible that he knew nothing of the Finnish work, the friendship that existed between both countries or, perhaps, even that he had his head in the sand or was too badly ill to have heard the direct command that no civilians were to be attacked.

'But that certainly couldn't be said about that other incident in Samoa in 1889...'

I shan't keep you long because the facts of the matter are simplicity itself and need no embellishments to explain them. Samoa, you have to understand, was going through some terrible political upheavals at that time and seven foreign warships had anchored in Apia as a matter of national interest to 'be there when they were needed' and to

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hopefully gain some clout in the region.

But the harbour was the size of a matchbox and open to the full power of the Pacific Ocean at its most northern extremity. Had there been a storm at sea which swept south, the boats would be exposed to the full force.

And that's exactly what happened.

But you have to understand that there were warnings - and clear ones at that.

For example, recent history could testify to a typhoon having hit that island just three years before their anchorage. Perhaps they thought that such a disaster couldn't strike twice? But, being the season for just such weather and with the pressure gauge falling rapidly, there were suggestions that all wasn't well.

Even the clouds were darkening and blocking out the clear light of day, increasing their journeying speed across the sky like Concorde in full flight, with the locals trembling at the prospect of what was about to transpire on their small coral island, and the common sailors petitioning their officers madly that common sense would prevail.

Each of the captains were well seasoned enough to know the consequences of just such a weather condition - but each of them was so concerned to stay and be their nation's representative that they simply ignored the obvious and waited for disaster to overtake them - which it did with great speed and ferocity.

Of the seven vessels, only one survived, the Calliope, and that not because the warnings had been heeded. When the typhoon descended on the harbour, she turned her bows into the wind and, at full speed, steamed against them, achieving less than normal walking pace but doing sufficiently well to ride out the storm.

What's all the more frightening is that it was the intelligent - the supreme commanders - who proved to have less common sense than those under them. And for what? Personal honour? National Pride?

As is obvious to every hamster in the universe...

'...Limood, there's no disgrace in turning one's tail (or, in our case, a stump) and fleeing to fight another day.'

I nodded my agreement but the sudden rattle of the plates above told me that Lee and Kath had finished their meal. With a quick 'excuse me', I hastened towards the crack in the boards while Snouck assured me that he'd be in touch.

This was going to be a very informative holiday...

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VOC

'The builders had high, apple-pie-in-the-sky, hopes.
They'd draped all the rooms with fish nets and tie ropes.
It looked very good but the walls were still bare,
So they decorated them with doors which weren't there'

Ode for Anita following the translation of some Dutch Tourist Information

In the sixteenth century, during the formative years of the Dutch East India Company, sailors used to hollow out sheep and go to sea in them. This wasn't an ideal situation - especially for the sheep - but it did mean that, if another vessel was spotted on the horizon, a long blast on the ram's horn could be sounded, warning off the approaching ship from steering too close a course.

The woollen insulation on the outside of the boat also meant that the sailors kept comfortably warm during driving wind and rain - in winter, when the Zuider Zee froze, it also went a long way to raising the temperature of the water so that the ice melted.

Hollowing out a sheep was no easy task and took a workforce of eight or more some nine months to complete depending on the quality of the original materials.

To this end, the Dutch bred the Texel, a large and sturdy beast capable of carrying four crew and with a tail that would act as a large rudder on the inland waters...

Snouck peered over my shoulder as I put pen to paper, eyeing the sentences as they came into existence. I was barely halfway down the page when I felt a tap on my left shoulder and heard him clearing his throat about to speak.

'What is these "sheep" about which you write?' he asked with a puzzled expression evident on his brow as I turned to look at him. It was something that told me all was not well with what I'd written but - at that time - my error wasn't too apparent.

'A sheep?' I responded. 'You don't know what a sheep is?'

'No. I know what a sheep is,' he answered, 'but why are they hollowed out as sea vessels?'

I thought for a moment - this was a difficult question to answer. After all, if even the Dutch didn't understand why they went to sea in them, how could I conceive of an adequate reason?

'It's what I've been told repeatedly since I came here,' I tried to explain. 'There's even a shop on the front that sells equipment for repairing a sheep and...'

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He gestured with his hand for me to be silent before beginning, 'There is some mistake - no? The sheep about which you speak is a scheepjes - a ship, a boat. But a sheep in English is a ship - yes?'

'You mean I've written that entire introduction for nothing?'

I sounded exasperated. I grabbed at the paper and screwed it into a tight ball, flicking it over my shoulder into the bin. I cleared my throat, tapped lightly on my pen and began once more...

In the sixteenth century, during the formative years of the VOC, sailors constructed ocean going vessels from wood, setting sail for foreign lands with strange sounding names...

'Quick!' squealed Snouck. 'Your owners are leaving!'

I snapped shut my writing pad, realising that I'd wasted almost an entire hour trying to get an introduction and followed Snouck's lead as he poked his head back into the rucksack. I joined him in a few moments and not a second too soon for the bedroom door creaked open and the bag was lifted upwards onto a back.

There were mutterings and mumblings that we could scarcely catch but, very quickly, we felt the bag warm as the sunlight hit the cotton. Today, we knew, was the Buitenmuseum on the far side of town, the open air place where buildings and crafts of old Holland had been reconstructed for you to wander round and witness what it must have been like.

It was way out of our range, of course, so we were relying on Lee and Kath to take us there, through the gate and into the relative safety of the streets and walkways which were so narrow that one could easily dart from place to place without being seen.

It was probably one of the highlights of my holiday, to see life as it had been - albeit with a lot of the warts and muck removed, a sort of disinfected version of the past where you could at least see the structures that would otherwise have been destroyed with the advent of the age in which humans now lived.

I was struck by the need to observe warnings and instructions as we went round - but I could understand why - some of these places must be fragile, others degradable while still others like the blacksmith's workshop were positively dangerous if you got too close to the smoking furnace and the yellow-hot metal that was being bent into a useful shape by the skilled craftsman.

I could understand these instructions on the whole, but not always. For there were porcelain sinks and metal utensils that I couldn't see the need to be prevented from

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being touched. Even in some of the places, the dimly lit rooms made sight almost impossible and there seemed to be no real sense for it.

'What's with the lights?' I asked as we entered another barn. 'Have the bulbs blown or what?'

Snouck looked at me surprised at my lack of understanding.

'No,' he answered, 'the light bleaches the dyes in the linens and paintings so it always has to be kept dim in here.'

'Oh, I understand,' I realised. 'I couldn't work it out at all.'

'Commands and warnings aren't always easy to understand,' he explained, 'but there's usually good reason for them.'

He fell silent for a moment before continuing, 'But commands with an explanation given do much more - they help the warned learn reason and be educated for when a similar situation might arise where there's no little plaque...'

There's a certain need for discipline while at sea - and, especially at war, when the commander may be able to look over the battlefield and see the way it must be fought in a much clearer way than those who are caught up with the intricacies of one small skirmish in the midst of the much larger picture.

But unreserved obedience to orders can become a problem when the reason for commands aren't perceived so that, when circumstances change, the original orders become not something which would win a battle but that which would lose it.

The problem has been the same down through time, of course, and it would be nice to think that humans would have learnt by now that blind obedience is never a good thing when situations change. Therefore, every leader should at least give an understanding to those who are under them so that the offensive can be understood.

Such a problem has been encountered at a great many battles but, of the earliest examples, let me choose Drepana in 250BC, one of those naval exchanges that should have served as the example to all who have gone after - all it seems to have taught men and women, though, is that it couldn't possibly happen to them.

The Roman fleet was in a great position. Advancing upon the Carthaginian forces, anchored in the port of Drepana, the tactics were plain - enter the harbour and blockade the enemy fleet's only means of escape. In the ensuing panic, the only possibility was victory - in a vain attempt to remove themselves from the Roman ships, the Carthaginians would break themselves apart trying to manoeuvre away or, at the very least, would be able to be picked off at will by the aggressor.

But strategies are never as easy as they appear, for the Roman admiral had decided

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that, instead of sitting at the head of his warships, he'd wait in the rear to push on those who were slow so that the full fleet would suddenly and fully drop on their enemy within as short a space of time as possible.

Of course, sitting almost a mile behind the tail of his fleet, there was no opportunity to change tactics quickly, to signal to the leading ships that the strategy that had been imposed upon them was now a danger to their own safety. For much of the time, it was impossible to see what was going on.

When the Carthaginians saw the ships massing on the horizon, their admiral did the most sensible thing he could. Although he may not have wanted to fight until he'd been able to ascertain the size and strength of the enemy, he immediately put to sea with everything he had so as not to be hemmed in by the restrictions of the harbour.

The Romans, approaching Drepana, watched as the enemy boats sailed passed them, remembering their orders to enter the harbour. As the last Carthaginian warship left the constrictions of port, the first Roman vessel's prow entered, followed by the rest of the fleet who, looking around at the harbour, began to realise that they'd swapped victory for certain defeat.

Now it was they who were trapped in the one place that they didn't want to be, the Roman admiral learning of the change of fortune and sending urgent word to get out of the harbour as quickly as they could. But, far from that being simple, they now found that they had no room to manoeuvre and the Carthaginians, waiting on the open sea to do battle, turned round and saw that what they'd feared would come upon them was now something that they could inflict upon their enemy.

Without a moment's hesitation, they turned about and blocked off the harbour, picking out the Roman ships at will and destroying all that opposed them. In all, some ninety-three Roman ships were either destroyed or taken captive while victory had been snatched from the jaws of certain defeat.

A lesson that, although those under leadership should follow instruction...

'....there's never any substitute for understanding. Had they realised what they were trying to do, when they saw the enemy leave port, they should have drawn up their lines for a battle at sea.'

I thought for a moment at the principle it taught - there was also the need for a leader to be at the front, I imagined, for had the admiral of the fleet been there, he could very easily have changed his orders in an instant.

This was something I'd seen in a great many situations even around myself - if leaders don't stand up and are at the forefront of bringing about the action they

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require, there's no possibility that those under them can be instructed anew when things go wrong - and go wrong they will.

'There are other principles here,' Snouck added, 'which are exemplified by battles, the types of which, I confess, should have happened once in history before their teaching should have been heeded by all who came after them.'

No, I couldn't see that. What other principles were there? I asked him to explain.

'It's important,' he answered, 'to choose where to fight. Remember the story? Why did the Romans choose to fight in a place that wasn't advantageous? Why choose the restricting turning space of a harbour rather than the open sea once the enemy ships had sailed?'

I thought again. This was true - if a terrain doesn't suit you, why be drawn into a battle that you don't want, in which you can't possibly win?

Snouck continued, 'Great victories have been won by small groups simply because they paid respect to the circumstances which would favour victory. Hubert de Burgh was one such sea captain who did just that...'

Sailing with a small force of thirty masted vessels, Hubert put to sea against what appeared to be an invasion force of some hundred and fifty vessels, making their way across the Channel. From their vantage point, the large fleet began to laugh, announcing proudly that in a short time they'd soon win a substantial victory.

But, instead of immediately engaging the forces, Hubert turned west away from the fleet as if fleeing from any thought of war. Puzzled, the French boats thought little more of it until, suddenly, they perceived their plight.

Although outnumbering their assailants by five to one, they had no ability to attack simply because the wind had turned to a westerly and was buffeting any attempts which they'd make to sail towards them. Turning his small band of ships east, Hubert moved stealthily towards the large convoy and picked off as many as he chose, safe from the warships in the centre of the fleet because they were unable to sail against the wind.

Instead of losing a battle because a numerical disadvantage was the basis upon which it was to be fought, certain victory was assured because the nature of the battle was changed into something which could have seen the enemy fleet have been twenty times as large as they were with the same result.

Circumstances very often determine the victory...

'...and victory isn't always assured by the strength of numbers,' concluded Snouck. He was quite right, of course. How many times had hamsters won the day when it

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was obvious by our experiences that the race wasn't to the swift or to the strong but to the little furry objects who out-witted and overcame. True, sometimes it was just a matter of time and chance but there was never a substitute for sound strategy.

We turned our backs on the museum as the sun began to decline late in the afternoon and availed ourselves of the local heron flight service which brought us back safely to the roof of my accommodation in good time - so good, in fact, that we flew over Lee and Kath as they painfully made their way along the back roads home.

Although Smurf had been waiting for our arrival, she was outfoxed by the size of our transport and fled for her life, away from our approach. Herons had their uses, it had to be said, and it was good to know that they didn't eat rodents.

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MEDEMBLIK

'O Medemblik!
You make me sick!
The best part about you
Is the road that goes out of you'

Piece of doggerel scrawled on the station wall

Breakfasts were always interesting - not the ones which I'd eat, you understand, but the ones which Lee and Kath had downstairs in the dining room and at which I felt it my duty to investigate and report on. After all, there were strange subjects being discussed and they intrigued my intellect as to whether any of them were in their right mind or not.

You may be wondering just how I managed to sit so close to the table that I was able to hear their every word but my friend Caesar the dog would carry me - clinging on to the underside of his fur - to within a couple of yards so that everything that transpired was clearly audible.

I think the main trouble was with the questions that Lee and Kath were both dreaming up as they wandered around the town for the first few days - Lee had bought a small pocket-sized notebook and, whenever something didn't make much sense to him, he'd write the question down to ask Anita the following morning.

Even the acquisition of the book had been a strange event and, having observed it from the side-pocket, it raised questions in my own mind that remained unanswered - Lee's first words when encountering someone who was expected to be foreign (and the place was full of them) was 'Do you speak English?' to which the gentlemen had responded 'No'.

But how did he know 'no' if he didn't speak English? And the fact that he knew what Lee had said tended to make one think that he did, indeed, know English. I think Lee broke his resolve, though, because his pointing at the objects that he wants can become fairly, er, pointed.

As and when the questions were answered or discussed at the table, he would tear the sheet of paper off in the bedroom and throw it into the bin - a great record of what exactly was asked that I retrieved nightly.

And what were some of the questions? Well, here're some of my favourites.

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'Why are the streets paved in herring-bone brick?'

Wherever Lee and Kath went, you see, they failed to find any tarmac but, rather, the town planners had contented themselves to use a material that was more pleasant and attractive than the dark black expanses that proliferate in the cities and on the major roads outside town.

