

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

NOTHING MUCH TO DO WITH GEORGE THE HAMSTER

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

To you, the human, who has been so overwhelmed and encouraged by these works from the paw of our hamsters, that a third book seemed inevitable. Thank you for your responses.

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A Human's Introduction

In the previous two volumes ('The Stories of George the Hamster' and 'The Legacy of George the Hamster'), I charted the life and times of our first pet hamster, George, and the effect he had on the literary world of the early 1990s.

Indeed, his influence has been so widespread that I regularly receive invitations from hamster communities in the remotest parts of the world to visit and speak about our experiences. Such difficult-to-get-to places such as Mongolia, Siberia and West Virginia have each held out a warm paw of friendship, encouraging me to spend some time with them.

Perhaps, one day, my wife and I will do just that.

For now, though, we felt compelled and encouraged to release a third volume of hamster stories and articles. Compelled because the bank manager keeps complaining that we need to deposit something with him before we take any more out and encouraged because we think we should get a quick financial return for this effort.

After the publication of the last volume, people have continually asked us 'What happened next?'. This book provides an answer to that question.

Only very brief biographical and background information is here recorded as extensive introductions that sit at the beginning of each of the works give the reader a much better insight into the reason for their composition.

An English Hamster in Greece

After Arlev and Hakeem (and their epic 'From Russia with Nuts' released in the second book) came Kesef, a small Russian hamster who often went hyper for no apparent reason but who'd box anything he didn't like if it came too close. The main love of his life was crushed and dried peas which he stored carefully at various points in his burrow complex.

A one-time contributor to the 'Rodent Weekly', he wrote only one private work (as far as we know) which is reproduced here - the diary of his epic journey in our hand luggage as we holidayed in Greece.

Although George remained hidden throughout the entire journey, Kesef was quickly discovered and offered good terms of passage and 'animal rights' (as laid out in the original Geneva Convention and the more recent G8).

Indeed, we so looked after him that he probably wouldn't have encountered half the communities he eventually did had we not taken him around, there being so many predators where we were staying (including regular sightings of the Mediterranean Shriekysniffpecker) that he would've had to have been much more careful.

His encounter with a religious group of holiday sightseers is particularly enlightening but I'd urge you to take his quotes of myself and my wife with 'a pinch of salt'. My

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lawyers and the Publishers are currently working on how best to alter the text to make it less offensive to all parties.

The Community in Eastbourne

Dak lived at approximately the same time as Kesef (although the latter was first here before the former came). Having outlived him, he accompanied us on a couple of occasions when we visited friends around the British Isles and, further afield, when we journeyed to the land of the free, the home of the pioneers - that is, Stoke-on-Trent.

Linked inextricably to George's HH4 story 'The Battle of Caldbec Hill' (see the previous book 'The Legacy of George the Hamster' - although the story there seems to convey the idea of Golden Hamsters rather than Russians which is what this work is about), this series of tales recounts the strange communal set up southern wild hamsters have whereby travelling rodents recount the stories of yesteryear for the benefit and upbuilding of rodent families.

Dak's adventures didn't stop there, though, having compiled a series of articles of his trip to America when he hitched a ride with us to Washington and travelled overland to North Carolina to meet up with us - but space doesn't allow us to include them here.

Hopefully, they'll appear in a fourth book, expanded to include certain 'new discoveries' of works that are currently being considered as to whether they're authentic by critical literary experts.

Amongst these 'pseudepigrapha' recovered from American archives are half-finished stories on the famous rodent incident 'The Boston Cheese Party', a new detective story entitled 'The Maltese Hamster' (from which we have yet to decipher the character names - rumours that they've been positively identified as speaking about Furlock Holmes are, to date, incorrect) and the Sci-fi classic 'Lord of the Onion Rings' (something that will be well-worth getting one's teeth into if proved genuine).

We've also stumbled upon Dak's reworking of one of Handel's epic pieces entitled 'Watermelon Music' which combines the original score with jazz variations. This may be released independently on CD.

I shouldn't raise false hopes, however, as there's a long way to go before they're accepted as being 'authentic'.

The Rodent Weekly

Using up over half the space of the book, this series of articles appeared in the pages of The Rodent Weekly, a weekly magazine for rodents (as its name suggests - strange, I know, but absolutely true).

I had the choice of over 200 articles from which to choose this compilation but have tried to use editorials that are generally not reliant upon a reader's background

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knowledge of the 'Hamster for President Campaign 2000' as reported in human and rodent newspapers and on line information sites.

It hasn't been possible to remove all reference to the Campaign, however, and I trust that the reader will bear with me when confronted by multitudes of new characters that raise their head for one, brief article and then disappear - seemingly forever - never again to see the light of day.

The evidence to which these articles testify is that Kesef and Dak were independently talented in their compositional skills and that the world would be a whole lot gloomier place had they never taken up their pen and written for such a famous periodical.

Finally

It's been a whole lot of fun remembering and reminiscing with friends (human and rodent) about the times in which these works were first compiled. It seems like yesterday that Dak and Kesef were still with us, working tirelessly through the night to produce their writings.

I trust that these works will sketch in that time for you, the reader, that it will fill out the flesh whenever you next hear of the famous rodentary writers Kesef and Dak.

Truly, their works belong to both rodent and human alike.

Lee H Smith
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

Both Kesef and Dak extend their thanks to those who helped them inspire and encourage them at the beginning of their respective works. It seems only appropriate that I thank those friends who've encouraged me to put this compilation together and who've remained friends through the years.

First and foremost, Liz, the GFO of the Hamster for President Campaign. Although you're now 108 years old (so you tell us - personally, I'd demand a recount, it appears as if some chads have been accidentally punched out of your age card), you're still an encouragement to get these stories out into the world.

Pavel, also, whose family inspired me to continue with George's hamscripts in the second book and who shared my disappointment when I couldn't get a Publisher for the work.

And, to Jenny, a friend in Canada, who just got so angry with the Literary Agents' rejection of the book that it helped me not have to be. Thanks for your concern and support.

To everyone, past and present, who've enjoyed these writings, I trust that these will equally inspire you to greatness and to fulfil your potential in the Creator.

Finally, to all those people (and there aren't very many of you) who continue to fail to 'get' what these books are all about, who wonder at my sanity and try to avoid conversation on this subject whenever I start speaking about it, who have called me insane for writing stories about hamsters (when it was the hamsters who were writing them, not me - who's the insane one, huh?) - yes, to all of you - this book wasn't written for you at all but it should provide categorical evidence that everything you worried about has been fulfilled.

Lee H Smith

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**An
English Hamster
in
Greece**

AN ENGLISH HAMSTER IN GREECE

INTRODUCTION

The epic voyages of George the Hamster are now legendary - how he outwitted his owners on more than one occasion when they journeyed to holiday in Paris and Scotland and how he frequently found himself enjoying the same days out when they thought that he was shut up in the confines of his own nest compartment, is documented in great detail in previous works and I need not go in to great detail.

If you've ever kept hamsters yourself, you'll know that it's the sacred duty of us rodents to plot ways of escaping from the compartments that we find ourselves in - but what you won't realise is that, even when you think you've finally designed what you pride yourself as labelling as 'the inescapable unit', the only reason why we never seem to get out is because we don't want you to realise that we've already found a way that must remain a secret until the time that we intend to use it for the ultimate adventure.

I am a good actor, having been taught by the finest in the rodent world. The challenge of feigning timidity whenever Lee and Kath went to pick me up was not an easy task but one that I stuck to with eager relish - and one that I succeeded in.

Lee's care not to frighten me - thinking that I'd pummel and fight any unusual object that entered my compartment because of fear - meant that, unlike George, I was more able to leave the plans of my escape scattered openly throughout the compartment, knowing that there would be little possibility of them ever being discovered.

It also meant that I could work on them consistently throughout my waking hours, planning and replanning the route and methods of seclusion that I'd eventually need to use when that day was to come when I'd slip out from the confines of my nesting units into the freedom of a holiday in Greece.

The Greek hamsters are one of the friendliest communities in the world - or, at least, they are reputed to be. My intention in travelling to Greece was to see for myself what the rodents were like, to see what sort of culture they had developed since their golden age when Alexhamster the Great ruled a kingdom as wide and broad as any in the ancient world and to see that ancient Roman site called 'Philippi' that lies halfway between my owners' hotel accommodation in Drama (or 'Dhrama') and the more touristy seaport of Kavala (ancient 'Neapolis').

I must extend thanks to a few people who probably don't even know of my existence.

Jill Grey corresponded with Lee and Kath over a two week period about the culture and features of the Greek mainland. I gleaned a great amount of information from her writings even though, for security reasons, I was never able to reply openly to her. Please accept this note of thanks now for the information you passed on - and especially the Greek phrases which came in very useful.

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To Paul Hellander, a writer of the Lonely Planet guide to Greece, I must say thanks, too. Even though he hails from the other side of the world, his willingness to share information through email and not say 'buy the travel guide' was most refreshing. Having helped with train times for Lee and Kath, I was able to carefully calculate a schedule to keep my owners close at hand should I need their help. Thanks, Paul.

To Kostas, too, who corresponded with me over one of the stories - thanks for the inspiration.

Finally, to all you who've read the stories on the web site and who've responded with encouraging words to Lee (and, through Lee, to me as I've read them when Lee's put them in his 'bin' awaiting final deletion), thank you. Without your encouragement and positive comments, I don't think this series of reports from my diary would ever have been written.

Now, to the reader of these reports, I trust that you will enjoy my ramblings - maybe one day soon I will get time to return to the Greek mainland and update my description of the place.

Kesef the Hamster

THE JOURNEY - WEDNESDAY 9TH AND THURSDAY 10TH SEPTEMBER 1998

'By horse, by rail, by land, by sea our journey starts,
Two men incensed by one man's journey from the past...'

from 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth' by Rick Wakeman

Sometimes, it's the getting there that's such a challenge that it makes the holiday. Other times, the entire journey can be mundane, tedious, boring and something that fades in the memory quicker than an untasty sunflower seed.

The journey to Drama was somewhere between the two.

Lee and Kath had chosen such a complex route to the village that I had, at first, despaired of ever being able to make all the necessary connections and arrive safely with them - a car journey to well outside London Heathrow, a bus journey in to Terminal 2, the necessary airplane flight to arrive at around four in the morning local time (on the 10th of September the following day), a taxi from the airport to the train station in Thessalonica, the Inter City train that would take around three hours and, finally, a short jaunt from the station to the hotel arriving somewhere around half past ten in the morning.

Each of these connections presented me with untold planning difficulties until I realised that I could exploit my acting abilities (as previously mentioned) and so make my stowing away that much simpler.

After all, I reasoned, if Lee and Kath are absolutely convinced in their own mind that I wasn't going to follow them there, they wouldn't need to check their luggage with the same thoroughness that they had in previous years when George had been their pet.