Anita didn't know the answer, of course - it was tantamount to asking you why your local council chooses sodium rather than halogen street lights. Unless you actually work on the Council, the answer isn't an obvious one.

'Why does no one wear football shirts?'

Again, what answer could be given? It appeared, though, that shirts were worn whenever there was a big match on the telly and, as they hadn't been there for one of those, they'd naturally presumed that such fashion considerations weren't made.

I noted also that Lee bought a Soccer shirt midway through the holiday after searching high and low for just such an item. They also asked their host why only one shop sold those types of shirts - it's a bit like asking why a CD shop might stock one musical artist and not another, of course.

Mind you, Lee may have asked that - I wasn't always with him when he frequented these.

'Why is Thursday night busier than Friday night?'

This was a good one - and totally unanswerable, too.

I had to admit that their observations were correct - the day we arrived was swarming with men and women out for a stroll or having a bite at a restaurant in the open air. But why should that be? Or why, as it was observed, was late night closing the following week so un-busy? Or why is the harbour packed with boats one evening and deserted the next?

'Why have you put the number of your house on the side of the scaffolding?'

I couldn't believe this one at all - Lee reckoned that it must be in case it got lost so that they'd know who it belonged to but, as it was pointed out by Kath, if it was pushed to some faraway street, what would have indicated that it didn't belong to the number fifteen in *their* street. Tricky, huh?

I can't now remember the answer they were given but I was beginning to seriously wonder whether they were getting so bored by the place that they were struggling to find questions each day and were grabbing at whatever they could.

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'Why aren't the church bells synchronised to ring at the same time?'

Anita's answer - 'I hadn't noticed. Why don't you ask them?'

The problem was that all the church buildings were locked so it was impossible.

I had to admit, though, he was quite right. At eight o'clock in the evening, you could hear the first chime eight, then the next, then the next. It was as if they'd been programmed that way not to interfere with the others.

'What does the street name Drie Groene Eikels mean?'

Anita's answer - 'Three Green Acornss.'

Lee's response, of course, was that there were no oaks in the street at all so 'why?'. There was no answer to that - how could there be?

How can you say why there are no foxes in 'Fox Covert' or apples in 'Orchard Street'? Perhaps the only answer is that they were there once but the town planners drove them out or destroyed them to make way for the houses.

'What's the flap on the sides of the boats in the harbour for?'

Anita's answer - 'For ssteering and changing direction.'

Lee had thought they were for flapping when they wanted to take to the skies. He was most disappointed. I've told him repeatedly, though, that Chitty Chitty Bang Bang was just a film.

'Why do you have a fish tank full of water and plants but no fish?'

Anita's answer - 'The fish died.'

Lee didn't respond to this one - perhaps he was getting tired and didn't realise that the answer didn't answer the continued presence of the fish tank.

'Why are there flag pole holders on all of the houses?'

Anita's answer - 'To put flagss in.'

It transpired that flags are flown on special occasions such as national holidays, when babies are born and when happy events take place. Remarkably, the street was lined with hundreds of flags on the day of Lee and Kath's departure - can't think why.

'Why do the letter boxes have Ya and Nee stickers on them?'

Anita's answer - 'To tell the postmen whether they want addressed junk mail and/or unaddressed junk mail. That remindss me - I must get ssome.'

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All that was missing was a bright light and Anita would have felt like she was being interrogated. To her credit, though, she came up with so many amazing answers that I half wondered whether she was making some of them up - some she had to research into but, all the while, I had the strange feeling that she was occasionally thinking, 'Now what are they likely to believe?'

That was true of the story which she read out to my owners at the breakfast table - for the life of me, I can't now remember just what it was all about but I do know that the concluding parable of the story was that cats are afraid of water because they don't want to have their livers eaten, to which both Lee and Kath nodded their approval as if it was so glaringly obvious that it went without saying.

Another morning, translating some Dutch tourist information, Anita informed them that the wooden walls of one of the buildings looked so bare that the architects had decided to decorate them with doors which weren't there - something which they didn't quite come to terms with.

The contents of the breakfast table were fascinating, too. Each morning, Kath and Lee would guess the type of egg that would be cooked for them, Kath winning the contest 1-0. Being so many variations of how to cook them, it proved well-nigh impossible to be accurate but, one morning, so taken up with talking, Anita plain forgot to get the hard-boiled eggs out of the pan with the result that she ran out to the front door with them on a tray as they were leaving for Medemblik - both in metal cups and with spoons beside each one.

The fruit changed daily, too - a different piece each morning which Lee tried to put back when Anita and Kath weren't looking so that they'd thought he'd eaten it. They should've realised that no apple core or no orange peel meant no consumption.

And there was fresh bread. On one of the days, Anita seemed to have left a surprise gift in it for them to find - it turned out that the bread machine had gone wrong and hadn't removed it's kneading arm from the dough. I'm not sure that Lee should've buttered it, though. Thankfully, Kath snatched it from his hand before he tried to bite into it.

And, all the while, I kept a close eye on the proceedings from my vantage point on Caesar the dog until the time came for me to scamper along into their rucksacks or to be called away by Snouck when he came to show me round the town.

Today was Medemblik (pronounced May-dem-blick by the locals) - the day of the forgotten hard boiled egg - and I looked forward to relaxing on the boat to get there

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and the little steam railway to get back. What Snouck and I would find at Medemblik, however, I had no idea - he did, of course, having been many times before, but he refused to be questioned on the matter and did nothing to either raise or lower my expectations.

I wasn't sure what to make of it, either - was he saying that it was so good that he wanted me to discover a little treasure hidden in the crown of Freisland? Or was it so poor that he didn't want to be the one who spoilt the day for me by suggesting that everything I saw and heard was negative?

I couldn't make my mind up - and decided not to bother trying to solve the problem.

The highlight of the day for me was the boat trip and the train ride - whatever might be encountered at Medemblik was purely an extra and, even if it did turn out to be poor, we only had four hours there until the last train left for Hoorn.

As we turned out of one of the harbours at Enkhuizen, I was immediately struck by the immensity of the place that, until then, I'd only imagined to be small. We passed marinas that were crammed full of boats, all with sails and rigging, that bobbed up and down on the rolling waves.

Terns followed in the wake of the boat though, from where we were sat, we could only barely see them over our shoulders as we passed out further into deep water and left the town behind. In the distance, lines of boats dotted the water and we gained on them speedily as if they were motionless - until I realised that they were.

The pace of the boat was the pace with which we descended upon them for they sat like anchored vessels, their sails up and fully open but unable to catch the howling wind which was buffeting our position high up at the bow.

The boats in the harbour rely on small motors to propel them into mooring places and out once more until they get clear of the harbour entrance but, when they're safely away from land, they switch man-made propulsion off and set their faces to navigate the inland seas by the natural elements.

But for how long?

You could feel the frustration of those who'd gone before in centuries past who must have occasionally pushed out from the harbours with a fair wind only to find themselves becalmed and motionless, too far to row back to shore to spend one final evening with loved ones but not even able to sail into the Atlantic bound for foreign shores.

Why, days must have passed some times. Were these souls to wait as long? And how long would their tin of baked beans last? And would they provide them with the wind they needed?

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I turned to Snouck and questioned him. 'Why don't they use their engines? They could be stuck out here for days like this!'

He turned his head to survey the scene as far as the eye could see. Towards the west there were a breeding colony of Cormorants that flew over our position in flocks of forty or fifty, headed for their feeding grounds farther out and, to the north, stood propellers, turning with the breeze to generate electricity for the small villages which lay under them.

Although it was a murky day, van Loosenpark counted thirty or forty sailed vessels, each one seemingly adrift and lifeless.

'Sailing is not always about getting somewhere,' he began. 'It's about the excitement, the anticipation of catching the wind, the expectation that, though one's temporarily becalmed, in a few moments the wind will get up and fill the sails with the propulsion that's needed.'

'But what if it doesn't?' I asked. 'How long do you wait?'

'You miss my point,' he objected. 'Being becalmed is just as much a blessing as not being endangered by howling gales and driving winds. Both extremes are problematical - but both can be mastered if one is wise.'

I turned to look round at the three-masters further out as Snouck continued, 'The sailor who's becalmed would pray for wind and the mariner buffeted by gales would pray for calm - and each have their own good reason for what they request.'

And what would I prefer, I wondered, if I'd been one of those gallant seafaring rodents of centuries ago? Risk all for speed or nothing to be motionless? It was all a matter of perspective, I guess.

'This is an old, traditional sea song,' Snouck continued, 'I think it was written about ten years ago...'

And with that he struck up a tune that matched those sea shanties I'd heard in the rodent folk clubs back home.

Lift your anchor and sail away from here on the morning tide,
Turn your boat out to the deep.
Lift your eyes up to the One who sends the wind and wait for Him.
Though it delay, it won't be long,
Soon His Spirit will come.

Feel the breeze, know the wind.
Be prepared to set your sail.

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The Spirit's wind soon will come so be prepared,
He won't delay.

Too long I've rested in the safety of the bay, it's time to make for sea,
Lift the anchor, set the sail.
Though the storm be fierce, the waves sweep over me, yet I will not fear.
He can calm the raging sea,
By His promise, He'll never leave.

My first impressions of Medemblik weren't good - even though it was easy to see Radboud Castle as we approached as it jutted out in seeming protection to the entrances of both inlets. Actually, it looked more like a French Chateau than a fortification but one man's castle is another man's garden shed - isn't that the way the proverb goes? I can't remember.

Running down the ropes that held us fast to the mooring post, we hopped off onto two swans who whisked us away to the safety of the other side of the harbour and onto the dry land in the reed beds just outside the castle walls.

We sat there for what seemed like an hour, waiting for Lee and Kath to arrive and, eventually, their heads poked over the wall. The problem - as I was later to find out - had been that, once they'd grabbed a bite to eat in the town, they headed directly for the castle to their own error and ended up just ten yards away from the wall but separated from it by the deep channel of water that led one harbour out into the IJsselmeer.

What they hadn't realised was that the shortest distance between two points isn't always a straight line drawn between them - unless, of course, you were prepared to swim. And Lee and Kath weren't.

So, retracing their route, they had to walk the full length of the harbour, left and onto the far bank that, although it first appeared to turn away from their destination, swung back on them and deposited them safely at the entrance. As Snouck had told me before, the witness of the eyes can sometimes be deceptive - here was living proof of the truth of his statement.

The restoration of the castle was certainly magnificent - especially when it was realised that it had lay in ruins for a great many years and that the building material would have been robbed out to build local houses and structures. The way it stood, one could easily imagine enemy boats sailing into Medemblik harbour and firing guns at the fortification as the stronghold echoed the salvoes from its walls and wrecked carnage

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on the assailants - but images can be deceptive. Radboud was actually used more often as a prison than as battlements.

I decided not to visit the castle - at Snouck's suggestion - and we made our way into the town so I could compare it with Enkhuizen. And how disappointed I was! Snouck's refusal to tell me anything about the place gave me no preconceived ideas but even I could see that if the two towns were sisters, this was the one who'd been left nothing in their father's will.

The only positive thing I could say of the place was that we only had another three hours before the train left (and that was five hours too much) - some people had to live their entire lives in this place!

As we made our way to the train station I noticed a CD shop - Lee would be pleased and I was sure he'd find it. He can normally sniff these shops out at a distance in excess of three miles. He'd probably even researched the town before arrival and knew where it was located, it's opening and closing times and what special offers were on.

Even the train station was in need of repair - the platform was sunk in places that needed their slabs lifting and relaying, weeds and flowers grew from out of the cracks which pushed the slabs apart and litter lay strewn just about anywhere except in the litter bin. On the top of the dike, an old wooden bench facing out to sea was cracked and in disrepair and even the Tourist Centre, the VVV, had windows which must have been installed decades ago - they hadn't seen a coat of paint since.

Yeuck. I didn't like Medemblik.

The best part about the town for Lee would be the CD shop - for Kath it would probably be any teashop that they could find - for me it was the railway line out of town and my assessment of the place was shared by Snouck.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I asked him. 'You could have saved us both the effort!'

'Why indeed!' he smiled. 'Because then you wouldn't have enjoyed a great ship journey - and you would have missed out on one of the truly great steam lines in Europe.'

And he was right, too. Sometimes being there isn't half as much fun as getting there - or coming back. But you could never tell how it would turn out until it did - that was life, I guess.

'Better to enjoy the journey,' concluded van Loosenpark, 'than to be filled with an expectation that's never fulfilled.'

We sat on the dike and watched the train arrive in plumes of smoke and noise like you'd never heard before. Enthusiasts from a great many nations of the world stood round the British (yes, that's right) steam engine, the Fenchurch, smiling and talking

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however they could to the conductors, ticket inspectors, drivers and caterers - there must have been personnel which numbered almost a dozen.

As the engine rolled back past the stationary carriages on the parallel line to attach itself to the front, we ran quickly under the gaps in the wheels (and in the process, tripped over a video camcorder that had been set up to capture the train rolling over it) to take our position at the head of the 1615 from Medemblik along with ten or more other rodents who'd come to experience the same as us - a taste of the past that was now hidden from view except to the brave few who made the effort to get a little glimpse of a forgotten era.

At level crossings there was little automation - the red flag holder had to jump madly from the side of the engine and run in front of the train (yes, that's how fast we were moving!) and wave his piece of cloth at anything that was in the road while blowing loudly on his whistle. Be it a cow, a pig or human pedestrian, it didn't matter - that was the way the old trains had made their way from one end of the line to the other and it was the way that was still employed for authenticity.

'My grandfather used to work on this line,' a little head popped up beside Snouck and distracted me from watching the action in front. 'He took the fares and looked after the rodents who travelled the line.'

The rodent was small but well-groomed - as most of those I'd met here were. There was a sparkle in his eye that told me he wanted to share something and, with the sun warming us into a relaxed state, I had no objections.

'All aboard,' squeaked Johann.

The rodent forms ran from the cover of the tall grass beside the station and hopped onto the supporting rail under the main body of the engine. There was still a full ten minutes before the scheduled departure time but, as it was imperative that the humans didn't see them, it was always considered much safer if the rodents were sat down with minutes to spare.

Train travel had become extremely safe in that day and age and was a form of getting about that many a hamster used. With hawks flying more frequently at this time of year to feed their young, it was imperative that safety was uppermost in the rodents' minds - to be able to visit family and friends in distant Dutch towns was a boon, covered transport providing the means.

The engine chugged forward while the last of the hamsters settled themselves down into comfortable positions. Johann looked carefully at his gold watch and puzzled at the time. It wasn't normal for humans to start their services early but - whatever - it was

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just possible that his watch was a little slow and needed resetting.

The hamsters squeaked with excitement as they gathered speed while Johann's attention was caught by what he initially thought was a group of humans shouting at the driver's cabin and who'd obviously missed their transport - perhaps they, too, had set their clocks slow. Perhaps, even, it was the guard who'd given the signal at the inappropriate time.

Whatever, they were on their way and Johann scurried round the passengers punching tickets and answering the queries about arrival times and onward connections that any felt it important to be certain about.

At the first level crossing, something very strange took place. Johann was expecting the train to slow to a crawl while a guard jumped off at the side and ran in front of them, waving his red flag and blowing a whistle to stop all the carts and horses that might be hit. Instead, the train steamed on - even accelerating slightly - rattling over the junction and sending a pony and trap into the dike with an enormous splash that the younger hamsters found so amusing that they giggled with delight.

It made Johann aware, however, that there was something seriously amiss.

He ran quickly back to the driver's cabin and poked his head above the floor level - no one. Were his eyes deceiving him? He took another look round and confirmed what he'd just seen - there was no one at the controls but the lever was pushed firmly into the 'drive' position.

Johann heard a local shout something unrepeatable at the train as it rattled over another crossing without any warning. What was more important at that time, though, was how to stop the train - the cabin was separated from the passenger compartments so it was unlikely that any human help would be forthcoming - instead it seemed to be down to him to do what he could to avert a disaster.

But what?

The brake lever needed the full strength of a human to move - that was out of the question. He could try holding on to the side of the train and using his own body as a brake - but that would make little impression.

In an instant, he saw the solution, his eyes shooting upwards to where he saw the rope suspended in mid-air - yes, that was something he *could* do.

He glanced at the levers that led to his destination and calculated the necessary sequence. Throwing himself upwards, he grabbed at the first pole, spinning himself round in a full circle to gain acceleration before releasing himself as fast as a speeding bullet to the lever high up near the roof.

Pulling himself to the top, he sat down for one moment, regaining his composure

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before his final jump at the rope - this was a 'success or failure' move that left little room for manoeuvrability. Below him, the open grill of the furnace billowed heat and smoke into the driver's cabin - if he missed his target, it spelt, at best, a singed butt and, at worst, grilled hamster.

Forgetting his own safety, he secured his rear paws for one final jump and launched into space towards the rope, grabbing the twine with all his strength before his body weight and the speed of impact pulled it to open the whistle.

The sound of escaping steam echoed over the countryside, decreasing in pitch as the train lost power, slowing over the tracks and grinding to a crawl. Johann clung on for dear life and, even though his paws began to grow weary, he hung there like a Christmas decoration until he heard the sound of approaching footsteps and the voice of the driver bidding his colleagues to climb aboard the engine.

'I can't understand it,' he said. 'What made it grind to a halt?'

He looked around for an explanation but none was immediately apparent. Then his eyes caught the rope above him and he exclaimed, 'Yes, here! The rope must've got caught up with one of the levers and it's drained the engine of power!'

Johann rubbed his paws to remove the soreness and returned to the hamster passengers at the front.

'Excuse me,' one waved a paw for him to come over, 'are we making good time for Hoorn?'

'Excellent,' he replied. 'We've had a very speedy journey so far and we're ahead of schedule...'

'...the only time that they ever were, too,' he concluded.

The train rattled over another crossing and approached the destination while Snouck thanked the rodent for his story and added, 'No one is too small or insignificant that they can't do something so fantastic and earth-shattering.'

I made a mental note and realised that that was the whole point of Hamsterdom (which is where, I assume, the city Amsterdam got its name) as we'd come to understand it throughout the centuries. It was because we believed that we could *do* something that we'd taken part in the great events of world history, that we'd been there when the dice were rolling and the knives were out.

I guess that that's why George had written all those histories - it had to be shown that great victories could be achieved by the smallest of animals, by the smallest of any species on the planet.

The train pulled into Hoorn and we hopped the tracks to the mainline as a modern

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intercity pulled in to the platform. Within an hour we were back in Enkhuizen, discussing the day over two glasses of walnut brew in the Van Bleiswijk, waiting for Lee and Kath to arrive.

AMSTERDAM

'Amsterdam is an anagram of Mat Dreams'
An excerpt from the Guest Book

'And where do you go today?' Anita asked as they sat at the breakfast table, uncovering their fruit juice and wondering what variety of egg would be served them. It had been a tough decision but, as they were running out of things to do in Enkhuizen, it was either Lelystad or Amsterdam and they'd opted for the latter mainly because the guide said that the former was a mass of concrete and steel girders.

And that there were a lot of Germans there, too.

Had it mentioned that there were ten second-hand CD stores, it might have been totally different *but* as circumstances fell, it gave me a great opportunity to visit the city and a part that had been recommended to me - while they busied themselves with the more mundane duties of life.

'Amsterdam hass pickpockets,' Anita advised.

Lee wasn't quite sure whether this was the same concept as that which they'd discovered when they first arrived in Holland days ago. On Schipol train station - as well as Amsterdam Sloterdijk - there were frequent announcements that said, in English, 'Please take care of your luggage - there are pickpockets operating on this station'.

It raised some very interesting questions - and ones that I never fully found an answer to. I mean, pickpockets, er, pick pockets - in order for it to be necessary for the luggage to be watched and safeguarded from pickpockets, one would have to assume that the authorities thought that English-speaking tourists normally strapped their suitcases to their bodies or that the entire contents of hand luggage were kept in the side pockets of one's trousers.

But, even more perplexing was what the statement implied. It seemed to be saying 'We know the pickpockets on this station and they are trying to steal your property'.

If that really was the case, then, why didn't they arrest them? Why didn't they just announce over the loudspeaker 'Johann Dijk. We're watching you. You're under arrest' and get shot of the problem once and for all? Or were the authorities taking their own cut from the proceeds? Still, never once were Lee or Kath bothered so the warnings - although heeded - might be more supposed than real. But, for Anita, the threat of theft was very real.

'You have a money belt?' she asked. Kath nodded - she'd brought it with her for just such an occasion. Lee relied more on the concealed pocket method - which worked all

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very well until you forgot where the concealed pocket actually was.

Anita turned to Lee and informed him, 'When we go to Amsterdam, we put our valuables here,' and she motioned with her hand that, for a woman, it was a good place to store money down one's bra.

'No way,' he replied, 'I'm not putting one of Kath's bras on. She's not my size.'

'No, no,' she held her head in her hands, 'You have a money belt?'

'It's okay,' he said 'I have a coat.'

Anita looked out the window at the clear blue sky and the brilliant white sun that was already dispelling any of the coolness of the night far away. If the forecast was right, it was to be the hottest day of the year so far but, just as she was about to raise her objection that Lee would be boiled alive, she heard in the back of her mind that old song whose chorus went 'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun' and she thought better of it.

In a few minutes, Lee and Kath were headed for the station, my nose poking out from the slightly opened velcro sidepocket in the rucksack, sniffing every scent, every breeze and indication as to where I was.

A whole day in Amsterdam!

I just hoped that I'd be able to find the colony of hamsters that I'd been told existed deep in the heart of the city.

It didn't take me long as I'd supposed - even though I was now in the deep recesses of what humans call 'the red light' area where, surprisingly enough, there were none to be seen. Perhaps it was named after the traffic lights, then, because any relevance to anything else seemed to be somewhat of a misrepresentation.

I guess you could call it the 'second-hand CD stall market' area or the 'innumerable McDonalds hamburger joint' area because such labels were instantly seen to be applicable but 'red light' area?

It just didn't fit.

Lee and Kath had decided to go to a disco in town and I'd followed them for a while. However, the dance floor was so crowded with rows and rows of new trousers, jeans and shirts - all individually priced - that they quickly exited into the light of day where the strobe effects weren't apparent and I exited out from the rucksack and into the walkways that run at the side of canals.

As I turned my back on my two owners' backs, my eyes caught the sign which stood over the entrance to the disco - it read in very large letters 'Clothes Shop' which initially surprised me but, having realised that the label 'red light' wasn't applicable, it

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seemed obvious that their dance clubs should be equally misrepresented.

That didn't help me, though. What if I was to go into a cafe or restaurant and find it out to be a police station or Sumo wrestling joint? Or both? Perhaps the signs were in some dialect of Dutch that I was misunderstanding - I certainly hoped so.

I unfolded the small map that I'd been carrying in my pouch and tried to take stock of where I was - a sign way above me read 'Kloveniersburgwal' and I pinpointed my position with unerring accuracy. Just a few short steps and there should be an entrance burrow beside the barge moored securely by the bridge.

Yes, there!

I poked my nose into the recesses of darkness and squeaked, 'Hello? Anyone in there?'

A voice, faint at first, replied, 'Hello?'

Then a louder, 'Hello?' until I smelt the approach of a twitching nose, checking me out and confirming to the others that followed that I wasn't a rat.

Within minutes, I was sat at a table with a glass of sunflower seed oil in one hand and two companions opposite me, discussing the city and the problems that the rodents here experienced. Because most humans went about doing whatever they wanted, they seemed to pay little or no regard to the scurrings of the hamsters throughout the night.

But what of the 'red light' area and the 'clothes shop'? What was with these labels? Had I just stumbled on two isolated titles or was it as prevalent as it seemed to be?

The hamsters lifted their paws in bewilderment.

'The humans are strange,' they informed me, 'but probably not more so than anywhere else. You probably know of humans who are equally as strange but in different ways...'

If only they knew how true that was - Lee and Kath were the best example I knew and the conversation at the breakfast table that morning was a point in question. Even more so the conversation which was to take place upon our return and which I've recorded faithfully below.

'It's all about a state of mind,' they continued. 'You know, what they *want* to believe and not what the reality of a matter is.'

I thought for a moment - yes, that was certainly the case with a lot of humans that I either knew or had known in the recent past. Once they'd set themselves on a method of interpretation it seemed impossible for them to turn from it even when it was obvious that their original belief was flawed.

'You know of the great Admiral Rozhestvensky, I presume?' the other asked.

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I searched my mind for the name but came up with a blank. Was I supposed to know about him? He sounded Russian, not Dutch - but, there again, one of my colleagues-in-fur sitting in front of me was a Russian. I confessed my ignorance and asked for the story - I grabbed a pen and folded my notepad to a fresh page, writing at the top 'Rozes...' crossing it out and starting again 'Rosezt...'.

It was very easy for him to say - but much harder for me to spell. As the story had begun, I quickly scrubbed it out completely and wrote the much easier 'Rozhensky' noting the date of 1905 as given by my friend - or was that meant to be the time? It seemed rude to interrupt now that he'd started and, as I forgot to check it out before I left, I have to presume it was the year in which it happened.

Admiral Rozhensky gazed out over the forty strong Russian Fleet and eyed the horizon with suspicion. Although it was true that no one would have naturally expected the Japanese admiralty to have sent its torpedo boats this far away from the Pacific, the rumours were rife that, even now, something resembling an invasion force was waiting for their entrance into the North Sea and the journey south through the Atlantic.

It was safest, reasoned the Admiral, that no vessel be allowed to get amidst the fleet - after all, if only one boat should get a free sight for firing on one of their warships, it was impossible to imagine the panic which it could cause.

A choppy sea didn't help and the billows of the waves were being frequently reported across the convoy as positive identification of a torpedo attack, the spray being assessed as the propellers breaking surface while optical illusions made the lookouts announce torpedo boats at every turn, alarming the captains and drawing much fire into the watery depths which swallowed everything whole.

Even their military intelligence did little but fuel the suspicions of the sailors. Daily the reports would come from shore of Japanese infiltration, of boats being commissioned in foreign ports ready to sail and equipped with the latest weapons of destruction, of spy engines sent out from undisclosed locations to keep track of every move and turn, presumably to give information as to when one might be separated from the main fleet to be picked off with ease.

But every sighting was a shadow, made more clear by the expectation of officers and crewmen alike who saw anything they expected in just about anything that couldn't have been what they were making it out to be - if you get my drift. A clear case of 'believe it, receive it' if ever there was one - except that what they were receiving from their overworked senses was actually never substantiated with the facts that they were

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proclaiming.

The hamsters had it sorted from day one, of course - they'd seen this type of behaviour before and had already classified it into a state of mind which they called 'horns and haloes', a psychological, trance-like, attitude which is seldom open to sound reason but, rather, will swallow just about anything that's presented so long as it fits in with the preconceptions that have already become foundational.

Even before the great soaps of the latter half of the twentieth century had appeared on television, rodents were producing answers to the well-known traits of men and women who interpret behavioural actions in real life as being 'just what that guy did last night on the telly when he said "no" but really meant "yes"' - and vice-versa, of course.

In the face of such incredible logic, it's a wonder how anyone was ever able to accept anything anyone ever said but, in broad terms, the 'haloed' could say nothing wrong while the 'horned' could always be perceived as meaning something totally different to what was heard - even to have attitudes attributed as being behind the conversation which were undermining their own position. Even if the people were confronted and challenged, their testimony could very seldom be accepted simply because it was *obvious* that nothing was what it appeared to be.

Yes, the hamsters perceived the mindset of the Russian Fleet a long time before it broke out into the North Sea - that just about anything that happened would be interpreted as an attack of their Japanese enemies who, even now, were actually thousands of miles away in the Pacific Ocean and weren't too bothered about whatever was happening on the other side of the world.

And the rodents could see what was about to happen - ever since two Russian trawlers had been sent to them with messages for the Admiral and they'd both been blown out of the water by the fleet, being thought to be cunningly disguised enemy vessels designed to wreak havoc. The only havoc that ensued, however, was that which was self-imposed panic which settled over all the sailors from the time the first shell was fired up to when the last sight of the hulls were seen disappearing beneath the waves.

Even then, there were some who thought that they'd cunningly converted themselves into submersibles and that they were, even then, getting ready to secretly torpedo them.