It wasn't without it's difficulties, but it certainly had many advantages. It meant I could sleep, rest, relax. It meant that I could rely upon my masters to get me there (provided they didn't lose the case) and all I had to concern myself with was getting into and out of the luggage - a very simple ploy for any hamster with the least bit of intelligence.

But, then, I wasn't banking on that airport security guard...

Wednesday

Perhaps it had gone too well.

Perhaps I was just complacent.

But I seriously never contemplated there being a routine security check before the booking-in procedure. Lee had told me about his trip to Israel back in '86, how each suitcase was gone through with its owner watching every move that the security staff

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made, but Greece? Surely there was no danger of any secluded bomb on a routine flight to Greece!

'Did you pack the suitcase yourself, sir?' the guard enquired.

'Yes, yes.'

'And has the suitcase been in your sight all the time?'

'Yes, of course,' which was a bit of a distortion but true, nonetheless. How the security guards can expect a human to keep an eye on his luggage when he's driving to the airport is beyond me - but, I can go with Lee's response.

'Do you have any explosives in your case, sir...'

'Oh yeah,' Lee thought, 'like I'm going to tell you if I had?'

'...any hard drugs, firearms, gas canisters?'

'No,' Lee said, 'you won't even find so much as a hamster in there.'

I cringed at his words - that response would be immediately suspicious to any security guard. I was now convinced that the suitcase would be opened and the contents gone through with a fine toothcomb.

'Would you care to open the suitcase, sir?'

The guard hadn't smiled or shown any expression in the tone of his voice. I could just tell that, as far as he was concerned, my owner had some dark secret in his case that needed to be uncovered (in truth, the only dark secret he has is how he hasn't found himself arrested before now).

The 'click' of the locks gave me a short warning that a hand was about to delve into the recesses of the case and I prepared my teeth for a pre-emptive strike.

A dull ray of light surrounded me, shining through a crack between packed tee-shirts. The first-aid scissors glinted in my eyes as I poked my nose out from my cover to smell the approach of an unfamiliar hand that flashed past my nose in a blinding instant that instinctively had me snapping my jaws into the soft skin just under the end of the finger nail.

'YYYYYYOOOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!!' screamed the guard, withdrawing his hand so fast that I hadn't yet had time to release my hold on the finger.

I accelerated passed the tee-shirts, shirts, jumpers, socks and underpants - up, up and through the air as I opened my jaws, catapulted over the heads of all the others who stood in that room having their bags checked.

The blood-curdling scream turned everyone round to see its origin as I span and levelled out about thirty feet above them, then, descending rapidly, I spread myself out to cushion the fall.

Down and down I plunged, seeing that I was on a collision course with a softly packed handbag that had, a few seconds earlier, been placed on the conveyer belt to the plane for loading.

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I landed with a soft bounce and disappeared almost immediately under the flaps that separated the outside night air from the search room as I heard Lee say, 'Mind the scissors.'

The security guard was not amused. The entire contents of the suitcase were being taken out, item by item, and placed on the adjacent desktop by the assistant while the guard applied pressure to the inch long gash that cascaded red liquid just about everywhere.

'Do you pay compensation for bleeding on our clothes?' were the last words I heard as I found myself bumped into the luggage compartment of the plane.

I never did find out what happened after that incident but, about ten minutes later, my owners' case entered the hold and I pushed and squeezed my way into the luggage, settling down in a soft corner that had been conveniently rearranged to provide better comfort for the flight.

That part of the journey, although unscheduled, had at least been a success.

Thursday

I'm reliably informed (though it's by a fellow rodent) that no Greek has ever won a world motor racing championship.

But, judging by the g-force I experienced in the suitcase as Lee and Kath journeyed by taxi to the train station from the airport, this is an undiscovered talent that wise sponsorship should seek to exploit and develop.

I've since learnt from my owners that being able to see the driving skills first-hand was not to be preferred and that, in their own words, they would rather have been locked securely in a suitcase with ample padding.

Nevertheless, they arrived safely at the train station and made the connection with time to spare.

The train journey from Thessalonica to Drama is reputed to be one of the most beautiful throughout the land of Greece. This was, universally, the response of those people who Lee had been corresponding with concerning the trip. Whether this was just national pride, I had no way of knowing - everything that Lee had questioned the Greeks on had received similar reports.

It was this that had started me wondering.

Nevertheless, I didn't intend confining myself to the suitcase for this part of the journey - especially as my two owners would probably have fallen fast asleep by now, having been awake continuously for somewhere in the region of twenty-seven hours. Sure, the adrenaline may have been keeping them awake for the best part of it, but I could only imagine that the thrill was now waning just a little bit.

My theory proved to be a correct one and, shortly before the train pulled out of Thessalonica, I squeezed my way out from the case and descended through a small crack

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in the cabin wall onto the undercarriage of the train where I was greeted by a large contingent of foreign hamsters (foreign to Greece, that is) all eagerly looking forward to this part of their journey.

It seemed, then, that I wasn't the only rodent who'd felt the draw of the land - and, indeed, was not the only hamster who'd managed to stowaway on board their masters' hand luggage.

There were many here who'd been inspired to travel as a result of George's writings - before my predecessor had put paw to paper, so to speak, trains such as this one would have been largely empty but, through his perceptive insights into both Scottish and French living (in his two popular journals now published in the first volume), he had inspired the next generation of hamsters to boldly scurry where no rodent had even dared think scurrying was possible.

My attention, however, was drawn to two rodents who were sitting a little way in from the edge of the platform where we rested, gazing out over the scenery that flashed in front of our eyes.

This pair were indeed strange - there was something 'peculiar', something that you just couldn't put your finger on and express in comprehensible language. In fact, their body language told me that one of these was almost certainly descended from one of the ancient furlosophers of Greece, standing, as he did, aloft on his rear paws and gesticulating madly over the scenery without squeaking a word.

The other was probably his student (or, at the very least, his travelling companion), seeing as he gazed almost with awe upwards at the now erect figure.

Pulling back from the multitudes that gazed out over the valleys and hills, I strained an ear towards their direction and tried to overhear their conversation. Instead of lofty words and high ideals, of furlosophic treatises and rational reasoned logic, I heard what I had not expected..

'Do you want a peanut?' said the hamster to his friend.

It was a difficult question to answer, made more complicated by the implication that could lie behind those words. To him, the question didn't revolve around the desire he may - or may not - have within himself, but the intricacies of the meaning that was contained within the words that had just been used.

'What does he mean by the word "peanut"?' he thought to himself, flicking through his mind for any reference points that could be applied to this situation. No, there was nothing there in his mind that was readily accessible - perhaps the intention of the hamster had been to convey some depth of knowledge that had to be striven for and meditated upon? He certainly would have to give this some serious consideration.

He began with the simple meanings.

'A peanut is food.'

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No, that was too simple, too obvious. Could it really be that this fellow hamster was asking him whether he was wanting something to eat and using the word and concept of 'peanut' to try and convey that meaning? It just didn't gel within him - there was that certain 'something' that didn't witness with that interpretation, however simple that the interpretation was.

'Look beyond this,' he told himself, 'think more perceptively about the entire concept that a peanut conveys.'

'A peanut has a strange shape.'

Yes, now we're getting somewhere - it's knobbly and bulbous and normally has two largish lobes at either end with a thinner circumference in the middle. But what did that mean? The shape? The thinness? The bulbous ends? Just what was this hamster trying to get at?

Was he talking about the overall shape? Perhaps it wasn't right to take the shape of the peanut in part but view it as a whole, a large crunchy whole. That could be the secret of the meaning! Yes, of course! It could be a threat!

This hamster could be threatening him with a symbolic peanut shell, saying that unless he changed something (of which he was blissfully unaware), he would change his shape to be more like a peanut. Or perhaps he was thinking of applying the peanut to him if he didn't comprehend the offence that he was committing in the hamster's eyes?

The first hamster spoke again.

'I said "Do you want a peanut?".'

'His words have changed!' thought the friend. 'This could be significant if I'm ever going to discover the true meaning of his words.'

Immediately - and very definitely - he discarded his theory that the sentence was a veiled threat. The intonation of the words and the softness of the voice in which it was spoken didn't seem to justify that meaning. But he did start thinking about those two extra words that had now appeared in his friend's phrase - 'I said'.

'Obviously quoting,' he thought, 'but why quote? Why not simply speak out the intention of his mind?'

There was only one possible explanation - somewhere in some time or other - a hamster (and probably a very wise one at that) had used the same phrase that he'd now used and he was trying to summon up that author to lend weight to the authority that he was trying to speak with.

As if he hadn't confused him enough with his original question, must he now refer him back to a rodent authority from ancient times who he might never have read? How could he do this? Why imply an alternative meaning when the simplicity of the statement was perplexing his finite mind as it was?

Surely, he could provide the source in the question to give him some hint, but to use 'I said' was throwing his understanding into disarray and he couldn't make the connection between the present day phrase and the past author.

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'Are you okay?' the first hamster squeaked. 'You seem very distant.'

'Er, yeah,'

That was all very well for him to say, wasn't it? All nice and simple to wonder whether his mind was able to do the mental gymnastics that he'd had thrust upon him by that enigmatic saying that had originated from deep within.

But just where was this meaning that he'd been struggling so hard to find? Just how was he to answer the question when he wasn't even sure just what the question was supposed to mean?

'Well?' said the hamster. 'Do you want a peanut?'

'I'm thinking, I'm thinking - gimme some time, okay?'

That's the least he could do! Time - that's all he was asking, it was all he needed. But how long would it take? He could spend hours - days even - trying to contemplate the solution and yet he could, for all intents and purposes, be no nearer the solution than when he first began. He decided to venture a response to stall for time but also to see if he could gain some qualifying sentences that may illuminate him.

'What would happen if I said "yes"?'

The other hamster looked at him with puzzlement.

'Why, you'd get the peanut, of course!'

Now he was getting to the bottom of it! There really was an object involved, here - there really was some sort of 'peanut' (whatever that word meant) involved in the question. It wasn't just code or a symbol for an action, but there was a physical object that this questioner labelled by 'peanut' and which the question was all about.

'How stupid,' the hamster thought, 'I should have seen this from the beginning - it was staring me in the face all along!'

His original thought about a correct interpretation of 'peanut' was certainly on the right lines, he had just failed to see that there wasn't a concept being promoted but a real object that was under consideration.

'And what would happen if I said "no"?' It seemed like the best question to ask at this point.

'I'd eat it,' the reply came instantaneously.

Simple - but puzzling. He'd eat it? What sort of friend was this hamster that he'd take from him what he offered to him in the first place? What sort of colleague-in-fur was this rodent that would hold up a prize of worth (whatever it was) only to dash his hopes upon some sharp protruding rock because his question didn't evoke a correct response?

No, no - wait! There was more to this. What if this 'peanut' wasn't a food item? Then that would make the hamster's word 'eat' take on an entirely different meaning. It could mean 'consumption' in the sense that it would no longer exist in the same state in which it was originally offered - or could it have some other meaning that was shrouded in mystery?

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Here he was, back wondering what the intention of the hamster's question was. And the questioning was beginning to make his head spin with confusion.

'Don't take all day - just tell me "yes" or "no"!'

Well, there was only one thing for it. When the concept of 'peanut' couldn't be accurately determined, when the consequences of the question couldn't be reasonably assumed, there was only one course of action - and that was to remain in the state in which he found himself and not risk a possible change for the worse.

He paused one further moment to review the decision before saying authoritatively, 'No, thank you.'

'Fine, fine.'

There - it was over. He had come to the decision (even though he was unsure just what the alternative decision would have achieved) and he could now allow his mind to rest and accept his surroundings once again.

The other hamster looked at him a second time and opened his mouth to squeak, 'Would you like a drink of water?'

'Just what did this hamster mean by the word "water"?' he thought.

I turned my attention back to the scenery just in time to hear one rodent squeak loudly, 'We're approaching Drama - best get to your suitcases.'

I let the babble ascend back to their owners first and then ambled restfully up and into the luggage, knowing full well that Lee and Kath would probably still be fast asleep - I wasn't wrong. I took up my hiding position just in time before the announcement came over the tannoy about the next station.

Though they don't understand a word of Greek, they both jolted at the town's name and hurriedly grabbed their luggage as the train pulled in to the platform.

THE CONFERENCE - FRIDAY 11TH SEPTEMBER 1998

The previous evening had not ended smoothly.

After arriving at the hotel around 1045 local time (0845 BST), both my owners had little option but to lay down and sleep the best part of the next five hours, waking at around 3pm just in time to exit out into Drama's streets at the hottest part of the day when the locals, full of wisdom as usual, close their shops and take a long siesta until later on in the day when the sun begins to decline.

I had extricated myself from the suitcases fairly swiftly upon their arrival and now hid myself at the base of their built-in wardrobe, ready to exit to attend the meetings that I'd come here for, once they left the room to make a reek of town.

I was assured by some of the other delegates who were able to attend the conference that they would meet me in my owners' room around four that afternoon and take me to registration but, at that time, I awaited their entrance and my owners' departure.

Kath was awake first, unpacking clothes and utensils that were essential to their enjoyment of the holiday (I think that, sometimes, they get over-zealous in their packing - for instance, just how useful would a pickled walnut peeler be this holiday? And the human phrase 'everything except the kitchen sink' may well have been usefully employed of the contents if it wasn't for the fact that, so the graffiti runs on the sides of George's old cage, that there had been a time when they hadn't stopped upon reaching that item).

But Kath was distracted by the hairs - mine, not hers - that were irregularly scattered throughout the suitcase and I could hear her voice, whispering at first my name in a half-question, half-statement that left me in no doubt that she was in no doubt.

An hour passed and Lee stirred from out a deep sleep while Kath tossed the matter over in her mind and debated whether she would tell him what she'd found.

'What're you doing?' Lee said dozily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to focus on the business of his wife.

'Just unpacking,' came the reply.

'Yes,' she told herself, 'I must tell him, I must let him know what I've found.'

'Lee,' Kath hesitantly began, wondering what response her words might be met with, 'you know, it's just possible that Kesef might have made it out here with us in our luggage.'

Lee raised his head from the pillow and looked at her expressionless - then he spoke in calm, even tones, 'Kath, it wouldn't be a *real* holiday if our pet hamster *hadn't* stowed away in our luggage, would it?'

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She thought for a moment, then agreed. Having a hamster around on holiday wasn't a surprise anymore - it had to be the normal occurrence by which everything else was judged.

That was yesterday, Thursday.

Today, I attended the conference while both my owners 'did' Drama. I'm not quite sure just what that phrase means, being a human one that has no hamster equivalent, but I think it implies that they visited all the important places and monuments of note throughout the town.

I only 'think' that's what it means because it seemed to take them all day and, to be quite honest, as lovely as Drama is, a couple of hours should have been all that was needed (for a hamster, at least).

Perhaps they stopped in the park of the local springs or watched the fish jump from the water, the birds hunt and the dragonflies, er, fly? Whatever, they seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time doing very little. Whatever they managed not to do, they were 'not to do' the same just a couple of days later on the Sunday after Philippi - a good enough reason for me to again visit the conference.

But humans are strange - as I'm sure you hamsters know - though their strangeness has often been the reason given us to be able to achieve all the things we do so well without them finding out.

I digress.

The 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Royal Scientific Rodent Academy had been the reason for the conference - an international mixture of science papers and preliminary results from investigations conducted at the four corners of the globe (I borrow that expression from the humans - but which rodent of us, in their right mind that is, would sincerely speak of 'corners' and 'globes' in the same sentence? 'Corners' imply a flat earth which humans are at pains to discount but, at the same time, they use phraseology that implies they believe otherwise. Things such as 'sunrise' and 'sunset' are inherently 'flatist' along with the belief that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line when every hamster knows that, on earth, the shortest distance is always measured by a Great Circle.

And there are other things they believe - but I shall deal with a few more of these when I compile some thoughts on Hamthagoras and present them to the reader in a later article. For now, though, I appear to have gone off at a tangent - which again implies a circle - and have digressed from the subject at hand. Please forgive the ramblings of my mind, but I have so much to relate that it all seems to come pouring out at the same time).

As I was saying, rodents from all over the world had converged upon Drama to hear the latest Scientific papers that were available. I know that I may be pre-empting the

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publication of the definitive compilation of presented papers (shortly to be released by the Sunflower Seed Press) but I will, if I may, include here a précis of one of those seminars that caught the attention not just of myself but of each and every attendee at the conference.

Each one of us there present could associate with the need for clarification on this issue, having attempted to find reason and understanding over many months of observation of the phenomenon witnessed. I am, of course (and you will probably, fellow hamsters, already have heard rumours circulating wherever you may hail from), referring to Professor Seedchewer's thesis on the self-generating cucumber plant.

Therefore, I offer all hamsters everywhere, my shortpaw record of that message as a preliminary testimony to one of the most well thought-out and structured pieces of research that it has been my pleasure to hear firsthand.

'My most learned fellow-scientists, rodents-in-fur and all who have devoted their lives to the advancement of vegetative understanding in the light of our past discoveries, greetings...

'This paper, which first saw the light of day as a small paragraph in The Rodent Weekly, has been the subject of the most extensive research and scientific experimentation from the day when the first theory flashed across my mind during my conscious hours to not more than a week ago when the scientific community extended the right paw of friendship to me in order that I might share this discovery with your good selves.

'Let me begin the way I myself did many moons ago - and, in one sense, it was a discovery that only afterwards found scientific proof - and, that is, with a philosophical consideration.

'You must understand that, at that time, I had no idea just what my thoughts would lead me in to. Had I known then I might not have been so bold as to postulate the theory of the self-generating cucumber plant.

"Why," I thought to myself, "does that circle of cucumber in my food dish never seem to diminish in size and taste when I frequently eat from it?"

'I'm sure that I wasn't the first rodent ever to think such thoughts and, years from now, some hamster in some other part of the world will find himself moved in the same direction. But my thoughts led me to conclusions from which there was no escape.

'Having accepted the premise, I gathered observations.

'Firstly, qualitatively.

'The cucumber slice always tasted the same, it always had the same wetness and the same consistency. Nay, it even had the same colour - a dark green on the epidermis and a far softer inner which was easily quantifiable. To all intents and purposes, this could be the same cucumber plant!

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'I hope that I haven't shocked you, my friends, but the conclusion seemed destined to be drawn even before I'd looked at the evidence. I had to conclude - and to some I know this was indeed a very startling word - that the cucumber that I ate from day to day from the same food bowl - and which was always the same food bowl for it bore all the same characteristics day by day just as the cucumber did - this cucumber, I say, *had to be* the same cucumber that I ate every other day of the week.

'Let that fact sink in a moment.'

(Pause)

'So how might I design an experiment to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was the case?

'Let me first reiterate where I'd got to.

'Philosophically, the theory had come into being based upon a nagging idea that I had allowed free expression. Qualitatively, all the signs that this was the same cucumber could not be refuted - it tasted the same, it bore the same colour, the same consistency, the same smell. In fact, in every way it was identical.

'So how could one implement an experiment to prove what I knew in my heart to be the case but which I needed empirical evidence for?

'I decided that the only way to prove the self-generating properties of this plant was to make a nest beside the food bowl and wait for it to self-generate before my eyes. I tried doing this consistently but, also consistently, my owners kept moving the feeding bowl not realising that I was conducting a scientific experiment. No sooner had I moved nest through the night and begun my vigil than one or other of them would lift the food out of the chamber and place it at some other location - where, by the time I was able to find it, the cucumber had already self-generated.

'However, as chance would have it, I managed a whole week of observations when my owners possibly neglected the fact that I had moved again - perhaps they just got fed up with my insistence.

'My findings have already been published but, for those of you who have not yet obtained the paper or who have managed to obtain a copy but have unfortunately eaten it, I will summarise my findings.

'The self-generating cucumber plant never, absolutely never, generates itself when observed. There needs to be much scientific research carried out on this phenomenon, not least an investigation into how the plant knows that it's being watched in the first place. My colleague in the front row there [Professor Lakee the Latvian] has postulated a sensory awareness that relies upon spacial distance and relative humidity which, at this juncture, seems the most reasonable.

'We never once observed a change while observations were being carried out but that is not to say that they didn't take place - internal structure was further than our experiments could be permitted to go at this time.

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'When left alone, therefore, the cucumber plant will self-generate to its former size and nearly always to its former total mass - charts showing comparative weights have been included in the paper.

'The only other conclusion we were able to draw was that, once away from the 'mother-plant', selective pieces could not self-generate. How this plant reproduces must also remain a mystery and, again, further research is desperately needed to discover the mechanism - pollen has been ruled out and also asexual reproduction, but a solution I am sure will be forthcoming in the not too distant future.

'Finally, let me urge you to join with us in this field of investigation. There is much work still to do and there remains yet many questions still to be answered. Although the self-generating cucumber plant has withheld some of its mysteries from us, we remain confident that, with thoughtful insight and detailed experimentation, we shall discover the anatomical complexities of this, otherwise neglected, plant'

PHILIPPI (DAY ONE) - SATURDAY 12TH SEPTEMBER 1998

Lee heard a crack, followed by a rustle of peanut shells, emanating from the built-in wardrobe. Stealthily, he crawled over to the door, stopping only to lift a small torch that he'd brought with them on holiday, then continuing as the sound grew louder.

He gently pressed his ear to the crack of the door, in time to hear the scaly, crisp outer skin being removed and dispensed with on the floor. In his own mind, he counted to three and simultaneously pulled on the handle and switched on the torch.