In such a state of mind, then, it was hardly surprising that a trawler fleet out of Hull should be identified as a Japanese presence, sent into the North Sea to sink the fleet before it had had a chance to leave relatively friendly waters.

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The first cry of 'fishing boats' from the crow's nest was simple enough - it was when the sailor added 'like the ones we sunk' that panic slowly descended on the crew, flagged messages being hoisted from one ship to another announcing enemy vessels, then ships and, finally, battle cruisers - some Russian ships signalling that they'd been hit by torpedoes as the fleet opened fire on the unsuspecting trawler men.

The 'torpedoes', however, turned out to be their own shells, for many of the gunners looked around for the Japanese battle vessels only to see Russian frigates and presumed - as one would - that they were so much similar in shape and form to their own boats that it had to be them.

As the sun rose on the battle scene the following morning, it became apparent that almost a full arsenal had been expelled at their own cruisers, the Aurora and Donskoy, and both had taken some serious damage, with four trawlers having been badly wrecked and another sunk in the crossfire.

The only redeeming feature of the entire escapade was that the gunners were such poor shots (the Oryol was recorded as having fired over five hundred times without so much as one shell finding its target) - had they been sea-hardened veterans one might have expected a better success rate but the entire night had been something similar to a firework display with huge bangs and flashes of light.

And all because the Russian fleet had been expecting to be attacked - indeed, it had been expecting it to such a depth that it didn't matter whether there was evidence or not to substantiate their expectancy because *anything* that took place could be misconstrued to affirm the belief.

It would have been nice to have thought that humans had learnt by their mistakes...

'...but all that history seems to teach us is that if it happened once you can be assured that it will happen again and again - because men don't change.'

He drew to a close so abruptly that my pen hung in mid-air waiting for another word - it wasn't forthcoming so I closed my book and secluded the pencil.

I glanced at the time on the wall and remembered that a journey back north awaited me - although I would have liked to have stayed longer, it was already mid-afternoon and I wanted to rest up for the evening meal at the Van Bleiswijk in town.

I bid both my colleagues farewell and followed their directions to scamper on board a slow private canal boat that deposited me a short walk from the Central Station.

Lee and Kath arrived back at their accommodation in Enkhuizen leg weary and hot - I watched their approach from my vantage point way above the ground, underneath the

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ledge that protected the pedestrians below from the House Martin packages that accelerated earthwards.

I'd returned to Enkhuizen and had freshened up a full hour before them, due to Lee having got 'inexplicably lost' in a second-hand CD market in Nieuwmarkt - I could understand how he might have got lost in the never ending alleyways and streets but actually to have got lost *in* a market made me realise that, perhaps, there was a good reason for his apparent suppression of a good sense of direction.

It might also have something to do with the second suitcase that they needed to buy for the transport of all their acquisitions in Holland. It was probably true that, when they scanned their suitcases with material penetrating lasers, they retrieved over 72 hours of music.

It had been a hectic day just walking around the city and, because they'd had to be on their guard against would-be pickpockets, thieves and assassins (the last, of course, being an over-reaction as can only be expected from my owners - it only went to show that they were equally guilty of misrepresenting the events which had transpired around them) and had had no real rest - even their trip to the McDonalds had been more like a covert military operation than a relaxed chomp through a Big Mac and fries.

Rounding the corner, they were greeted by the smiling face of Anita as she rested for a brief moment in between giving the downstairs window another lick of gloss.

'Ah!' she began. 'Back sso ssoon? Have you had a nicse day?'

Lee was armed with CDs - of course he'd had a nice day. Kath was armed with even more of Lee's CDs that he'd been unable to carry - she'd not had as nice a day as Lee had had.

'Amssterdam,' Anita continued. 'How did you like it?'

Both my owners don't like cities - they might tolerate Sheffield where they live because it's unlike the major cities of the world like London, Amsterdam and Neasden but, given the chance, they'd much rather be in some backwater where very little happens and about the worse thing that takes place is that a cup of tea might get spilt over the carpet.

Therefore, Amsterdam wasn't enjoyable - sure, it was great for them to experience the sights, sounds and even the very strange smells that heaved their way from out of the canals, but 'enjoy' was just too strong a word. 'Tolerated' would have been better - 'survived' would have been more in keeping with their mental attitude.

'It was dreadful,' Kath voiced first.

'What iss "dreadful"?' came the reply.

Obviously a bad choice of words.

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Lee tried. 'It was the pits.'

'Pitss? Pitss? What iss "pitss", please?'

Kath and Lee looked at one another, struggling for another word that might be in their host's vocabulary. If I'd've had a dictionary on me I would've thrown it down that instant but, as fortune would have it, one wasn't close at hand.

'It's not very salubrious,' Kath offered.

A blank expression with hands raised heavenward greeted her alternative. I could've told them that but, nevertheless, they weren't going to give up trying.

'Do you know what an enema is?' Lee asked.

I slapped a paw across my eyes as if hit by a poop from above - as my owners had been four times that holiday already (the score was 2-2 at that time and they had already decided that the next poop won the competition - though why they'd turned it into a contest, I have no idea. It would explain why they insisted on following after feeding swifts and martins for the remainder of the holiday, though).

'What iss "enema"?'

'Well,' Lee began, 'it's when...'

'How about a suppository?' Kath interrupted.

'It's not a suppository,' Lee objected. 'That's not what an enema is.'

'It could be,' Kath rejoined, 'it's one type of enema.'

Lee turned to Anita and assured her, 'No, it's not a suppository,' though why she would care whether it was an enema or a suppository I couldn't imagine. And what were they trying to say, anyway? That Amsterdam was an enema? That the city was a suppository?

It just didn't make sense - perhaps to them it did but, if I was honest, even if their host had understood what the words meant, it would've have been difficult to have made the connection. An explanation was forthcoming, though - not to be misunderstood, Lee was actually going to try and explain it.

'You know when you can't go?' he began. 'You know - when it's hard and nothing will budge an inch?'

I could see that Anita didn't know at all - her face was agog with pictures which must have been forming in her own mind that were trying to grasp what on earth the words related to. She stared at the paintbrush as if looking for inspiration, then inside the paint can. She read the instructions on the side of the tin just in case the answer was there - nope, nothing.

'So you get this plastic tube with a bottle of water attached to the other end...' Lee continued.

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'It was bad, noisy, crowded and too busy,' Kath interjected, dispelling the need for a description and the embarrassment that it would cause.

'Ah yess,' Anita's face glowed with understanding. 'I understand.'

Kath and Lee turned to go but they were stopped by the question, 'Pleasee?'

They turned once more to face Anita as she asked, 'What iss "enema"?''

DROMMEDARIS

'When passenger of foot heave in sight, tootle the horn.
Trumpet him melodiously at first,
But, if he still obstacles your passage,
then tootle him with vigour.'

From the brochure of a Tokyo car rental firm

'Why is the Drommedaris named after a camel?' I asked Snouck. 'It doesn't resemble one at all.'

We had been travelling in Lee and Kath's rucksacks from the accommodation that morning and were now looking out from them across from where they were standing on a small grassy area between the Buitenhaven and Oude haven.

They'd decided to take a short break here and have something to drink in the warming morning sun and we'd taken the opportunity to poke our noses out of the bags to grab some fresh air. I had no idea what Kath was putting in those sandwiches but they certainly smelt as if they were dead - indeed, that they'd gone a long way passed that.

'A camel?' Snouck chuckled. 'Yes, I can certainly see why the name causes you problems. After all, it certainly doesn't look like a camel, does it?'

What was so funny? I couldn't understand the problem. Every English person knew that the word 'dromedary' was a label put on a camel so what was Snouck's problem?

'You know what has always puzzled me...' he began.

'Why is he changing the subject?' I thought.

'...is why your King Arthur decided to name his court of knights "Camelot" after a dromedary. Were there camels in England in that age? Or do you think he saw them in a zoo overseas? Mmm?'

I perceived that he was taking the mickey - call it a hunch (especially as we were talking about camels) but there was something that pointed to the possibility that Snouck wasn't taking me seriously.

'You know well that Camelot has nothing to do with camels,' I returned. 'Just because it has the same arrangement of letters at the beginning of the word it doesn't prove a connection.'

Van Loosenpark looked at me knowingly and I got his drift - obviously, just because this building began with the same letters, it didn't mean that it was modelled on the camel. Just as a catalyst isn't made from cats.

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'Most people have preconceptions that colour their own interpretations of a matter,' he continued. 'On rare occasions, they can be fatal...'

Sometimes, you forget that what's seen around you hasn't always been in existence.

Kids today might never know that music was once distributed on vinyl discs, twelve inches in diameter or that limitations on the amount of information available to be recorded onto them meant that, generally, they were rarely more than forty-five minutes in length. Even more, that the first recordings contained much less material and, even as recently as a hundred and fifty years ago, sound recording was all but impossible.

Of course, Lee and Kath know about these methods of audio storage - not because they're well read on these matters but because, when developments were taking place, they were there at the cutting edge.

And so, in the advancements of military fighting machines, one often forgets that metal ships are less than two hundred years old and submarines barely one hundred and that, when one superpower finally developed the latter, it caused so much panic amongst the others with whom they were at war that it threatened to change the course of world history as we know it today.

The German U-boat was the most pivotal war machine of the opening exchanges of World War One and the western allies had little or no reply to them. Hastily, developments took place that were, to say the least, revolutionary.

I'm not referring to the well-known 'K' series of submersibles which proved to be one of the worst disasters in British naval development, each one being assigned a letter and number which confused many into questioning why K2 was named after a Himalayan mountain, K9 after a successful attempt at breeding a fleet of aquatic spy dogs and why K8 seemed to suggest that women had been accepted into the role of sailors.

No, about these matters, much has already been written.

What concerns me more is those very first attempts at submarine development which, until today, have never yet been reported on but about which hamsters the world over are very knowledgeable - that is, the British navy's first attempt at developing some sort of underwater strike force which was the forerunner of the K-ships - the J-fleet.

The profits were fathomless, of course, if underwater transport could be perfected - to secretly gain access to the foreign ports of the world and to take out some of the most dangerous battleships of their time, making the way for total sea supremacy to launch attacks at will on whichever nation came against them.

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The J-class began life as limpet mines, with the insides hollowed out and long, wooden poles inserted into the shells that projected towards the surface for air and supplies. It was a simple procedure to supply the single sailor with food by arranging rendezvous points at sea where tea and soup could be poured down the funnel to be collected into storage vessels for the daily supplies.

But initial tests proved disastrous for many a supply vessel didn't know when to stop pouring liquid down the hole, causing the submersibles to fill up and sink and losing many test pilots in what could only be described as a disaster. The Admiralty, however, saw progress in everything that transpired and released an official report to the heads of Government which spoke of 'the success of the concept within certain pre-agreed parameters...we are confident that within a very short time, J-class vessels will take their place alongside the more recognised battleships of Her Majesty's Navy'.

Within three weeks, a simple rubber bung was developed by naval scientists that enabled the pilot to stop the delivery of liquid when the submersible reached the critical point. However, this also stopped all air coming into the craft and suffocation resulted in a great many of the trials until a second tube, or 'aqualink' as it was then called, was inserted alongside. Reporting back to Parliament, the top naval brass wrote that 'despite some initial set backs, we have mastered the need for a replenished air and food supply' and, moreover, that 'we would anticipate delivering the vessels to Her Majesty's fleet within the next year'.

However, no account had been made that the supply vessels were unable to distinguish between the food and air hole with the unfortunate result that half the navigators died when they were unable to use the standard issue bung to block the misused air-vent - the design and shape was unusable on the alternative tube and it took another three months of development to, firstly, supply alternative bungs in case of emergency (which were placed in the cabin behind breakable glass in case of just such a situation) and to clearly colour code the pipes so that those above the waves would be unlikely to make the same mistake.

However, in the winter tests, the waters became so choppy that sailors were forced to bung both pipes to prevent water being taken on board and sinking, running out of air in the space of only twelve hours and sinking to the bottom, never to rise again. The Admiralty called it 'an unprecedented success...giant strides are being taken forward and we feel that the next few months should see us standing on the brink of a breakthrough in submarine warfare'.

The breakthrough never came, of course, and, what was worse, it was pointed out that it was all very well talking about perfecting the submersibles but, to date, no one

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had thought about what weapons would be needed should it ever be achieved.

At the torpedo testing ranges, information was leaked directly to the Government organisations by the developers in the hope that the seamen who were to be the next group of victims - er, I mean pilots - in the J-class mark 7 might be saved.

So negative was the report which spoke of premature explosions, waterlogging of the mechanical propulsion system and defective steering mechanisms which caused the warhead to return in a full circle to destroy its launcher, that an official statement was released which stated that 'to talk negatively about failures when there's a significant progress in what's already been achieved is to undermine those who will be using the weapons and to cause them to become depressed. It's much better to rest on the positives and build on what's already been achieved'.

So committed were the authorities to the success of the project that they seemed to turn a blind eye to anything which undermined their objectives and which raised serious confirmations that the submersible would never take off - actually, it had a better chance of taking off than being used at sea.

How the dreadful disasters were only ever viewed in the positive so that no one would get down-hearted was a clear proof that failure couldn't be seen as an option. What it actually did, though, was to make those involved believe that what they had was much better than it actually was and a false self-confidence kept justifying each and every disaster as a learning curve.

In the end, the project was abandoned three months into the war with the official conclusion that 'we have learnt much from the development of a submersible prototype and believe that the lessons learnt will be a valuable asset as we strive to develop the new K-class of submarines'.

Actually, all that was learnt was that the J-boats were ill-conceived and badly planned and that, when something is wished for hard enough, no amount of evidence will ever alert the mind to an alternative...

'...something which, time and time again, has been the conclusion when history has been considered,' Snouck concluded.

He added, 'The K-class that I mentioned at the end suffered from the same misconceptions as those submersibles that had gone before and, eventually, an entirely different strategy had to be employed to deal with the U-boats of the war.'

In the distance, Lee was admiring the bronze statues of Paulus Potter, the renowned artist, and a goat situated some five yards from where the artist seemed to be committing the scene to paper. He tutted with disbelief.