I remember jumping with surprise - not that I thought that what was now not two feet away from me was a predator, but because the suddenness of the appearance sent me into shock. Having regained my composure, I turned to face my owner as he turned the torch off and put on the overhead light.

'Oops!' I began. 'How careless of me, I seem to be lost.'

Well, I know that expression is poor but, honestly, it was the only thing that came to my mind at the time. Lee's expression was no better.

'So, we meet again, Furlock,' he said, then, 'I thought it was you - couldn't you keep the noise down a bit? It *is* three in the morning, you know!'

'I'm surprised you can sleep at all with that bazouki music playing outside your window.'

'It was the unusual sound that woke me, not the incessant tones of the band. How are you, anyway?'

'Okay. The conference is going well...'

Then it hit me that neither Lee nor Kath knew anything about the reason I was here.

'There's a hamster conference that's on - you've no need to concern yourself with that. Looking forward to Philippi today...'

'Stowed away in our hand luggage?'

'That was the plan, yes.'

'I'll make you a deal, Kesef...'

A deal? What sort of deal? Did I have to do anything?

'This place is more dangerous to you than any Paris or Isle of Mull was to George. Let us know when you want transport and food and we'll do our best to help out - other times, feel free...'

'And what's my part of the deal?' I squeaked.

'Nothing obligatory,' Lee said. 'Well, no, I lie,' he paused and then continued, 'Just agree not to eat peanuts at three in the morning.'

'Agreed,' I said.

'Good.'

Philippi is a quite magnificent archaeological site which actually extends far beyond the 'pay-to-view' boundaries - and that's only the half of it. What the guide books don't

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tell you is that the difference in altitude between the highest and lowest points is probably two hundred metres or more, the Acropolis soaring high over the valley below where the Republican armies of Cassius and Brutus lost to Antony and Octavian in 42BC.

What I discovered a couple of days later when I was taken to Kavala was just how isolated the mountain of Philippi is, how it juts out into the valley bottom, commanding an incredible view for miles around (it was clearly visible shortly before we ascended and descended into Kavala some ten kilometres away).

The day was hot - really hot.

Being a Russian hamster and used to the temperatures of the Mongolian steppe, I knew I'd struggle if I travelled round the site on my own, so I stayed in the rucksack side pocket and gazed out onto the ancient rocks - the birds of prey were too menacing for me to have risked a solo expedition. Besides all this, the fruit-filled croissants in the rucksack just had to be guarded in case, er, okay, I knew you wouldn't believe me.

Lee and Kath's trip was enhanced by the Museum Curator who rushed out to meet them and show them the lie of the land, pointing out interesting features that they would otherwise have missed. He epitomised the Greeks that my owners were to meet throughout their stay - he wanted to share what he knew even if, at times, his English let him down. No matter - he wanted to help and make people aware of things that were important.

They'd met someone the day previous when Lee had opted to ditch his nylon rucksack and buy a more robust canvas one (nylon in Mediterranean heat? Lee must be nuts). Not only did they find a product that was better and cheaper than anything they could get at home but they had a lengthy conversation with the proprietor who, it turned out, had studied at University in Newcastle, England, in the late seventies and early eighties.

They were of one mind, too - seeing the need for Drama to expand its tourist industry but also aware that they needed to be careful which type of tourist they attracted. The streets of Drama are alive until the early hours of the morning (and their hotel was situated in the middle of where all the action was) but there was seldom any real trouble (apart from the calamity of the wine being too warm).

Anyway, back to the Curator.

He pointed out the battlefield where the armies of 42BC drew up for battle, the route that should be taken to ascend to the Acropolis (which, Lee decided in the end, to postpone trying for until at least the following week - maybe never. Can't say I blamed him) and he urged upon them to make sure they visited the ruins of the Octagonal Church where mosaics on the floor depicted wild horses pulling cherries - my ears pricked up at that last description but, when we finally got over there, it turned out to be wild horses pulling chariots, the curator having got his English wrong.

What a day we had at Philippi!

The great thing about Lee and Kath is that they aren't too orthodox in the way they visit either ancient sites or holy places - they like to get involved in the stones of the

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past. So, while your average tourist will gasp at the Amphitheatre cut into the rock and move on, they will climb its steps and go beyond the summit to see what lies there, they will look for inscriptions on stones that most people will miss (even though they don't understand them when they find them) and they will even, as they did that day, notice the existence of a Roman wall that ascended way up the hill where no line was marked on the map.

Even at the excavated Roman toilets where most tourists look into a hole where seats can be witnessed, Lee managed to find a way down into the building for a real 'hands on' experience.

Kath was taken up with watching for birds soaring overhead or flitting from tree to tree, noting a rough-legged buzzard on a hunting expedition and seven black storks who were riding a thermal to the west before continuing on their migration south towards their over-wintering grounds.

Oh, and of course, there were plenty of Els - I shall explain all about them in a later diary entry.

I feel I must include one of Lee's numerous works here as it just epitomises both my owners' attitude towards getting involved in the things around them. I found this in a darkened corner of the computer hard-drive with several encryptions forbidding my entry until I had managed to crack them - but it didn't take too long.

I'm not sure which part of their life this refers to, but I guess it must be from the past five years and, judging by the contents of the story, I would imagine that, to protect themselves, the delete button should have been pressed instead of choosing the storage and encryption option.

'Have you seen this?'

Kath sounded excited as she led me to a small pile of luxuriant grass that cascaded over an old railway sleeper at the rear of the garage.

'I found it about five minutes ago. I reckon it must've been dropped there while we were out.'

I stared at the large brown pile with unaccustomed relish. We had recently been reading a 'tracks' book and, not to put too fine a point on it, we'd come to realise that every cracked twig, each soft indentation in the soil or, as here, each pile of animal excreta had its own individual message that helped the budding nature detective to discover the owner's identity (I think 'ex-owner's identity' would be a little more accurate).

The grass had been pushed down by this extraordinary pile, flattened by the weight that had fallen on it from above. I noticed to the left that a slug had had its senses activated and was already crawling over the package looking for a meal.

I made a mental note never to kiss a slug again.

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'A dog?' I thought. It certainly had the feel of a dog about it but there was something instinctive that said 'no'.

'A deer? Or muntjac?' Kath voiced.

'No chance!' I reasoned. 'There aren't any round here. Besides, the whole neighbourhood would be in a commotion by now if that'd happened.'

(And in a far worse uproar than that epic moment a year ago when I wandered down the garden in shorts.)

'One of the horses at the end of the road could have escaped?'

The suggestion had a lot going for it - not least the size - but the angle of impact and compressed consistency yelled another 'no' in my ears. Besides, there were no hoof prints in the grass - surely there should have been.

'I think we'd best look it up in the book.'

Without anymore ado, I made for the wildlife shelf in the Book Room where analytical and technical volumes hold the solution to every natural problem.

Scanning the titles, I pulled out 'Collins guide to Animal Tracks and Signs' and began flicking through for the faeces page. There, in glorious Technicolor, were turds of every shape and size - so lifelike that you could almost reach out and touch them.

Well, perhaps not.

What a shame that they hadn't thought to have a scratch and sniff section for the visually impaired - this would have been a most valuable addition.

Deer? No, too small.

Too small? Wow!

Horse? No, no. Totally wrong shape and colour.

What then?

My eyes caught a glimpse of a pile on the previous page - yes, of course, it had to be!

I grabbed my ruler and measured the length, breadth, width (David Attenborough would have been proud of me) and scaled up the parcel in our garden to approximate the size of the mammal.

I rushed downstairs and into the garden where Kath was still busy at work watering the plant tubs.

'Got it!' I shouted. 'It's in here!' and I pointed to the Tracks book that was in my left hand.

'What've you found? What is it?'

'Well, if my calculations are right,' I began, 'and if I've scaled this up right - I'll have to do a recheck on it, of course, but I...'

'C'mon, c'mon,' she was growing impatient, 'spit it out.'

'Ah yes.'

I paused and tried to suppress my excitement.

'Well, according to the book, we've just been visited by a thirty-two foot squirrel!'

'Wow!'

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Lee does not like religion, even though he is a born again christian. To him, religion is a label that he puts on anything that has a semblance of spirituality but which is actually very much dead. I take his point and, if I remember correctly, this was one of those things that George learnt from Hammish when they visited Iona way back when - the diaries are in the first book and are worth a read.

Yes, religion - straining for an experience when the reality is an uneventful and contrived phenomenon that misleads and misguides the adherent. Or so Lee would say - you'll have to take it up with him if you disagree but, as we journeyed west on foot to the 'authentic' site where the apostle Paul met Lydia, a seller of purple-dyed fabric, and baptised her in water when she believed the word they spoke to her, I couldn't help seeing Lee's concept 'in action'.

Previously, we had peered into a small, enclosed structure, supported by wooden beams and looking in quite a state of collapse.

The plaque read 'Prison of St Paul' where, allegedly, the apostle was held until an earthquake shook the prison doors open and the jailer came to be a christian through the reaction of both Paul and Silas.

Located three metres from the modern Kavala-Drama road, Lee joked with me that perhaps the 'earthquake' was, in fact, a heavy lorry going by.

The site is actually an old, disused water-storage area, not a prison.

Anyway, we arrived at the site of Lydia's baptism shortly after a coach party of English tourists had - the same tourists that we had encountered at Philippi as they were whisked round the site at break-neck speed.

Finding a seat near the swift-flowing river on which was a Tupperware container full of yellow coconut cake that I eyed with relish, Lee and Kath sat down to await their departure before they would investigate the 'authenticity' of what was regarded as being the true site.

I poked my head out of the pocket, focused my ears on the assembled group and listened to their conversation as the tour leader stood up to conduct the short - but sincere - religious meeting by the banks of the river.

'This is an holy site,' she said.

'Amen,' one agreed. Others nodded approval and held their hands heavenward to show how spiritually aware they were. A small number extracted Bibles from inside carrier bags and rucksacks, some exposed sacred crosses that hung about sweaty necks.

'This is an holy site,' she repeated. I was convinced just listening to her - I think it was the use of the indefinite article 'an' which drew me in. Certainly, it sounded like it was an holy place.

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'Here,' she continued after the affirmations subsided, 'was where the Saint apostle Paul, beloved, blessed by God, baptised the holy servant Lydia and where she became well and truly drenched.'

Bibles were opened and candles lit, followed by the sound of a great and mighty rushing wind as the tourists blew on the pages trying to put the flames out.

'Here in the authentic Roman cement, we see the apostle's footprints beside that ancient inscription *PAVLVS TARSVS* - here it was, then, that the apostle has left us a sign that we might worship this place with sincerity and so ignore the obligations of the Gospel as spoken in the New Testament by Jesus Christ.'

More 'amens' echoed around the group followed by numerous 'hallelujahs' and more raised hands. Spontaneously, from a written hymn book, they began singing a pre-arranged song in unison (unison of word, that is, the keys employed were quite varied).

We worship you, O holy place,
There is none like you.
You turn our eyes from off God's face
To be falsely true.

Reality is not our aim,
Let us live a lie,
And worship relics and dead saints
Until the day we die.

O let us not face up to Truth,
Let us not be real.
For if we grasped the real Good News,
How empty we would feel.

A few hummed away quietly as the leader almost whispered, 'Let's close our eyes and pray.'

Here they were, a coach load of tourists, willingly closing their eyes on the beauty that lay around them and paying hundreds of pounds for the privilege to do so, too - this was a real sacrifice!

'O God,' she began, 'Thank you that we have been given all the money we needed to be on this trip even though others, less blessed by You, are unable to come and worship this holy place. We thank Thee that Thou hast lavished upon us the goodness that others don't deserve but which we do.'

'We thank Thee that we are not like them but that we are like us and we like You though not they like You nor us - for if they were like us they would be here with us,

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which they canst not be for the coach is full. But we thank Thee that Thou knowest who deserveth Thy holy coach seats - which we also worship in appreciation - and that Thou hast provided.'

Numerous 'amens' echoed round the group. Each of them opened their eyes and smiled knowingly.

As they packed to go, Lee noticed that the Tupperware container full of cake still lay on the bench beside him. He looked at me quizzically as if for inspiration but I just smiled back waiting to see what he was to do, expecting at least a small morsel. As the last couple gathered their items together and photographed the stream for the nth time, Lee lifted the box up and began, 'Are you with the coach party?'

They seemed surprised by the question but, having paused, affirmed a response.

'You seem to have left a box full of cake behind,' Lee continued.

'Oh, thank you,' they responded. 'Someone was looking for that.'

But a puzzled expression remained on their face. 'Aren't you with the group? I thought you were with us.'

'No, no,' Lee answered (while I thought 'Pretty close fellowship, that - don't even recognise who's on their tour!'), 'we came here on our own.'

'Where are you staying?'

'Just along the valley in a place called Drama.'

Their faces were blank. 'We're staying many, many miles away in Kassandra.'

'Oh yes,' Lee said, 'that's a long way. I'm sure you're enjoying it there it's, er, very hot there, isn't it?'

'My, yes,' and they turned to go.

As they disappeared over the brow of the modern baptistery structure, Kath asked, 'Where's Kassandra?'

'Not a clue,' Lee replied, 'I just didn't want to appear ignorant.'

'I like coconut cake,' I squeaked, 'why didn't you get me a piece?'

For all that went before, both my owners and myself decided that the site could be authentic even though the point at which the Via Egnatia (the road which runs through Philippi) fords the river needs to be accurately determined for there to be certainty attached to the identification.

Besides, the vegetation has changed since those days and the swamps have largely been drained for agriculture. Even if it was 'authentic' it would have looked much different and, besides, as George would have said, 'Reality is where the Creator is doing things today, not in the place where He once did things in the past'.

HAMTHAGORAS - SUNDAY 13TH SEPTEMBER 1998

Levi Strauss.
Just like
the Theory of Evolution,
He's always promoting
the survival of his jeans.

I awoke to the sound of rain spattering on the pavement below.

The air was cooler, more pleasant and I began stretching my paws to remove the tiredness from my bones and rubbing my eyes to remove the sleep.

I had overheard Lee and Kath discussing their itinerary the night before and had excused myself to attend the last day of the conference - though the Byzantine walls were not of particular interest to me, I would, nevertheless, have liked to have seen them, but I resigned myself to looking at Lee and Kath's photographs.

That is, should they be able to get out into the town - the way the rain was continuing to fall, it wasn't looking too good.

I descended into the subterranean passages which ran underneath the hotel and soon exited into the large reception hall to enrol for the final day.

And what a final day it was to be!

Featuring seminars and discussions around one of the greatest rodent mathematical geniuses of all time, Hamthagoras. The further development of and investigation into his foundational scientific propositions goes on apace by rodents throughout the world.

For those of you unaware of some of his great discoveries and inventions, let me begin with one of the rodent world's most staggering and advanced observations.

Hamsters knew the earth was round long before humans ever did.

It was a logical assumption based upon circumstantial evidence but, nevertheless, the conclusion - to which each and every rodent was party - was that the world was a sphere.

Consider the ancients' logic.

Their food was round - tomatoes, oranges, cabbages, nuts, seeds (the list is endless) - but, in some way, each and every food had, at the very least, rounded properties. Their nest was round - not a cube - and dug out of compacted soil that formed a rounded soil heap when deposited on the exposed terrain above. Their eyes were round - so too their mouths and even their bodies when they curled up during the day to snooze countless hours away in satisfied slumber.

If their entire experience was, therefore, round, how could the earth be flat with edges? It stood to reason, and the assertions of less advanced creatures (such as man)

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only made them snigger with mirth and giggle with hilarity whenever they heard their thesis.

I t always struck the ancient hamsters that, if humans really were so intelligent (and, to hamsters, they always thought - as they do even today - that man's attempts to place himself at the pinnacle of some sort of evolutionary process is just a result of their tremendous pride and inflated self-worth) - yes, if humans really were so intelligent, why hadn't they accepted the notion of a round world eons before they had?

No, hamsters were the real scientists of the world. Humans could only ever be considered to be second (at best) - and that was if you left the giraffes out of the equation.

I nclude them and mankind would be struggling for the Bronze.

I 'm sure you've heard of the great Hamthagoras - the history books are littered with mention of him and rodent Seminaries the length and breadth of the land are still teaching his age old mathematical formulae that have gone unchallenged for centuries.

His most famous theorem stated that

'...the squared sides of a packet of sunflower seeds was equal to the summed total of the squared sides of any other two packets...'

which was a foundational requirement of trade development through the years whenever merchant hamsters, plying their trades in foreign lands, returned bringing strange foods and exotic wares.

I think you humans changed the theorem into something slightly different - something to do with triangles, I seem to recall - but just what good is a triangle when you've got babies to feed?

Absolutely none!

And why? Because food comes in round packages to show all creatures that the world is, er, well, we've covered this before, haven't we? I t was probably because mankind believed the world to be flat that triangles were imposed upon Hamthagoras' theorem.

But I digress.

I must tell you about Hamthagoras' greatest discovery - his greatest discovery, that is, in my opinion. While it's true that different hamsters have different favourites (one of the most popular being the frictionless exercise wheel which, once started, continually revolves while the rodent is off doing other things either within or without his cage. The masters naturally assume that their pet has been exercising throughout the night and are oblivious to any covert operation, other rodents being given the blame

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

for gnawed-through sugar and flour containers) but, by far and large, what I am about to relate to you is reputed to be his crowning achievement.

Hamthagoras had been experimenting with buttered toast which his owner pushed in through the bars of his cage on frequent mornings before he went off to that place which, although it brought very little joy, did bring a smile to his face at the end of every month.

Though Hamthagoras looked forward to his daily 'treat', he found his mind sadly perplexed when, overlaying until after his owner had disappeared, he discovered that the toast that had fallen through the cage bars had landed butter-side down in the wood shavings that lined his cage.

Statistical calculations contradicted the reality of his findings for, Hamthagoras reasoned, the toast should land butter-side down only fifty per cent of the time when, in fact, his records, scrawled on the side of his cage (and preserved for ever at the Royal Academy), showed that the frequency was touching nine times out of ten.

You can imagine the problem just on a natural level - the wood shavings needed to be dusted off and there was always a piece that got stuck somewhere that made the bread excessively chewy and potentially dangerous to the gums. What Hamthagoras set out to prove, therefore, was, first of all, why buttered toast should land the wrong way up and, secondly, how this could be prevented.

He already had a good idea as to the answer to the former and, next morning, he was up early waiting for his master to poke the toast through the cage bars. When shadows approached, he raced over to the offering hand, snatched at the titbit (which shocked the owner so much that he withdrew his hand with lightning speed) and raced away into the confines of his research laboratory (his nest) to carry out scientific procedures.

With a razor sharp sunflower seed, he spliced the toast into two exactly identical volumetric halves (hamsters have a good eye for these sorts of things and need to have, when wrongly balanced cheek pouches can send a rodent running around in circles for days not realising that they're going nowhere) and then weighed both sections.

What Hamthagoras discovered was that the buttered half always weighed more than the unbuttered half - it may only have been a few micrograms but the difference of mass was there nevertheless. From here, he went on to successfully conclude that an unequally weighted object (one that does not have a constant density throughout its volume) will always fall with the denser side to the floor.

The butter, which filled the air holes between the bread on the buttered side, therefore pulled the toast to revolve around the spatial axis until the sticky side faced earthward. It was always more probable that it should land buttered-side down though the ten per cent failure rate did not disprove the theory but showed that, for a one hundred percent success rate to be achieved, an indefinite fall distance would have to be given so that the greater density could have its full effect.

This 'indefinite distance' was calculated as P where

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$$P = \frac{\rho m}{a^2 - b^2}$$

and a is the density of the buttered side, b is the density of the unbuttered side and m is the total mass of the toast (ρ is a constant).

This equation therefore proved that the greater the difference in density, the smaller the indefinite fall distance became, while an increase in total mass increased the value.

Having now proven why buttered toast fell buttered-side down, Hamthagoras set about determining how this phenomenon might be prevented. And this was what led him on to discover gravity - over a millennia before the human Isaac Newton discovered the very same thing.

Hamthagoras proposed that the reason for the toast's fall onto the floor was that the mass of the cage bottom attracted the object toward it (this, quite obviously, is known as the gravitational pull of an object but the phrase was not coined by Hamthagoras), pulling it into the wood shavings that acted as a covering. It wasn't, therefore, the shavings that had attracted the toast but the large mass of the cage floor - and this was the breakthrough.

If one wanted to prevent the toast from landing butter-side down on the shavings, they could simply be removed to another part of the cage and the floor would attract the food *on its own* - that is, the shavings would not pull the toast away from the cage floor because the individual mass was less than the total floor mass.

To translate this into practicalities for humans, it means that a piece of buttered toast is not attracted to a moulting hairy carpet *but to the cement floor beneath it*. To prevent the attachment of fluff, hair and dandruff onto sticky buttered toast, the carpet needs only to be rolled up and placed in the corner of the room. The toast will be attracted to the floor (the greater mass) and will not fall into the carpet.

Hamthagoras' brilliance has been sadly overlooked by modern day humans who rely more upon Newton's apples than Hamthagoras' toast.

But judge for yourselves - which do you prefer?

A piece of hot buttered toast or a French Granny Smith?

My point entirely...

The afternoon was drawing on and I made it back to the apartment just in time to find Lee and Kath planning to walk to the north side of town to see if they could climb the hill that commanded one's attention from way below on the plain. Kath also hoped to see some rare birds - being an old twitcher at heart - and she took along her binoculars and bird identification books in the rucksacks.

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They were all too pleased to take me along for the ride, room being made for me in one of the bulging side pockets of Lee's new bag.