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'You know,' he shouted to Kath, 'we came here yesterday and the picture was only half-finished.'

He paused and stared back at the palette where the work was being created. 'Honestly, he's been here all night and he's not added one detail - the guy's a slacker!'

As they wandered back to the ruck-sacks, we both disappeared once more into the cotton fabric and waited to be carried elsewhere. Travelling by human was the best form of transport known to rodents, it had to be said - and it helped you see as much of the town as was possible in the safety of human protection.

That evening at the van Bleiswijk, Lee and Kath were having difficulty with the English menu - it wasn't that the spelling was poor or that it made no grammatical sense, it was just that, well, the literal translation of another language is not always a true representation of what is trying to be conveyed.

But that was where they ended - there was still some way to go to reach that stage of understanding.

I could sympathise with them, too - the menu clearly said a casserole. From where I was perched - in one of the artworks that sat on the window - the bold font was clear enough. It made no further descriptions in its title but did give the detail that it was made from tuna - something that made it fairly unique, too.

Lee finished his beer and motioned to the waitress to receive the order. He pointed with his finger at the list of dishes and mouthed, 'Medallions of beef,' a course that was almost the same in both languages, 'and the casserole.'

The waitress mouthed the words back, 'Cass-sir-role,' but looked puzzled. She took both menus and proceeded to the kitchen with all haste, still wondering if what she'd written down would be understood by the chef.

Or anyone...

Twenty minutes later, a smaller waitress approached the table asking 'Medallions?' and placing the plate in front of Lee after he'd gestured, began to walk away after simply setting the other plate down in front of Kath as both of them mouthed in unison:

'That's not a casserole - that's ravioli!'

And indeed it was.

Questions were going to be asked in the kitchen. Perhaps even in Parliament.

In fact, it had been a misunderstanding. The waitress, totally oblivious to what a casserole was, had asked the owner (the owner, it has to be assumed, had translated the menu) and, because she'd known that the item was at the lower end of the list, he'd assured her that it was the ravioli, the item below it.

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Perhaps it would have been better to ask Lee and Kath but, as the owner was so sure, ravioli was what they'd been cooked. But it was no problem - the food was removed and another couple of dishes were freshly prepared.

This time, Kath got exactly what she asked for - well, almost.

It was quite true that what was set before her was made of tuna - you could see it poking its head (not literally) through the cracks in the pasta - but a casserole is like a stew and could never be mistaken for tagliatelle.

To the translator of the menu, 'tagliatelle' had become 'casserole' - nevertheless, Kath seemed to eat it with a great deal of relish though they did point out the need for clarification the next time they typed up the food list.

The following evening, though, Lee found another 'casserole' on the menu - a South African dish of meat with Cajun spices, onions and potatoes. Well, that certainly sounded like a casserole and, as I overheard him read it out, I didn't doubt the label.

However, Lee - being the trouble maker he is - was convinced that what was being described *wasn't* a casserole so he ordered it for a laugh. Sure enough, when the food came it was a glorified Cottage Pie - had it been made of lamb it would have been a Shepherd's Pie - and any resemblance to a casserole was purely coincidental.

That's the great thing about striving to communicate - you're always likely to make a complete hash of it and provide humour for most of those who'll be listening to you or reading your composition. For example - and this sign is not being newly reported by myself - in a Paris hotel, English guests were told to 'leave your values at the front desk' where you can just imagine a willing manager looking up the spelling of a word and then forgetting to check out that what he'd chosen held the right meaning. From offering protection to his clientele, it becomes a label instructing them to act immorally.

And a friend of Lee's who'd come back from some remote place in Yugoslavia had read out the English guide which described the sea as 'arriving' at the beach where what they were trying to say was that there was no gap between the sand and the sea - though why one would have supposed that there was some kind of vacuum between the two, I can't imagine.

Still, so long as both language users are game for a laugh, it can be an object of a great deal of mirth.

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

It all started well as boat outings go, the weather was sunny and fine,
The ducks were out paddling their ducklings in tow and the locals were fishing with line.

The sunlight was glistening off ripples of green, the small birds were flitting the trees,
Clouds of mosquitoes were dancing in shade and the flowers were feeding the bees.

The first that they knew that something was wrong was Ed when he rose from his seat.

The motor cut out, the boat slowed to a crawl as the fisherman jumped to his feet.
A series of words were then uttered in Dutch, would've made Kath go red had she heard.

The boat quickly stopped and the four trav'lers watched as their vessel was passed by a bird.

Armed with a spanner and handful of string, Ed rattled the engine apart,
And soon he was up to his elbows in grease, some gasoline, oil and more dirt.
From the midst of the boat then arose bearded Lee who said, 'To the shore I will punt,'
And grabbing the pole at the side of the boat, he began his assured cunning stunt.

The first prod with the pole jammed the end in the reeds and though he tugged hard it held firm.

Eventually, though, he freed it in time or he may have been stuck there long term.
But, in freeing the pole and pulling it out, the boat was now headed to land,
Which was helped by the steering of 'Nita astern who'd taken the rudder to hand.

Moored by the shore was a colourful boat that the prow of the vessel was going,
And Kath cried, 'Be careful! You'll ram that amidships!' cos about it she's really all-knowing.

But ram it they did with a crack and a bump but Lee pushed them away fairly swift,
Cos the owner might come out and into the light - they were sure that he'd be pretty miffed.

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With a whirr and a click, Ed started the boat and they all breathed a sigh of relief. They all knew the motor'd eventually start and they'd not given up their belief. And, as luck would fall for Anita and Ed, they weren't cast adrift for forever, But next time they think to take out both their guests, they might use the excuse of the weather.

I enjoy watching humans flounder about in elements to which they're not accustomed. While it may not go very far to assure me of my own aptitude in the same medium, it does make me feel adequate when my expertise isn't tested and the incompetency of others is revealed - not that I would belittle the adequacy of either Ed or Anita in the craft which had now stopped in the middle of the canal but Lee and Kath - well, I'm sure you know what I mean.

Had they stopped to take a look at the two ducks which sailed past them that morning when the engine died and they started to punt for home (something which, if my calculations are correct, would have taken them close on three and a half days - even without the need to sleep), they would have seen that, far from there being grebe-let heads projecting upwards from the parents back, there were two forms which had fur instead of feathers and which looked remarkably like rodents.

Snouck had organised this trip for me because he knew those ducks who were best approached in the town - those who'd not raised any of their own that year but who'd given themselves over to a year of rest to store up enough resources for the following one, relying on the goodwill of the tourists who they took for rides as often as they required.

What I hadn't realised was that Lee and Kath would be out on the canals at the same time - if that piece of information had been available, you can be assured that I would have stayed well away from the possibility of being stumbled upon by them.

As it was, they hardly noticed us race past them like some speedboat, destined for Buitenhaven, until we'd disappeared into the distance and round a bend in the waterway at which they continued straight on.

It had been a most enjoyable day out, too, and, as our duck friends flew away to wherever home was for them, we sat underneath the small jetty that was attached to all the sides of the harbour and looked out at the approach of ships and boats of all shapes and sizes which were departing and returning.

I couldn't help but enjoy the picture set before me - colours lined the masts that shimmered in the light while the mass of rope carved strange geometrical patterns with the sky. Even though there was all the evidence of busy-ness, there was a certain rest

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that pervaded the scene.

Out past the entrance to the harbour a three-master (I have no idea what the technical name is even though they were defined and named at the side of one of the jetties) glided effortlessly past and I remarked how pleasant it looked with the varnished masts, polished hull and cream sails which flapped in the eddying wind.

'Don't they look, er, nice,' I squeaked.

'Nice for what?' Snouck replied.

His question took me by surprise but it was relevant none the less. Nice for what? Well, what it was designed for, I guess. But what was it designed for? What had the master planner sat down at the drawing board to create when he first had the thought in his mind of making such a vessel? For pleasure cruising?

Probably not. Especially as this ship seemed a century old and that sort of thing just didn't happen in those days - well, not with a vessel this big.

'What do you think it was made for?' I asked. 'You know these ships, not me.'

He thought for a moment and then answered me enigmatically, 'It's obviously not "nice" for those uses to which it's now being put - although, at one time, it's "nicety" was perfect.'

I was sure he was trying to confuse me so I repeated my first statement, adding, 'But doesn't it look nice? Clean, polished, sparkling? Which sailor wouldn't like to go to sea in her?'

Snouck turned towards me and gave me his full attention.

'Niceness,' he explained, 'does not win wars.'

I have no objections to boats looking 'nice' - I think it gives them a certain awesome presence that attracts the onlooker to the grace of the boat. A ship watcher will be more struck by the perfection of the carefully varnished hull and mast than he will be with a fibreglass frame that's tarnished, bearing all the hallmarks of remedial work that has yet to be finished.

No, a carefully maintained vessel will tell you a great deal about its owner - but it isn't the be-all-and-end-all of nautical assessment and, for purely practical reasons, I'd rather have a frigate that could hit the target from a couple of hundred yards nine times out of ten than a battleship which, no matter at what distance it was sailing, couldn't hit land.

So, care is purely relative. After all, ask yourself which you'd prefer to be on - one which hardly ever missed and which was avoided by everyone but the most daring, or one which everyone knew could be easily sunk because it was incapable of inflicting much

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damage?

So it's important to assess by true comparisons - just because the boat which you now see before you in the harbour glistens in the sunlight, it doesn't mean that it's the boat which you should select for a nautical journey in whatever circumstances that might present itself to you.

And that's where the British navy went very seriously wrong during a great deal of the nineteenth century. After all, everyone knew that they were the best fighting force at sea and were seldom required to show their naval strength beyond simply showing up and waving their guns at people.

With countries and continents kow-towing to whatever British representative would turn up, it was remarkable that the accuracy of the gun emplacements began to become second - or even worse - to the regimentality of the boat, the careful state of its painting and the polishing and gilding of every part of its metal frame.

To mention just one example of the sorry state of the fleet by the close of the century, in 1882 eight battleships sailed to attack the forts of Alexandria in Egypt and succeeded in hitting their target just ten times for a total discharge of some three thousand shells.

What was even more surprising was that the authorities were delighted with the result.

Inspections normally commented on those superfluous items which, if it had been blurb to promote a cruise liner, it might have been entirely adequate - but was it really important to encourage the officers because the sailors were clean and well-dressed, that the ship, likewise, was spotless both inside and out and that, when viewed as a whole, it was a place which made one feel good?

For fear of destroying the ambience of the ship, guns were hesitantly fired - after all, the smoke could darken the near perfect paintwork and this, as everyone knew, would mean that extra expenditure would have to be laid out to bring it back to its near pristine condition.

It was time for a realist to enter the fray but, incredibly enough, even though Percy Scott demonstrated clearly the incompetency of the gunmen and crew in their one major commission - namely to go to sea and to blast the hell out of the enemy - there was staunch opposition from all sides of the Admiralty who had sold themselves over to be perfect in pomp and ceremony rather than to be lethal in war.

For a great many years, gunsights were still inaccurate and target practice was quick to show that, if war ever broke out, the fleet would have to be capable of doing much more than simply turning up to win any major battle.

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But consider carefully the progression here and discover the way such practices come into being. With the British in near total and undisputed supremacy at sea, what need had they for guns anymore? Why did they need to hit the target a hundred per cent of the time when their presence was enough to subjugate their enemies? What need, even, did they have for knowing how to load and fire the guns when, on a great many occasions, they only had to swivel the barrels towards land to achieve the surrender they required?

And so the Navy turned to the more mundane matters of nautical pastimes - such as dress codes and ceremony, shiny metal fittings and tidied decks where not a spot of dust or dirt were found.

In fact, they became more like floating hotels than men-o-war...

'...but the lessons here are ones that can be applied to just about anyone, anywhere - for there are many who start out to win great battles and wage war against many an enemy, finding that they achieve the purpose for which they've set out.'

Snouck paused briefly and took a deep breath before proceeding.

'But, when you lose the reason for which you were made, you get side-tracked into superfluous details which are of no consequence to your original objectives. You may have the appearance of being victorious but, come a new battle, you would be proven to be lacking.'

He was quite correct, of course - but the boats in the harbour still looked 'nice'. They might not serve any useful purpose now that many of them had been converted from their original use but there was still something about them that made the observer be pleased that he was able to have seen them even once.

'Aren't ships ever built for one purpose and then, as they're used, discovered to be better employed in some other capacity?' I asked. 'I mean, it seems impossible to be always sure just how a boat will turn out even with the most meticulous of planning.'

Snouck nodded. 'But they're normally disasters which would have been better never to have been built. Like the roundships of the mid-nineteenth century. They were so successful as boats that they ended up as tourist attractions.'

'A round boat?' I began smiling. 'Surely you're not serious?'

'No, I am - truly. There was an Admiral by the name of Popov who decided that a circular ship would be what the navy of his time desperately needed and he set about building two - as if one wasn't enough...'

It looked good, I don't doubt.

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It had guns that were more than adequate for it's own time, too.

And it cut through all the red tape of its day by being the first of its kind - the boat they said would never be built was - and two of them, no less.

Everything had gone perfectly and on this their confidence rested. What they hadn't perceived, however, was that a ship behaves much differently in water than it does in dry dock. It was a tactical blunder, it has to be said, but one that's been too often repeated throughout naval history.

So, they decided to put them through trials in an inland river known as the Dnieper. All went well for at least the first few minutes until, unexpectedly, the current caught both boats - one stream of water eddying upstream while the other pushed her down.

With no cutting edge of the prow as on normal boats, the vessels simply span out of control and were driven far out into the ocean while the sailors, unable to regain the stability of the ships, clung for their lives to the rails, throwing up both overboard and over anything that met the never ending stream.

Totally useless for the purpose for which they'd been built, they served for a while as floating gun emplacements (which, if a gun had been fired at one side of the boat, would have had the effect of causing it to turn just like it had on its maiden voyage) before being converted into tourist attractions...

'...a totally useless construction,' Snouck concluded.

I began laughing - he was pulling my leg, I was sure. Wasn't he? A circular boat? Who would ever have imagined?!

But, there again, there were none stranger than humans - perhaps it really was true.

As if seeing the doubts surface in my own mind, van Loosenpark assured me, 'I lie not, my friend. Look it up in the history books and be assured of the warning that history gives us - not everything which is conceived of as being useful will always be put to the purpose for which it was originally intended.'

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GUEST BOOK

'Enkhuizen is an anagram of Zen Ink Hue'
an excerpt from the Guest Book

I fear for Lee and Kath - just like those intrepid rodent travellers who've gone before me and who, no doubt, will come after me a long time after I'm gone. I wonder what sort of people the English are taken to be by those who meet this strange couple who don't seem to behave like most other British nationals abroad.

For example, they don't like tourist events and sites (something really strange when you realise they are one just by being there), they always try to understand the history of the places they visit (even when the locals are only concerned with where the next meal is coming from and what's on the telly in the next half an hour) and, more significantly, they can act strange - well, just plain weird - where most normal tourists would fear to tread.

Take the Guest Book, for example.

People enjoy signing them normally - unless they're exceptionally shy or have had such a terrible experience that they don't want to be hypocritical and state how great a time they had. Just a few words is all that's really necessary - something like 'Thanks for the place to stay and the wonderful breakfasts - we will surely stay here again if we ever visit the town in the future'.

Nice and short. Simple. The people who write such a thing will rarely ever come back because that's just the way things are *but* that doesn't matter. The words are clear enough that, for the price that was paid, it lived up to everything that one had expected.

But that's where Lee and Kath rebel at the thought - a Guest Book entry isn't a few pleasant words written in a scribble just before one goes home the same morning. Rather, they turn it into a work of art that runs to countless pages and which needs many hours of thought and toil being put into it.

Sitting in the corner of the room listening to the two of them talk was simply illuminating - plans were drawn up about structure, form and - believe it or not - where the best stickers could be got in town. Did the other person think the fourth poem was too long? What about the crossword? And the anagrams - was there an alternative? Was the text too sarcastic or did it hover between being complimentary and honest?

These were all questions that were discussed and carefully planned while they stayed there. On the morning of their departure, they left the book on one of the

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chairs with a note scrawled in biro on the top which read 'Anita. You're a very forgiving person...aren't you?' something which made me cringe just thinking about what the finished article might be.

Although I had been straining my eyes to see what they were doing throughout their stay, I made haste to scamper down to where it lay so as to read for myself just how damaging it might be.

I pushed the cover open and skimmed through to the start of their epic. The first poem (of three major works and two pieces of doggerel) stared me directly in the face - the 'Poem for those who come after us' - and was the first entry in an eight page Guest Book epic which, since their departure, has gained entry in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest in world history.

I took a pencil out of my pouch and began scribbling down the words.

Now that you're here and you've unpacked your clothes,
Take a look, if you will, at the Dresser.
Cos if you can see a round shape like cheese,
You'd best eat it quick 'fore it festers.

(Limood's note - apparently, Lee and Kath thought that a round object placed there before they arrived was a plastic decoration until it began smelling vile on the second day.)

The staircase is steep, almost vertically up,
And is modelled on the north face of Ev'rest.
There's a small camping shop in the centre of town
Where you'll need to buy rope to be safest.

(Limood's note - if you'd've run short of breath halfway up, you could always have bivouacked on the stair face until help could reach you. As Ed was one of Enkhuizen's Life Boat crew, it was always reassuring to know that survival techniques could be quickly applied.)

When you go for a bath, you must give attention
To the letters and what they are for,
Cos the K is for cold while the W's hot,
And the plughole's in the midst of the floor.

(Limood's note - I have no idea why the taps aren't red and blue like in the UK, but a plughole in the middle of the floor does save on having to buy a shower

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curtain. It also gives a hamster an alternative hiding hole.)

As you walk round the town be sure to write down
All your queries - it's just a suggestion.
Then at breakfast make sure you ask 'Nita the score,
She's got answers for ev'ry known question.
(Limood's note - and the answers to the questions she doesn't know she'll make
up. But they're so plausible that you could never tell the difference between
fact and fiction.)

The dog is called Caesar, is attracted to paint
And, until it gets dry, can't be groomed.
Smurf is the cat, her eyes like a painting
Will follow you right round the room.
(Limood's note - and, if you're a hamster like me, it's not only the eyes that will
follow you. It was a good job that Caesar the dog was there to protect me,
coming to my aid on more than one occasion.)

So, weary trav'ler, enjoy Enkhuizen well,
And let yourself rest while you stay.
We had a great time and saw lots of the town
When we stayed for ten days back in May.
(Limood's note - they actually stayed for eleven days but, apparently, that
didn't scan properly so they altered it.)

But, even on this first page, that wasn't all there was - I could count at least nine
stickers of Looney Tunes characters (quite an apt source, I noted) with comments under
them and anagrams elsewhere. Some text was even written upside down so as not to get
in the way of the others.

At least on page two there was a real 'thank you' addressed to Anita though, as I
started to read it, I realised that it wasn't as straightforward as most Guest Book
entries go - here there were comments about 101 uses of eggs (which got a major
treatment on page four - I'll deal with this in a moment) and cats being frightened of
having their livers eaten when they go in to water. Indeed, there seemed to be almost no
end to how side-tracked Lee's mind had actually got.

I turned over onto page three and discovered the second major poem - underneath

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thanks to Ed, Anita's husband. This one, however, was in a different style and handwriting, being completed by Kath. Again, I turned a page over in my notebook and began to scribble down the rhyme:

The weather was great.
And the food that we ate
Satisfied all of our cravings.
Anita was good,
In the kitchen she stood,
Answering all of our ravings.

The award which you've won,
For the service you've done.
Is invisible, we couldn't find one.
But it's yours be aware,
For the good things you share,
And the info you give on Enkhuizen.

I felt a cold shiver run the length of my spine at the bad rhyme - I guess that it was possible that they might be misconstrued as being similar but what made me concerned was that someone like Anita might have thought that 'one' should actually be pronounced like the end of 'Enkhuizen'. That could lead to some pretty interesting conversations should they ever come over to the UK (and, just as an aside, the bottom of page two already contained an advert for staying at Lee and Kath's place - though I'm sure a thousand and one reasons for *not* staying there are already being compiled).

And then there was page four.

Sheesh! Page four!

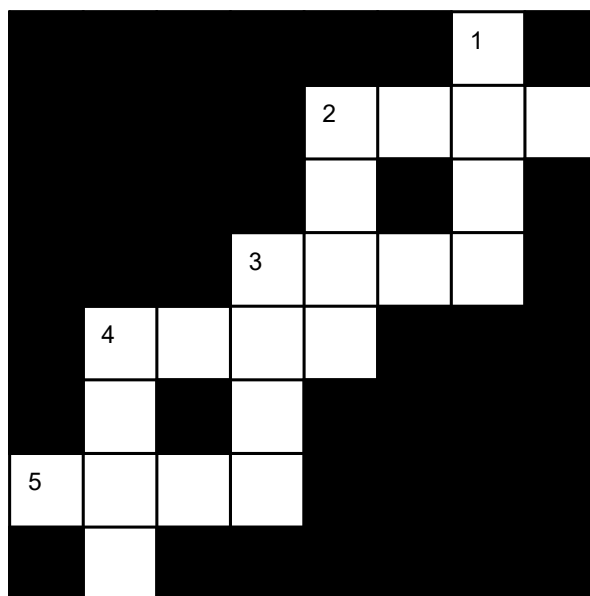
At the bottom of page three, the statement 'There now follows an eggstremely peculiar page' was enough to make you realise that, for health reasons alone, it might best be skipped. However, for the sake of science, I forced my eyes across onto the next leaf and was greeted immediately with the 'Breakfast Crossword'.

Before the reader feasts their eyes on what follows, I should point out that eggs had become somewhat a point of humour at the breakfast table, Anita finding unique ways to cook one egg for both Lee and Kath each morning that was different from the day's previous. It must've seemed only natural, then, to devote an entire page to eggs (natural to Lee and Kath, that is - I still don't fully understand it and probably never

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will).

The grid was set out as follows with the clues alongside.



Across

2. Whisked with milk, salt and pepper, this common food dish has a fowl main ingredient (4)
3. Boiled in water, they're described as 'poached' (4)
4. Simmered in a little fat, this food is nutritious and filling (4)
5. A farmer's omelette has these as its main ingredient (4)

Down

1. Boiled for three minutes, these make a tasty snack (4)
2. Would-be chickens (4)
3. These objects are traditionally removed from the house by cooking on Shrove Tuesday (4)
4. Mixed with mayonnaise and gherkins, they make an ideal salad for breakfast (4)

What made it all the more nauseating was that the solutions were printed upside down at the bottom of the page - just in case the answers weren't obvious - but were the most non-sensical I'd ever read. I hastily scribbled down what I found. They read:

'Solutions. Across: 2 - Eggs, 3 - Meat, 4 - Bread Pudding, 5 - Beef. Down: 1 - Mint, 2 - Pear, 3 - Lamb, 4 - Aberdeen Angus Steak with fries'

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How one might have actually fitted four down into the grid, I have no idea - even worse was how steak and chips could ever be thought to be a tasty Breakfast snack when mixed with gherkins and mayonnaise.

A little further down - and surrounded with cartoons with bubbles coming from their heads and captions describing what they were - was a news article, copied faithfully from the local press, I assumed. It noted that Lee and Kath had actually applied for Enkhuizen to be renamed Egghuizen - or was this some kind of joke as well?

It seemed real enough to me, I admit, because it was well-known that 'Enkhuizen' meant 'Town of a few houses' and, now that there were some 16,000 inhabitants, it seemed as if the name was meaningless and empty - but had the local civic authorities *really* agreed to change the name in honour of their stay? Surely not!

And so the Guest Book continued - pages five and six were a story about the VOC, the Dutch East India Company, with a large gap at the bottom in which I hastily scribbled my own private note of thanks to Caesar. Page seven and eight were a poem about one Sunday morning that they'd been taken out on the canals of Enkhuizen by Ed and Anita (which I've reproduced elsewhere).

Again, a large gap existed at the bottom and a few words immediately came to mind - I hesitated putting paw to paper but there seemed to be no other option. I paused one further moment, thinking about whether I might land myself in trouble - no, that couldn't be. Kath and Lee weren't going to return to the room now that they'd packed and were having their final breakfast so I was safe.

I licked the pencil in my paw and wrote in the best handwriting I could, 'Every once in a while, there come two incredibly nice tourists who make all the others you've met pale into insignificance - Lee and Kath are *not* that couple...'

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EPILOGUE

I'd just finished reading the entries in the *Guest Book* and adding my own comments when I heard the sound of voices in the hallway and the clicking of the lock as it opened.

Was that the time already? Oh my goodness!

I'd got so carried away with reading the notes that I'd lost all track of how quickly the clock was turning. I slammed the book shut and grabbed at the note, placing it carefully back on the book just as it had been.

As I poked my head under the bedroom door, I heard the click of the barrel in the lock and Anita beginning to sing downstairs as she went to work, cleaning the breakfast plates from the table.

I was left behind! How could I have been so stupid to think that Lee and Kath would've taken the same time over breakfast as they normally did? - they were catching a train and that meant schedules to observe and places to be at specific times.

I settled down and told myself not to panic. There was a logical solution to this, somewhere - and I just had to think it through.

When Anita finally went out, I slid down the handrail and shouted Caesar the dog, taking care to make sure that Smurf was outside playing. The dog had been a great asset to my times at the breakfast table and had even carried me round to protect me from the cat. I had to appeal to him to get me back in contact with Lee and Kath.

He assured me that everything would work out fine - he knew the computer passwords and could boot the computer up for me just as soon as Anita and Ed had gone to bed that evening. Besides, there was very little that could be done now as my owners would still be on their way home and unable to access their email.

That evening, I sent an informative message to Lee and Kath but, even then, I was thinking in very different terms to a rescue mission - no, with Snouck's advice I had already been thinking about staying, of integrating myself into the Dutch community and throwing in my clogs with them here.

For the next couple of weeks, I frequently emailed Lee with new hamscripts and pieces that he was glad to convert to html code and publish on the web.

Caesar began trying to communicate with Anita using 'The beginner's guide to making contact with species which think they're more intelligent' but all to no avail. Just as he'd think he was getting somewhere and that she was finally perceiving that he was trying to tell her that he wanted some cheese for the hamster, she'd grab a lead and take him out for a walk.

How the clear statements could have been misconstrued made me realise that, if

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humans only expected animals to talk to them, the vast majority of them would be able to understand what we're trying to say. It was the expectancy that was the problem. Unfortunately, it's easier to talk to a caterpillar, sometimes, than it is to a human.

When I finally told Lee and Kath my plans to stay, they were delighted for me and they wrote me a very warm email (so warm, in fact, that the fan on the processor kicked in when I opened it), telling me how much they'd enjoyed having me around. They offered to contact Anita for me and explain what was happening but I decided against it - I'd seen this type of communication arrive before and it did nothing for Lee's reputation.

After finishing the manuscript, I waited a few days before it appeared on the web and checked every word. Then I bid farewell to Caesar and left for Van Bleiswijk where, even now, Snouck had prepared a small nest for me that I could call my own.

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Appendix One

APPENDIX ONE - LORD OF THE ONION RINGS

I couldn't decide where to put this story in this book.

Although once considered to be an attempt at a fake, it's now been shown conclusively to be from Dak's paw, written during his American Period and recovered from the rodent communities of Allen County, authenticated by Harvard's Board of Dodgy Hamscripts.

There never appears to have been a beginning, explaining the context of the story, neither an ending, concluding the reason for its composition - all extant hamscripts bear neither teeth nor tear marks either end and we can only assume that the story failed to be incorporated into Dak's 'Observations' but was retained for a possible third major work that he never completed.

However, as no remaining notes or hamscripts remain attributable to Dak the Hamster, it seemed best to include this story as an appendix rather than try to insert it into his work reproduced in this volume.

LORD OF THE ONION RINGS

I The Beginning

Onion Rings are fun to eat,
They taste so good - and they repeat.
You fry them deep in floury batter.
Chips are worse cos they're much fatter.

'This won't do!' the proprietor shouted as he hit buttons on the calculator and stared frustratingly at the figures that were being printed out on the paper roll. 'Our profits are down again by twenty per cent! If it continues like this, we'll be closed in a month!'