Up and up we climbed through narrow and narrower streets, through areas with ever more suspicious-looking Greek nationals hanging over balcony parapets, until we arrived at a patch of wasteland on the edge of town. Here, Kath saw an I sabeline Shrike which made her day but, climbing further up to a short outcrop of rock and then descending, a hoopoe emerged out from a pine tree and began eating and probing the ground.

I enjoy seeing wildlife - I admit - and the views I had not only of the birds but of the emerald lizards that scurried away from approaching footprints were great to witness. But, what really puzzled me, was the bird that both Kath and Lee kept referring to as an 'Els' - and pretty thin ones they were, too.

Why did it puzzle me?

Because, wherever they went, they seemed to be there (perhaps they were following us?) and they were always in need of food, their bones sticking through their skin like some ill-fed creature. Or, at least, I presume they looked this way - I rarely had a long enough glance to do more than identify them as a passing blur of silhouetted feathers.

And there was always more than one or two, they appear never to have travelled or hunted in anything less than flocks. I've looked through the annals of ornithological history and am yet to find an 'Els' described or mentioned - when I approached Lee and Kath, having come back from Greece, they categorically denied that there is such a bird.

So why did they say they'd seen so many of them?

Having recorded their exact words on more than one occasion, I confronted them with the evidence but they were still not forthcoming with an admission that they'd mentioned it. But, not only do I have their conversation recorded, my mind plays back the conversation as clear as if it had happened just a few moments ago.

'What's that?' Lee would say as birds flitted and darted about in front of them.

Kath would follow them with her binoculars until they were either too far away in the distance or they flew into tree cover.

'That's, er, that's,' Kath would begin, frantically trying to locate the bird in her book. Finally, she'd close the book with a thump and announce, 'Must be some thin Els.'

To which Lee invariably replied, 'Gosh, we've seen quite a few of those this holiday.'

KAVALA - MONDAY 14TH SEPTEMBER 1998

My owners have a saying (though I think that most humans use it, too) - 'When in Rome, do as the Romans'.

Lee and Kath extrapolated this saying to an extreme on holiday though, as the graffiti on George's old Rotastak unit (written, too, by the one and only George) bears witness, it wasn't uncommon for them to do the same when they were in Paris.

In Greece, the saying is adapted to say 'When in Greece, do as the Romans' or, as it was in Paris 'When in Paris, do as the Romans'.

What I mean is that they seem to have the inordinate ability to seek out and find any and every pizza place that's in the near vicinity of their hotel accommodation. Run by nationalised Italians, these food outlets speak a form of the national language that even the Greeks don't understand. What chance, then, do Lee and Kath stand who were still struggling with recognising the alphabet and who frequently mispronounced transliterations as a matter of course?

Add to this the strange fact that the Greek word for 'no' sounds remarkably like 'okay' and 'yes' sounds like 'no', and couple both these with Lee's frequently used body language of putting his hands in front of him when he says 'no' (an action that, to the Greeks, means something like 'Get away from me, satan, that's far enough!'), you immediately have a recipe for disaster.

But, all credit to the endearing qualities of their warm smile, they never once caused an international incident - apart from that isolated occasion that I promised I wouldn't mention. I didn't believe the testimony of that olive planter when the case was finally heard and, fortunately for Lee and Kath, neither did the judge.

But, I digress.

The problem with the Greeks (and I'm sure that they would begin sentences with a similar phrase, though ending in 'the English') is that they aren't the most animal-loving nation on the earth. Therefore, Lee's visit to the local shops to get a balanced diet of seeds and nuts for me wasn't successful, his description to the shop owner of the kind of animal I am, compelling him to be offered tins of tuna-flavoured dog food.

Consequently, I had to rely on whatever titbits were saved for me from the pizza establishment that they frequented. This wasn't a problem - Lee forgets that, being a hamster, I'm naturally resourceful and don't rely upon the food that he manages to provide for me - but the scraps of ham, feta and pizza base provided a good supplement to my daily scavenging expeditions.

Indeed, their provision for me was more dependent upon the restaurant waiter's tolerance of pieces of pizza being stuffed into their rucksack side-pocket than it was a necessity for my welfare. The 'eccentric English' is a phrase that is, fortunately, widespread and universally applied wherever and whenever they're met.

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Today they were going to 'do' Kavala, the ancient port of Neapolis and, having little at hand that seemed an overriding constraint upon me, I opted for the journey, room once again being provided for me in the right hand side pocket of Lee's rucksack.

We were out of the hotel by eight, Lee and Kath needing to get postage for the cards they'd written over the weekend. It was irrelevant that their presence back home would beat their cards' arrival, but sending postcards has become as much a tradition as actually going somewhere. Even 'days out' seem to bring out their letter writing fetish that compels them to attempt world records of quantities sent.

Let me tell you just a little about the 'lie of the land' in case any hamsters reading this may wish to go. Drama is situated in a very large plain - a valley floor - to the south-east of which the floor rises into mountains that disappear just as suddenly into the sea. Here Kavala is situated, almost built like an amphitheatre into the side of the hills.

Kavala is a noisy, bustling city - every bit as noisy and more than Drama (causing Lee to comment that it must be impossible to die anywhere in Greece 'quietly in your sleep' - there's always something happening and it's usually noisy), far hotter and more humid too - oppressively so.

I mentioned in another article how it wasn't until I travelled to Kavala that I began to understand the strategic importance of Philippi, situated as it is on the side of an isolated mountain extending out from the range into the valley floor. It's no wonder that the town was so important in ancient times for it commanded a view across the land for miles and lay on the main West-East routeway of the ancient world named the Via Egnatia.

But, let me get back to Kavala.

This was a bonus for me, I hadn't intended to make it here and wouldn't have been able to had my owners not discovered me and offered me travel. I knew already that there was a strong cyber-hamster community here situated under the ruins of the old Turkish citadel, known collectively as the 'Gerbil Jihad' who, even as I write this, surf the Internet for evidence of cruelty done to hamsters, gerbils and mice, launching retaliatory counter-measures through a network of animals situated at strategic points throughout the known world.

Next time you read the postings on the alt.pets.hamsters newsgroup you may, unknowingly, be reading the comments of members of the Gerbil Jihad.

As soon as we arrived at the bus station, situated on the fishing harbour where men mend their nets, we made for the citadel.

I had already given Lee precise co-ordinates as to where both the entrance and exit was but, being watched by some local Greeks sipping tea at a table, he cleverly feigned a fear of heights at a particularly narrow place on the battlement where the walkway shrank to two feet and the drop to around twenty (I think it was feigned - but his face did turn a very pale white), allowing me to clamber down his trouser leg, through the

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concealed entrance and into the cool gallery where hamsters tapped away at computer consoles.

Momentarily the tapping stopped but they soon reverted to their monitoring of the Web as I tiptoed carefully past them to the door behind which their mastermind worked.

I peered over one's shoulder to witness a newsgroup posting boasting hamster mistreatment, followed by a few pressed buttons and unusual sounds that terminated the offender's account with their ISP and debited their credit card to the tune of \$1527 (this being an American based server - of course, this amount would be recredited but it does make for a nasty shock especially when the creditors are 'Gerbil Jihad').

Another, just before I knocked to go in was decoding a lengthy encryption placed on a Web site somewhere in Japan and began swapping the web pages on the ISP for information promoting the aims of the Jihad in multiple languages.

I entered the room and Bean rose to greet me (his real name, quite obviously, is not Bean - and I have only specified the actual location of the headquarters because, by the time anyone reads this, they will have long gone and set up an Internet connection in another place).

'Kesef?' he said.

I nodded.

'We have been expecting you - please, take a seat.'

I sat back on a soft cushion in the corner of the room and took the cup of sunflower oil that was offered. I had so many questions, having learnt of the Jihad's existence quite by chance and just a few days before I'd left for Greece. I took the plunge and dived straight in.

'So, tell me Bean,' I began, 'why a hamster resistance movement? And why here in Greece?'

'Well,' Bean stretched out on the soft bedding and closed down his computer as he continued, 'the resistance began over two years ago through discussions we were having on the Internet...'

I noticed that Bean had said 'we' but I decided not to pry further as to who the 'we' might be.

'...but as for our location,' he lifted his hands, 'the Greeks have always proved themselves to be the greatest resistance fighters the world has ever known.'

'But Greece isn't exactly the hub of the Internet, is it?'

'No, true - but the connection times are quicker and our owners are out most of the time eating the night away so we can devote longer hours to our work.'

One question had been nagging at me for a few days since the jolt of the landing in Thessalonica had prompted its formation in my mind.

'How successful do you think the Jihad is?'

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'Very,' he squeaked with mirth, 'we even have a cyber newsletter that we distribute monthly with examples of the action that's been successful. Here, let me give you a hard copy for you to take back with you.'

He handed me sheets of pressed palm leaves, written on front and back with pasted peanut butter and baked dry in the sun til the characters became like cement.

'Please - read the article now, it will give you a good insight into our work.'

I opened the first leaf and was confronted by a testimony entitled 'Revenge of the Teenage Mutant Hamsters' from a rodent who appeared to reside outside Greece. I began reading.

On 16 Aug 97,
Kid Nippy wrote
on the <alt.pets.hamsters> Newsgroup,
'I killed my hamster.'

My story is a strange one but by no means unusual. I've seen it happen in all too many lives and in places that I don't remember - or choose not to. My memory is clouded with tales too long and too intricate to tell, with countless consequences of actions that no-one thinks are linked and which very few people see as being related.

Yes, I could tell you tales.

But let me tell you just one.

In a faraway land - at least a thousand miles from where I live now with my masters - there once lived a kid who killed his hamster. Now you and I would shudder at such a thought, we would shrink back (if we were human) from ever performing such a callous act as that.

But this kid was different. He thought he could get away scot-free from the consequence of his own actions. He thought that his misdemeanour was something to boast about to his friends and something that would make him new ones - something to glory in and be proud of.

But if he'd've known then what he knows now - well, he'd never have inherited that incident when...

...No, I'm going too fast now, let me start from where you can follow and from where the story will make sense...

Nippy - for this was the child's name - didn't care.

What about?

Everything, really - except himself. And this was his downfall in the end.

What I must emphasise to you is that this was entirely his own choice - no-one is so tied in to a way of life at the beginning that they can't decide to break with the past and live to the new, but the path was delightful to Nippy to start with and the rewards

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appeared so great that he followed the route with unquenchable fervour til at last there was no way back.

It was the 16th of August when that fateful posting appeared on the Newsgroup.

Why do humans think that their messages are only read by creatures such as themselves? Why don't they realise that there are animals even more intelligent than they who read these notes?

And so it was that I, Moscatan the hamster, scanning through the titles of newly posted messages, came across that title that sent shivers up and down my spine and gave me goosebumps where I'd never imagined that it was possible to get them.

Murder.