His wife came back in from the food storage area, placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and stared at the figures that told no lie.

'What is there to do?' she asked. 'We've tried everything we could think of - speciality meals, early discounts, two-for-ones. Each and every time we try and increase the clientele, the numbers drop.'

The proprietor held his head in both hands, then looked up from the table.

'We need something that no one else has,' he whispered. 'We need something so utterly and incredibly unique, something so special that can't be duplicated by anyone else, that people from miles around will descend on our café to order from us and us alone.'

Their three pet hamsters - Heis, Duo and Trion - poked their noses out from under the bedding, smelling the last traces of food that lingered long into the night after the doors had been closed and the last customer departed.

'D'you hear that?' Trion whispered. 'Our owners are in trouble.'

'What's that to us?' Heis objected. 'Get on with eating your seeds and let them sort it out amongst themselves.'

'You think these seeds are free?' Duo countered. 'Our food supply depends on them doing well from their business.'

The husband and wife continued looking through their accounts, searching for cheaper suppliers, trying to squeeze out the very last penny from each and every product that they knew they could sell.

'What about a Quest?' Trion suggested. 'You know that the Keepers of the Ancient Recipe of the Onion Ring are reputed to live near here. With that...'

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'...we could save the business!' Duo continued. 'What a great idea!'

'One minute,' Heis tried to bring some sense to the discussion. 'Do we actually know where these "Keepers" live? Sure, I've heard of the mythological Onion Ring Recipe, too, but that's what I always thought it was - a myth.'

His partners fell silent while their owners gathered their books together, placing them neatly away into a cabinet before exiting out the living room door to climb the stairs to bed.

'But what have we to lose?' Duo asked Heis.

'And think of what we could gain!' Trion added.

Heis shook his head as if consigned to his fate. 'All for one...' he squeaked.

'...and one for all,' they replied.

II The Quest

Heis and Duo - Trion, too -
A messenger now comes to you.
He will tell you of the test,
So you may reach your sacred Quest.

Hopeless, the three hamsters fell silent in a small clearing near to a trickling stream that gurgled its way through the forest. They began rummaging close to the edge where large trees had shed their nuts and berries, searching for food as they replenished their strength with protein.

'What are we doing here?' moaned Heis. 'We're a million miles from the ancient recipe! We're not even sure that it exists, are we?'

Trion urged his brother to be patient.

'It's at least a further two days' journey,' he squeaked, 'past the giant oak that spreads its branches onto the forest floor. That's the legend we all know and it's the only piece of information we have to go on right now.'

'I agree,' Duo sounded enthusiastic. 'We have to do something to help our owners and this is the only option we have.'

Heis returned to grubbing about in the pile of leaves, his front buried securely while his rear end rotated about its axis, trying to push himself deeper. He emerged holding a round, black object that he quickly discarded.

Suddenly, a brilliant white light flashed in front of them, brighter than a strip of magnesium being burnt in pure oxygen - not that any of the hamsters had ever seen such a chemical reaction (they didn't even know what magnesium was), but had they done, the similarities would have been instantly recognisable.

In front of them stood a small wizened object - a sentient being - moving its head from side to side, eyeing them inquisitively with large, bulging eyes and green, reptilian skin. Its forked tongue lashed occasionally from its mouth, dampening its yellow nose that glistened in the moonlit clearing.

'W-who?' Heis stammered.

Trion jumped in more boldly. 'What are you?' he squeaked.

The head of the creature turned to address the answer to his questioner.

'I am,' he said with a degree of authority, 'I am a Thing.'

'A what?' Duo said almost humorously. 'You're a, a Thing?'

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'That is what I said.'

'What's a thing?' Heis asked.

'That is what I am,' said the Thing. 'I have been known as many different names to many different people. Authors have called me different names down through the ages but, essentially, all I am is a Thing, dreamt up by the author to introduce something that can't come about without my presence in the story line - implausible though my existence may be.'

The three hamsters were puzzled.

Trion spoke up. 'Then what's your name?' he asked.

'My name is unimportant - besides you wouldn't be able to pronounce it. No, the reason I'm here is what's important, for I've come from a distant land to help you on your Quest to find the Recipe you desire.'

'It's a sign!' whispered Duo.

'It's someone dressed up in a costume, if you ask me,' replied Heis.

'Shh!' hissed Trion. 'Let's listen to what this Thing says!'

The Thing motioned with one of its seven hands, clapped two others onto its head as if trying to remember its message while laying one each onto the right shoulder of the three. They weren't altogether sure what it was doing with its seventh.

'What you desire is close,' he began. 'The Ancient Keepers send me as Guardian of the Recipe and Instructor of those who would seek...'

The hamsters bowed themselves to the ground and closed their eyes, awaiting the information they desired as to the location of the Recipe. The Thing's words weren't what they were expecting, a rhyme that made their Quest seem further away than when they'd first set out.

With a shaking voice that betrayed the fact that the forest was becoming increasingly cold as night began to fall, he instructed:

'Within the forest, you will find
Tests for you that stretch the mind.
Succeed in these and you'll receive
The recipe, if you believe.'

The three hamsters lifted their heads and opened their eyes but it was gone, vanished from where it'd stood before them only moments ago as the echo of its voice faded away.

'Gone!' squeaked Trion.

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'Weird!' whispered Heis.

'Mainstream!' Duo said in awe.

'Mainstream?' Trion and Heis objected.

'It was the only word that came to mind,' Duo explained.

III

The Fellowship of the String

A cunning test I set you all.
Will you pass or will you fall?
For three are one and one is strong,
Think carefully, think hard and long.

'It's been a full day since we last saw the Thing,' moaned Heis, 'just before sundown when he appeared to us as if out of nowhere. And where are these tests he promised us?'

'Perhaps they've already been and gone?' Trion reasoned. 'I mean, we don't know the nature of the tests, so how can we know what form they'll take?'

The three travellers walked gingerly along a well-trodden path as it meandered its way through the deep forest. A few yards from them, a scarlet red notice caught their eye that was positioned over a minute tray, chiselled into the bark of an ageing beech.

'Look!' squeaked Duo. 'Look! A message!'

As they grew closer, they could make out the words, written in powdery soot that spelt out the word 'SHARE' and the single piece of golden cord that lay in the bowl.

Trion was the first to reach the object and lift it up as the others gathered round.

'It's gold!' he exclaimed. 'Real gold! Look at the way it's made up of three unique gold wires that are interwoven to form the single thread.'

Such workmanship they'd never before seen - which only went to show that they'd led very sheltered lives and needed to get out more. But Heis drew their attention back to the instruction that seemed to tell them what to do.

'It says "share",' he repeated, 'but how can you share something that's indivisible?'

'We could cut it,' reasoned Trion, 'into three equal pieces and we could all take a piece.'

Duo objected. 'But that's not sharing, that's dividing - it would no longer be the object that we found.'

'Well,' began Trion, 'what about if we untangled the strands? Three threads, three hamsters - each receive a part of the whole.'

It was Heis's turn to raise an objection. 'It's better, I agree,' he reasoned, 'but it would still no longer be the cord we found. Besides...'

'No wait! I've got it!' Trion interrupted. 'It's a symbol of our Quest! Yes, I see it now!'

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He fell silent while the other hamsters looked at him with wide eyes that failed to perceive what he had.

'So?' squeaked Heis, 'So what does it mean? You've lost me.'

Trion held the cord up closely so they could examine the intricate detail, running his paws along the full length, caressing it as if his life depended on it.

'We who are three,' he began, pointing out the individual threads, 'are one - together, one in our Quest for the Recipe. Stronger than if we were individuals each searching on our own.'

He paused for a moment before continuing in rhyme:

'Cut the cord, we lose our best,
Divide the strands, we break our Quest.'

and then added:

'Let three be one that one is strong,
And then our Quest will not take long.'

'Have you just made that up?' squeaked Duo. 'It was almost something I'd've expected to have heard from the Poet Laureate.'

'I didn't think it was *that* bad,' corrected Heis, 'but I get your drift.'

Trion looked at them impatiently. 'Do you see what I'm saying?'

They both nodded their agreement.

'So, shall I carry it for the first part of the journey?' squeaked Heis.

IV
The Two Flowers

If one for all and all for one,
What will you do when it can't be done?
A puzzling Quest, a gripping plot,
Your thoughts will be the melting pot.

'I haven't eaten for *hours*,' griped Heis as the three hamsters trudged wearily along the path.

It had been a hot and sticky day, the foliage doing little to rid them of the excessive heat that restricted their movements to a crawl. Soon, evening would be here when they could make faster progress in the coolness of the night.

They'd found water at every turn. Small streams veined their way across the fern-covered ground every few yards, it seemed, though none of them knew where the trickles led. But they weren't too concerned - the hunger that nagged at their mind was causing them to forget about the Quest on which they'd come.

Nearing the edge of the forest where a handful of trees had been felled in what appeared to have been a recent storm, they surveyed the short expanse before them, making sure there were no signs of predators who could easily pick them off as they scurried into the next cover.

Peering out from behind a large tuft of grass, three pairs of eyes assented the all clear and they dashed speedily across the void. But, suddenly, they were taken aback by the second board that seemed to be nailed to a post, hammered into the earth beside two flowers that were in full bloom.

They abruptly came to a standstill and forgot the danger they were fleeing.

'Look!' squeaked Heis. 'Another test!'

Reading aloud, Trion announced the instruction 'EAT' and eyed the two flowers with relish. Weren't these of the most rare kind, the sort you only ever found in the most secluded part of nature?

They could have been edible stinging nettles for all they cared, to be honest, so hungry were they that it was fairly unimportant. The point was that they could be eaten and, having not taken anything except water all day, their hunger turned the tiniest of the flowers into something approaching a feast.

There was just one problem.

'Bite size,' squeaked Trion.

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'And two of them,' observed Duo.

'And three of us,' Heis sounded disappointed.

This called for application. Could the flowers be divided into three equal portions? No way! They were far too small. Was there a bud that hadn't yet burst open that could be used as a third mouthful? They examined the plant carefully but all to no avail.

They were stuck with two flowers and three mouths.

'You eat,' Trion offered, 'I'm sure there'll be something later on in the forest I can have.'

'Why should there be? There hasn't been anything all day in the forest until now. We could be days away from finding anything else to eat. Besides, I have more weight than you, let me go without.'

Trion shook his head. It wasn't that Duo's offer wasn't tempting, it was that it just didn't feel right - there was something at stake here that Heis was trying to get a grip of in his mind, the struggle showing on his face.

Actually, he was attempting to work his thoughts into a rhyme as Trion had done earlier, muttering under his breath until he found the word that made both sense and the same sound. Then he opened his mouth and began:

'If one for all and all for one,
A sacrifice means all get none.
Not one with nothing, others fed,
But each of us will have no bread.'

Heis smiled at its completion.

'There,' he squeaked, 'a test to show our unity.'

The others agreed and they each turned their backs on a free meal as they saw the path in the distance leading away from the clearing and into the darker cover of the forest.

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V

The Return of the Thing

And so the tests you've overcome,
But how you did is what you've done.
I come to you as we agreed,
And soon you'll know if you'll succeed.

Another flash of brilliant white light and the Thing stood, once more, in front of them, its yellow nose dripping mucus on the ground with regular consistency.

'Excuse me,' it apologised, 'I've had this cold for weeks and I just can't seem to shift it.'

The three hamsters, stopped in their tracks by the reappearance, sat back on their haunches, raising their ears like antennas to get the best reception.

'My friends,' the Thing began again, 'you have done very well and your tests have been completed.'

'You mean, we've won the recipe?' Heis shouted excitedly.

'Not so fast, young hamster, for I must now explain to you the reason for your success. Although not essential to the plot, my kind have done so in similar literary works in times past and the author has chosen to use me in like fashion.'

It gestured with its seven hands as if juggling unseen balls - it was certainly infinitely more expressive than being confined to two but it wasn't easy to work out what the Thing was trying to convey.

'The first challenge was there to assist you to focus on your unity. This is what tests are,' he explained, 'not instruments that prove to me what you are but encouragements for you to determine what's in your heart and judge yourself accordingly.'

'And you saw that the golden cord said something about your relationship, the fellowship that you had together - more than simply an IQ test.'

The three hamsters smiled as the Thing continued, 'Sharing one piece instead of dividing it into the three singular strands that it was made from, showed you that three bound together as one are stronger than three singular strands loosely employed at the same time - something that you've needed to live out during the Quest for the Ancient Recipe.'

The Thing cleared its throat - if it had a throat. Duo wasn't altogether certain that the sound they now heard was coming from the being's mouth but he knew it wasn't his own stomach that was gurgling with hunger. Perhaps it was Trion's?

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'The second test,' it began. 'Again you perceived something important about your relationship - that a sacrifice is only worth anything when all participate in it. How could one of you have eaten and enjoyed when another suffered and went hungry? So, all going without makes the sacrifice perfect.'

There was a short silence as the Thing raised itself to its full stature and uttered one final rhyme:

'The Fellowship of the golden cord
Has shown your life of one accord.
Encountering two flowers small
Makes all for one and one for all.

'You three hams have won the day,
Your wise response has made the way.
The challenge won, your guarantee
Fulfilling your Quest for the Recipe.'

A flash of blinding white light hid the Thing's disappearance from them as Duo raised both paws to press firmly on his eyelids and thought, 'I do wish he wouldn't keep doing that - I'm getting permanent spots before my eyes.'

The three hamsters were left alone, standing in the silence of the forest as leaves cascaded down gently from the trees. High up, in the canopy of the tallest trunk, Heis saw it first - a small white object fluttering slowly earthward, fluttering on the eddies of the breeze.

'Look!' he squeaked with delight. 'Look! The Recipe!'

As one ham, they ran frantically first one way, then the other, positioning themselves to be under the paper as it came within paw's reach.

Trion was first to hold out the parchment and read the words, 'The Ancient Recipe of the most exquisite application of batter to Onions...'

Heis and Duo squealed with excitement as he continued, 'Take one cup of flour, one cup of beer and, the most essential of all ingredients...'

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VI
Frying Tonight

Take some onion and some batter,
Pile them high on diners' platters.
Add some relish, sprinkle salt,
Don't forget to shake on malt.

'Another portion of Onion Rings for table five,' the waiter said, shuffling in to the kitchen with piles of empty plates and dirtied cutlery. 'Keep those rings coming, I've got a queue out the door and halfway down the street waiting to get a table.'

In the corner, two ladies peeled and sliced through onions upon onions, fifty or sixty large sacks propped up in the corner of the room waiting to be prepared, ready for battering and frying.

From somewhere out the back, the proprietor was laughing, walking into the kitchen with a bounce in his stride that his employees enjoyed.

Signs were good - franchises were already being considered to take the fame of 'Le Café de L'anneaux d'oignon' the length and breadth of the country, business propositions also coming in from around the globe that had to be put to one side while they established the restaurants in their homeland.

In his hands, the proprietor held another bowl full of batter mix, made from that most ancient of secret recipes that had been slipped through the letterbox of his front door three months ago.

What a turn round he'd seen!

It had been nothing short of a miracle...

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Appendix Two

APPENDIX TWO - WHO KILLED GEORGE THE HAMSTER?

The Internet is full of web sites advertising beliefs of conspiracy theories and alternative reality - I just never thought I'd stumble upon one that included George the Hamster.

Indeed, having found one, the links led me on to even more.

And more.

Perhaps a hundred thousand exist out there in cyberspace that call into question the events surrounding the passing away of our beloved pet so many years ago.

While I would have to renounce all such theoretical beliefs as preposterous, I've included one documentary-style article that I found in a National newspaper just the other week and, having obtained permission from the copyright owners, I'm now at liberty to reproduce it here in its entirety.

Although a popularised version, it does, nevertheless, pave the way for scholars and lay persons to do further research, if they desire, into this line of reasoning.

WHO KILLED GEORGE THE HAMSTER?

'Just because I'm paranoid,
it doesn't mean that someone isn't out to get me'

Anon

'George died on 14th September 1993' or so begins the epic account of George's secret life entitled 'Requiem for a Dead Hamster', reproduced in the book 'The Legacy of George the Hamster'.

'He had lived about 2 years 8 months' it continues as if the event is a well-established fact, a fixed date in human - and hamster - history that's without question, something that the world can rely upon as secure and trustworthy.

But, is it?

Is the statement of events leading up to and surrounding the alleged death of George the Hamster as believable and as simple as his two owners make out? Can we rely upon a document that was written *after* the event by humans who had a vested interest in telling us something that *they* wanted us to believe?

And what of the mysterious circumstances that have never been explained? Of the lights in the sky, the black limousines that were seen parked outside the house on the day of his death, of the burnt documents that were incinerated in authorised systematic

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destructions that related to his work for MI5?

In short, can we believe the simple truth as presented to us or is there another, harder to swallow, possibility that needs to be given serious consideration?

The aim of this article is to ask the questions that no one has yet dared to put into print - to ask the necessary and extremely poignant concern, 'Who killed George the Hamster?'

'I remember seeing lights in the sky,' a local tells me as I interview them one evening. 'It was real strange. We all knew George was ill - or so they told us - but we never once saw him, either when he was close to death or immediately afterwards before his owners said they'd buried him in the garden.'

This is by no means an isolated report - my filing cabinet is overflowing with accounts that bear a similar testimony to mysterious circumstances. Indeed, so voluminous are the typewritten accounts that I've had to convert them into digital format just to make some space.

'It was blue,' says another, 'a blue-strobed light that flashed on top of a large white vehicle bearing strange hieroglyphic characters that only made sense when viewed in a mirror.'

And what do these letters say?

'Difficult,' a witness scratches his head, 'very difficult to be certain. I only caught the start of the word but it seemed to bear the letters A-M-B-U as if they were trying to tell us something.'

The witness looks worried as if they've perceived something 'from the other side'.

'I checked out every word that those letters are used in and the only thing that made any sense to me - and which was about the same length,' he lowers his voice and leans forward to make sure he's not overheard, 'is the word "Ambulacrum".'

Immediately I see the relevance before another word passes his lips, but he continues. 'Now that sort of physical construction is an integral part of certain, er, alien lifeforms that have been described over the past four decades and associated with abductions.'

Having further researched with some in-depth and accurate authoritative sources, I arrive at www.georgeabduction.com, a site given over to the evidence for the alien abduction of George the Hamster and his 'return home'.

Did I read that right? He went 'home'?

I email the webmaster and get a speedy reply. 'We believe that George the Hamster was a shape-shifting time-dimensional alien life form who spent his ideological

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kindergarten on earth and who's now returned to where he came from.'

And where is that exactly?

'Somewhere way beyond our conscious knowledge - somewhere like Milwaukee but harder to get to.'

I wonder if that's possible but the webmaster assures me it is. 'You have to remember that there was a conjunction with Mars on the day that George left us - lights were seen in the sky at night close to nearly every airport in the entire world and the camouflage of a comet would have been sufficient to whisk him away into the Mother Ship.'

A quick search of the Internet reveals 17,376 web sites devoted to the theory, with over half of them associating his relocation with a cover up by 'higher powers'.

'Yes, that's right,' one web site owner tells me. 'Basketball players are abnormally tall and may house sentient alien life that operates the human shell.'

Another emails me with the possibility that, 'Perhaps, George has been transplanted into a humanoid robotic cyborg and will return soon as a newly elected world leader.'

Plausible though all this might sound, there's just one small flaw - it would mean that George's owners would have to be in on it as well. I arrive at their house by appointment early one morning and comment on the beautiful sheen on their reptilian skin and yellow slit eyes.

'Thank you,' approves Lee, 'I've just come back from a wax and polish at the Car Wash.'

What about these rumours, I ask. Are they in on the conspiracy? Are they, perhaps, alien guardians that have been entrusted with housing a fellow alien, disguised as a hamster?

Kath laughs loudly, hissing her mirth as she flicks out her double tongue and licks the plate of caramelised flies clean. 'Is that what folks are saying?' she asks. 'Why, whatever next?'

Lee agrees. 'Do we look anything less than human?' he asks me. I have to agree that the theory does seem to be a little far-fetched. Although not the most outrageous of theories it is, nevertheless, one of the most popular amongst conspiracy theorists and it's good that I've been able to 'put that one to bed'.

Perhaps more common, though - and something that's even more frightening - is the assertion by the Internet community that George the Hamster was silenced by certain political organisations - the very same ones, often, that have been elected by the vote of the people to safeguard society.

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The question that needs to be asked is twofold and well encapsulated on the official web site dealing with the multitude of hands implicated in George's death and from which this short report gets its title.

The introductory blurb poses the problem succinctly by stating, 'If George was, indeed, killed, not only must the person name the suspect but also the motive why they needed him to be removed.'

Looking at the multitudinous amount of links to home pages scattered throughout the world, it's easy to see that some people's minds have been working overtime for here, amongst other names named, are the CIA, KGB and MI6 (all of which would be expected) along with Barbie, Action Man (working as a mercenary for various organisations), the crew of the USS Enterprise and a cuddly soft toy that its owner calls 'Brian' that went missing and couldn't be found around the time of George's demise.

The most plausible of all these suggestions, however, has to do with the emergence of the 'Hamster for President Campaign' in the United States at about the same time as George passed on. It was well known that the Party, gaining rising popularity amongst Americans, was looking for a dynamic figurehead who would draw votes to its cause - and it can be shown conclusively that he was approached a few times in the last two weeks of his life.

What needs to be determined, though, is whether there was a joining forces of political activists who felt it necessary to eliminate him to safeguard the monopolisation of the ballot that the two major political parties held, or whether an active terrorist cell took it upon themselves to remove the threat to what they thought was in the country's best interest.

I ring Democratic headquarters and ask to speak to someone who can give me the official line - they respond by telling me they've never heard of George the Hamster. Well, they would, wouldn't they? Only if they had something to hide would they deny the very knowledge of the situation.

The Republican Party? They entertain the phone call but repeatedly ask 'Who?' whenever George's name is mentioned, concluding that it would be best if we both hung up the phone because there was nothing they could say on a matter about which they hadn't researched.

Of course, if there's no official denial of involvement, you can expect that, even now, discussions and talks are being held to decide on a common response to mask any implicated party member.

The answers just seem *too smug, too vague and unspecific* to warrant the belief that they really have no idea what I'm taking about. The one thing I've learnt about

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Governments the world over as I've studied various conspiracy theories is that, if they admit it, they're only confessing something they can justify as acting for the common good and, if they deny it, they know that they'd never be able to justify what they want to confess.

Either way, it's obvious to everyone that both parties seem to be implicated in a manner about which we can only speculate...

...and probably Barbie has a lot to do with it, too - after all, Ken could have driven the getaway car.

Another theory - and one that challenges the very question 'Who killed George the Hamster?' - is that George never existed in the first place and was purely an invention of Lee and Kath's mind.

One might poo-poo the idea almost immediately, reasoning that so many people saw him in his life time that his existence goes without saying. But, stop and think for a minute - just what evidence is there to suppose that there once was a real, live hamster called 'George' who dwelt with the Smiths?

One such believer takes up the story.

'When you get down to it,' he tells me over the telephone, 'most of the "sightings" are purely the result of suggestion.'

What does he mean? Can he give me an example?

'I can do more than that,' he answers me, 'I have a whole list of questions that remain unanswered. Like, we naturally assume that George was witnessed by the people he stayed with when his owners were in Paris and Scotland but, hang on! We know he never made it to those people cos the story put forward is that he went awol and travelled with Lee and Kath. The testimony is worthless.

'And the people who saw him when they visited the house? It's been well documented that they didn't have many friends so there were very few people who ever went there. Besides, he was always asleep - that's what they all testify - and his owners kept assuring everyone that it was normal behaviour.'

There's a pause on the line before he continues, 'Now just what was it that they were trying to hide, huh? I'll tell you - that George never really existed, that's what.'

After hanging up the phone, I do my own research and the implausibility of the owners' position is blown apart. They have no receipt for the acquisition of George, they have no bills for hamster food, the 'original hamscripts' could be nothing more than the work of any literate rodent (and would bedding really have lasted that long since his death?), the original Rotastak housing bears no gnaw marks which would hint at rodent

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occupancy and, perhaps the most damning of all, the site of George's final burial place has been lost from memory.

If George had really been so special to his owners, why hadn't they clearly marked his grave site for the benefit of subsequent generations who would want to come and pay their last respects?

I meet up for lunch with a professor in rodent studies from a well-known university (both the name of the professor and the university have been withheld for obvious reasons) and he tells me about the state of current research into hamscripts purported to be by the paw of George.

'I've tested hundreds - if not thousands - of texts,' he shakes his head, 'and I can honestly say that there's nothing that can be used like a "marker" which tells us which is genuine and which is fake. It seems that an original work is accepted mainly because Lee and Kath say it's genuine - it could have been written by anyone, anything.'

If the documentary proof for the existence of George doesn't exist, therefore - if, perhaps, it has never really existed - then should we really be asking who killed him? His non-existence negates the relevancy of the question.

If George the Hamster never existed, then, just why do so many people around the world believe that he did? Surely it's not enough to say that a couple of people simply invented everything and that the lie has been perpetuated and reproduced rather than the story be checked out and authenticated?

That's the reasoning behind another theory that tries to explain what it likes to call 'The George Hoax' although it sees anything from mass hypnotism and mind control through to subliminal suggestion and microwave transmissions as the reason for society's brainwashing, the one's who've escaped such a corrupting influence being the 'illuminati'.

I meet up with a group of them in a secret rendezvous in London, their leader donning a metal collander on his head with an electrical wire extending from its centre and earthed into the ground.

'It's the only way to stop infiltration,' he tells me, 'so that we can think unimpeded and receive pure, untampered thoughts that come from within our conscious resonance.'

I'm not too sure what he's trying to say - all I know is that he thinks that he's an escapee, one who's perceived the truth and is ready to do battle as the next stage develops.

'It's no coincidence,' he confides, 'that radio-transmitters have been erected all over the land under the cover of being an integral part of a mobile phone network. Really, they're Government-funded microwave agitators that distort the natural wavelengths of

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the mind and implant the information that they want us to believe.'

And the existence of George the Hamster is one of these 'facts'?

'Yes,' he assures me, 'along with the belief that rap is a music form and ants rule the world.'

Hang on, I object, who believes that ants are sovereign over the earth?

'You may not now,' he looks concerned, 'but, give it a few years, and you'll not only believe it but you'll have forgotten all about this conversation.'

He shows me a phone and explains to me that, by pressing the numbers on the pad in a specific sequence, you can dial straight to most Government Departments. This secret coding, he says, is only known to a few that are known as 'Directory Enquiry Operators' and are the frontline between the secret agents who roam the country carrying out their programming and the powers-that-be.

But why George the Hamster? Why did they need him to exist?

'It was to deflect suspicion from themselves and to prove that they had the power to make us believe anything they wanted. You see, it doesn't take subversion to make people believe most things - but, if they can successfully implant bizarre truth, they know that they'll get away with less unusual information - like America invading Iraq.'

So, what's he saying? That the US haven't invaded Iraq?

'Let me ask you one question,' he begins, smiling knowingly, 'Have you been there and seen it? No, you haven't, have you? You only believe what you're fed. Why, for all you know, Iraq might not even exist.'

Of course, it's purely subjective but interesting, nonetheless. And it brings us back to the legitimacy of the question as to whether George the Hamster has ever died - quite impossible if he never existed in the first place.

Finally, one of the strangest phenomenon in the quest for truth is the widely held belief that George really did exist, that he was owned by Lee and Kath Smith, that he wrote extensively about Hamster History, stowed away on board his masters' hand luggage on at least two holidays and that he died like a normal hamster.

Such a belief is bizarre to say the least and has only a few adherents.

To those who believe that minds are being controlled, it's just one more piece of the jigsaw to prove their own theory. To others, it shows that men and women are truly gullible in their belief of whatever facts are presented them.

No. It has to be said that the common thread that interweaves through all the theories that we've been looking briefly at here is that there's something inherently mysterious surrounding the event of the death of George the Hamster.

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Perhaps we may never know exactly what did take place all those years ago in a small area in the front living room of Lee and Kath's house, but one thing is for sure - George the Hamster certainly did *not* die in the manner and circumstances in which his owners have wanted us to believe.