I clicked on the header expecting to read some plaintiff cry from a kid who'd accidentally left the cage door open only to discover that his pride and joy had escaped in the night to be eaten by the family's cat - or someone who'd forgotten that his pet was running about the floor and had accidentally trodden on it.

Such things as these happen and many owners blame themselves. True, with greater care they could have been prevented, with a bit more wisdom these things could have been foreseen - and owners need the encouragement to deal with their sense of guilt and their own condemnation of themselves as 'murderers' and start all over again with a new pet, a new resolve to give that little ball of fur and teeth the best life they can.

That's what I was expecting but, instead, here was a kid positively delighting in the fact that he'd killed his hamster!

I squeaked indignantly and with a very great deal of displeasure. It came out from between my teeth with such volume that I heard my masters turn over in bed at the sound and I had to stifle a snarl that I felt coming on and which would give the game away that I'd worked out how to turn the computer on and hack through the password screen (and not for the first time, I might add).

Angrily, I clicked on the 'follow up posting' selection and typed in 'And one day the hamsters will get their revenge' pressing the 'okay' button and watching it disappear onto the Newsgroup in a split second.

'Now,' I thought, 'now's the time to get that promise fulfilled.'

Crouching under cover of the long grass, they inched their way slowly, stealthily toward the lit ground window that sparkled in the darkening night. The moon peeked its head out from behind the wispy clouds that laboured wearily across the sky and the first frog emerged from the cover of deep water to begin its nocturnal hunt for food.

All was well, they hadn't seen them.

The grass rustled at the advance that betrayed their presence, then the borders bowed under their weight and the newly planted sapling bent with the strain of the lookout as he climbed to its pinnacle to check the path and squeak the 'all clear'.

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Something furry, very large and not the sort of thing you'd like to meet down a dark alley at night, darted suddenly from the shadows, across the tarmac and into the bush that grew beside the front door.

Then another.

Branches bent downward as they climbed toward the letterbox, reaching the strongest of launch pads and propelling themselves through the opening like butter-lubricated carrots spinning across a child's plate.

'Was that the mail box?' the adult said looking behind them, momentarily distracted from the commercials that flashed and sang and flickered in the dimly lit room.

'Not at this time - be reasonable, it's half past eleven.'

'Oh, yeah - forgot.'

The Teenage Mutant hamsters allowed their bodies to relax, pressed hard, as they were, against the wall.

'Come on!' one said. 'He'll be upstairs in bed, asleep.'

And with that they tiptoed passed the rear of the sofa and made for the bedroom landing.

Nippy's conscience had been bothering him - somewhere in the deep recesses of a darkened mind, some slight glimmer of hope still shone. There was an awakening, a stirring that he'd tried hard to suppress ever since that day.

But he'd kept on running away, down endless corridors, fleeing from the voice that called his actions in to question. Not even his parents had been told the despicable nature of that deed - such was the level to which he'd sunk that he'd shown them false sorrow and proclaimed it to have been a tragic accident, having received the comfort that comes from being an only child with endless presents to ameliorate his suffering.

If only they'd been told.

His deeds were never far from his waking thoughts but he only succeeded in pushing them down, further aside than it was wise to, but there was still a glimmer that made him remember.

Nippy slept peacefully, in spite of the war that raged inside during the waking hours, his head only poking out from the covers occasionally when he flipped over onto his back.

He knew nothing of his midnight visitors and would definitely never find out their true identity - but he was all too soon to discover the mission on which they'd been sent.

The furry mammals pushed their way under the door and sat on their rear paws squeaking quietly to one another as they waited the signal from the bushes that would mark the start of this covert operation.

On the stroke of midnight, the wheel of the empty hamster cage that stood on the cupboard near the window, began to creak. Nippy's ears pricked up, unsure whether what

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he'd just heard was a dream or reality. He scanned the room for further sounds but - nothing - just the gentle sound of a breeze as it rustled through the leaves outside.

Then the wheel creaked again, this time louder. Nippy sat up in bed, looking over toward the metal wires, his heart beginning to race uncontrollably. He tried to control his breath but the adrenaline wouldn't allow him, he began panting and he felt a cold, icy sweat break out on his forehead.

Silence again. Nippy doubted his ears but he knew - he just knew - that he'd heard it, there was no mistaking.

Suddenly, the wheel came alive with rattles and squeaks, Nippy jumping from the bed and trying the door to the bedroom which had been firmly locked by his combatants-in-fur.

Just as suddenly as the noise had started, it stopped. All he could see was blackness, a void, but he knew the sound to be coming from the cage. Dare he turn on the light? Dare he take a look at this, this whatever it was that had been running in the wheel? What if his pet had come back to haunt him? What then?

There was a rustling and a scraping in the chippings that still lay on the floor of the cage. The water bottle rattled as whatever it was pressed its tongue against the metal bearing that released fluid into its mouth. The food clicked as it was batted about with a firm paw against the sides of the dish.

Nippy had no hesitation in believing that this was indeed his hamster - his very dead hamster - come back as some fiendish ghoul to haunt him for the rest of his life.

'I shouldn't have done it,' he thought. 'What have I done to myself?'

For Nippy still thought of every action in terms that were either beneficial or detrimental to himself - he hadn't come to see that others needed considering.

He tried the door again, this time with a firmer pull, but it remained fast.

'Mum?' he shouted.

No answer.

'Dad?' he cried, his voice now with a distinct tremble while his throat became ever more dry.

'Squeeeeeeeaaaak!' the voice came from the cage.

'Squeeeeeeeaaaak!' the voice came to the side of where he stood, somewhere in the region of his pleasant warm bed.

'*SQUUUUUUEEEEEEEAAAAAK!*' the blood-curdling, venomous sounding hiss was directly over head! Nippy cast an eye upwards in time to see a furry-like object descending rapidly, paws outstretched, fangs glistening in what little light shone into the room from outside.

'*AAAAAARRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*' the scream echoed round the four walls and came back to hit him in his face, the furry attachment to his head sinking his sharp claws into his scalp and his teeth into the protruding ear.

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Another attachment - this time on his foot - brought a wince of pain and a warm trickle of blood that warmed his chilling limb. Frantically - and blindly - Nippy fumbled for something, anything, clutching at whatever he could, crashing into furniture, pulling ornaments onto the floor and drawers' contents out onto the carpet - not noticing that whatever had been attached to his head was now gone, and the furry object at his foot had fled under the door and away as fast as his paws would carry him.

Still the demolition went on as one after the other, objects were wrecked and battered, each time Nippy thinking that what he'd got hold of was somehow his assailant. As he let out one final scream, the door clicked open and an adult hand flicked the light switch on to reveal a carnage the likes of which had never been seen since the Second World War.

Nippy stood in the middle of the floor, his earthly possessions piled around his feet in pieces - heads ripped off war figures, board games ripped in two and pieces scattered to the four corners - one piece even hung from the lamp shade.

His father looked at him in bewilderment.

'What in heaven's name are you doing, Nippy?' he said in disbelief as his son began to cry.

'It came back to haunt me,' he sobbed. 'My hamster came back to haunt me.'

His father paused a moment as his wife looked in over his shoulder, wiping her eyes in disbelief at what they were telling her had happened.

'And why would it do that?' his tone was even and constrained.

'Because...' Nippy was finding it hard to use the right words, he knew he had to admit the truth regardless. 'Because, I killed it, dad. I ki...' and he broke in to tears.

'Yes, we know.'

Nippy sobbed but heard what'd been said.

'Then why...(whine)...why didn't...(sniff)...you tell me...(wail)...you knew...'

'Because,' the father said, 'because you have to grow up and learn what happens when you take the easy way out. Your mom and I both knew your conscience would bring that deed back to your remembrance - though we couldn't have possibly imagined it would turn out like this.'

'But it attacked me...'

'Nonsense,' his mother interrupted, 'It was just a bad dream.'

'Get me another hamster, dad. I promise, this time, I'll look after it the way I should.'

'Well, we'll see. First things first - go and get the black sacks and the broom and clear up your room'

'A bit like Jaws but with more fur,' I said. 'Sort of "Furry Vigilantes" or "Guardians of the Sacred Nut".'

Bean smiled. 'You could say that - but it's a very rewarding work.'

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'Vengeance is rewarding?'

'No, not vengeance. No hatred. No anger. Just corrective therapy by our operatives. If humans don't bring their humanlets up properly then we must take it upon ourselves to do so.'

Suddenly there was a loud tap above me.

'I must dash - apologies,' I said. 'My masters are awaiting me.'

'Yes, of course. Keep in touch.'

'Certainly,' I responded. 'Here, have my address' and I wrote in large letters arlev@clara.net quickly handing it over as I scurried upwards and into the opened rucksack pocket.

'Sorry I was so long,' I apologised.

'No problem,' Lee responded. 'Kath lost her paper fan which took us ages to search for - then a Blue Rock Thrush flew past her and that delayed us even more. I was just wondering whether you'd been eaten by a rat when I knocked.'

'Me? Eaten? Don't be daft.'

Yet again, the evening found Lee and Kath at the Pizza Loganta, though this time Kath threw caution to the wind and ordered tagliatelle instead of the pizza. This shocked the waiter - so much so that he needed a short lie down to recover.

It's quite usual for tourists to begin to pick up words and expressions throughout their stay, using them in conversation with increasing confidence as the time wears on towards their departure. Not so Lee and Kath - in fact, as I monitored their conversation with the waiter over the evenings they were there, it seemed to me that it was the waiter, Andreas, who was learning more English.

At least he didn't mind and, by this evening, all three of them were laughing and joking together like old friends - not that they really understood much of what each other said, but at least they were getting along okay.

I noticed from my side pocket, though, that two pairs of eyes still glared toward the table through the potted plant leaves just at the time that pieces of pizza entered the Velcro flap.

Thankfully the police had not yet been called and, with only three days left, it looked as if we might just make it to the end. However, the German tourist who sat on the far side of the restaurant motioned to the waiter and mumbled something incomprehensible, nodding in our general direction.

A few words were said in response, one sounding like 'angleekos' to which the tourist gave a knowing smile and reverted back to eating his meal.

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PHILIPPI (DAY TWO) - TUESDAY 15TH SEPTEMBER 1998

'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun'
Noel Coward

Lee is nuts - that statement is nothing new - but the heights (or depths?) to which his lunacy soared found new levels. My previous diary entry for Saturday noted that Lee was only thinking about climbing to the top of the Acropolis which towers over the valley floor and that I was understanding that it really was a task better left untried.

Today, at 6.40am (notice that - it was 'am' and this is supposed to be a holiday), just when I'd turned over in my nest in the corner of the wardrobe, Kath's watch alarm sounded the call for them both to dive out of bed, hastily getting things together in rucksacks.

I poked my head round the door and, through half-opened eyes, witnessed the scene. 'What's going on?' I squeaked. 'Fire alarm?'

'No, no - the Acropolis. First fully overcast day we've had and we need to get there so I can climb during the early hours when it's cooler.'

'Are you nuts?' I questioned. 'That mountain is friendless!'

Lee stopped in his tracks, his hand halfway into the rucksack placing water canisters securely onto its base.

'Are you coming or not?' Lee asked. 'I've padded the side-pocket so you'll get an easier ride.'

'I thought so - you are nuts...'

'Of course I'm nuts. Why else would we tolerate the presence of our pet hamster on holiday with us in Paris, Scotland and now Greece?'

He had a point - Lee's insanity did have its good sides. Perhaps I was being unfair in my assessment of the situation? I thought long and hard for a few moments, reconsidering my position on the entire perspective of Lee's sanity.

No, I was right the first time, Lee *was* nuts. But then so must I be for ever coming out here with them - and if I was nuts, that meant that I had to say, 'Yes, I'm coming - let me in to that pocket.'

We arrived at eight o'clock at the opened gates - we discovered that the site actually didn't open til eight-thirty but there was an old guy who jumped out of his car when we went in and sold us some tickets. From there, Kath walked eastwards to an area that she had made a mental note of last time to be good for bird-spotting, while Lee and I turned west and almost immediately upwards towards the Archaeological museum.

At the back, there was a path which began by running east, under the shade of an old vine, before ascending towards the first wall that marked the real start of the climb. The path is a twisting one all the way to the summit, following a zigzag line of

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retaining walls up the hill. We appeared to be getting nowhere for the first third of the journey even though height was gained, because we made no lateral progress towards the Acropolis some 800 metres away.

I gave Lee all the encouragement I could.

'Wow! Look at that view!'

-gasp.

-wheeze.

'Hey, Lee! Look at that view!'

-pant.

-gasp.

But Lee didn't appear to want to be encouraged. About two-thirds of the way up, Lee stopped for a drink of water and to wring out his shirt which had now caused the dye of his rucksack to run.

'Not bad, is it Kesef?'

'That's what I was trying to tell you - what a view!'

'See the battlefield?'

'Yes, yes - what a perspective!'

We pressed on - even though, had it been my choice, I would have been pleased with where I'd got to and returned down the slope. The path became more difficult as we approached the summit, loose stones and boulders causing his feet to slip (perhaps we were the first ones up here for weeks?) but, eventually, we came to the first building - a ruin - and noticed others to the west and north.

Lee moved on to the largest of the buildings - it looked Byzantine, but I'm no expert - and was just passing a large hole on the western side (where a spiral staircase - probably unsafe - rose into the main body of the structure) when my head was turned as I heard a loud squeak.

'Stop!' I shouted.

'What?!'

'I heard a hamster!'

'Here?'

'Yes. There it is again. Over there in the crack.'

I squeaked back a welcome and a small furry head briefly exited into daylight, saw Lee and then retreated just as fast.

'Don't panic,' I squeaked, 'we're friendly.'

The head, this time more tentatively, poked a nose out to sniff the air, then squeaked, 'Who said that?'

'I'm in the big black thing that the human's carrying,' I shouted - and I waved to attract his attention.

'Oh, so you are.'

'Don't worry, he won't harm you.'

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'What are you doing here?'

'Just visiting.'

'Don't get many visitors.'

'I can imagine.'

'What's your name?'

'Kesef. Yours?'

'Kostas,' he squeaked, 'and I come from a long line of mountain hamsters. We have inhabited this hill for millennia - my fathers and my fathers' fathers have been born and raised here, we have lived and died here and yet very few know of our existence.'

I held out a paw while he hopped into the rucksack pocket. Lee walked round til he was overlooking Philippi in the valley below, then placed his back-pack on the floor and sat down beside us staring down.

'Did you use the path?' Kostas said.

'Yes.'

'You've come from Philippi, then?'

'Yes - there for the day.'

'Mmm,' Kostas paused, 'that's an eventful place - or, at least, it was.'

'So I've been told.'

'We see everything from here,' he continued, 'we see the comings, the goings, the peoples, the wars - we have a long history of observation from our position.'

'A long history?'

'Millennia,' he replied. 'Yes, very many millennia...'

Something strange was going on in Philippi that day, something that never seemed to be duplicated afterwards. Of course, Philippi was a Roman town then, 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 at that time, we could see the town 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 being 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 had 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 Via Egnatia. No, that wasn't particularly strange in

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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.

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 had 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, 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.

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As the crowd re-entered the city from the stream, the rabble in the forum massed together and walked quickly up onto the Via Egnatia 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 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 the mountainside 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 round 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 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,' Kostas concluded.

'Didn't the splashing ever happen again?' Lee asked.

'Not with the same frequency. And the marching out was rarer, too.'

'But it did happen?'

'Yes, indeed.'

Kostas turned and gave me a long hug that felt like my eyes were bulging out from my head with the strength of his grip.

'Take care of yourself, Kesef,' Kostas began. 'When you next come, I'll be waiting to tell you more.'

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The day had turned showery and, despite the Museum Curator taking time out to explain more aspects of the site and to answer questions, they returned to Drama on the one-thirty bus and made for the Council offices to get a map of Drama to put on the web site.

That Drama is regarded as a backwater is a true statement - that Drama does not want to stay a backwater is equally certain. But neither does it want to become a 'typical' Greek destination that brings out the worst in its visitors.

I listened to Lee's conversation (conversation? More like hand gestures that made no sense) and, somehow, he found himself directed across the road to the third floor of a glass panelled building where the 'Internet' resources were housed. Lee needed permission to put the map on the web and that's where he had to go to get it.

Drama does have it's own web site, but it's in Greek - even more reason to put some English information on.

But I listened with unbelief when Lee said, 'Do you know what a hamster is?' my unbelief transforming into horror when he continued, 'We're hoping that our hamster will write a series of articles about our journey here.'

The Greeks are extremely hospitable and I'm sure that we would have been offered coffee had that last statement not been fully understood but, to reinforce his comments, Lee tapped in the web site address and downloaded George's web site for good measure.

I knew that Lee wouldn't undo the flap on the rucksack side pocket but, for one ghastly moment, I thought he might. The workers, though, managed to realistically feign a lunch break and Lee and Kath felt obliged to leave.

I told you the Greeks were wise.

They get it from Philo.

THE NORTH HILL - WEDNESDAY 16TH SEPTEMBER 1998

'We saw lots of apes, tree frogs and snakes
And parrots that come from afar.
But best of them all was the Walls Ice Cream stall,
Which we found at the gate near the car.

'The ocelots spots are bigger than dots
And the Asian lynx stinks worse than glue.
Guanacos and rheas run fast when they see us,
And we found that the Pudu do poo.'

Old Rhyme about Chester Zoo by Arlev

I don't think that the situations Lee finds himself in are all his own fault. He seems to be the victim of circumstance on more than one occasion when the avoidance of the problems that he encounters cannot be achieved.

Take, for instance, this morning. A simple event like changing his travellers cheques into local money turned into an epic that seemed to get blown out of all proportion, and all because - well, let me start at the beginning.

It was early, but the post office in Drama opens at seven-thirty so it wasn't *too* early. Having expressed my desire to come out with him for a short restitutorial stroll in his backpack, I was gently woken and placed in the side pocket. I just love watching humans work - I don't know what it is that fascinates me, but their co-ordination and concentration coupled with their vast degree of skill in being able to maintain something they dislike doing for years on end never ceases to amaze me.

The Guide Book had instructed Lee that the post office was the best place to cash cheques, that the charge for the transaction was cheapest here. Well, that last part was certainly true - the cost was so cheap because they couldn't change the money for him at all.

They sent him looking for banks - again, all open. He compared the drachma/sterling rates, chose the most advantageous and went in.

'Angleekos,' Lee said and pointed toward himself (he had added the arm gesture because, a couple of days previous he had just uttered the word and got the reply 'No, I'm Greek'). 'Do you speak English?'

'Ah yes,' the teller responded, 'a leetle.'

Lee removed the damp cheques from his pocket and placed them on the counter. The teller looked surprised but shuffled through them knowingly.

'Travellers cheques,' Lee said.

'Yes, yes. Of course,' she responded. 'One minute.'

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A cashier was called from the rear of the premises who looked equally surprised but reassured by whatever the teller was saying - which could have been 'half a pound of carrots and two potatoes' for all Lee knew.

Or for all I knew, for that matter.

The couple went to the safe, opened it, unlocked an inner compartment and removed a manual from the top shelf. This was thumbed through gradually until an appropriate place was found - then it fell shut and had to be re-opened.

At that moment, a young woman arrived for work and was let in at the locked side door (no doubt this is for security purposes but, as the counter barriers are only some five feet high, there seems little or no point in the lock).

Having removed her coat, she walked over and joined the conversation.

The man was gesticulating wildly and his voice raised a couple of octaves - he was frantically searching on the table that had the travellers cheques on, but he seemed not to be able to find what he expected to be there. A few moments later he dived into the bin, unravelling pieces of paper one after the other until he let out a contented sigh and placed it under Lee's cheques.

The teller returned to her place where Lee was standing and apologised.

'Ten minutes,' she said.

'Is there a problem?' Lee enquired in his clearest speech.

'No, no,' she responded almost casually, 'we see Germans, only - and they have, er, have...' she gesticulated a rectangular shape in the air.

'Notes?' Lee added.

'Ah yes, notes,' she repeated. 'Please, seat.'

Lee sat down and began to smile.

'Makes you wonder, doesn't it, Kesef?' Lee spoke quietly into the pocket out of earshot. 'Alexander the Great conquered endless kingdoms to establish the Greek Empire, but his descendants can't even discover how to convert foreign currency!'

The consulting group had now turned into about half a dozen bank officials - including a rather large, stout man who Lee told me afterward was probably the manager. Each of them were speaking (though not simultaneously) and the cheques were held up to the light, reversed, handed out to everyone to feel and then inspect.

Then a phone call was made and a screen was consulted (from where Lee was sat, he said that it had numbers all over it but it could just have easily have been a SKY channel - it didn't seem to help them). Finally, the babble subsided and the male cashier came to the front by the counter and began writing.

A few more minutes passed then Lee was called forward. He rose to walk to the counter but I squeaked loudly so he returned to take his rucksack - I wanted to see and hear what was going on.

'Please,' the cashier said, 'you sign here?' he pointed to the reverse.

'No, no,' Lee said, turning the cheque over. 'Here.'

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'Ah yes. Please?'

A pen was handed him and he began signing them. A few moments later, another piece of paper was handed him that he was invited to sign - then the original handed back to him to take to the teller on the far side of the bank (a lot of Drama's shops work on the principle of having to pay at a central point for a product before it's collected from the sales assistant - this was the principle in reverse).

The teller received the paper and began counting out the money. A few more moments and the transaction was completed and we were on our way back to the hotel. It only took forty minutes, too, from the time we left the apartment room to our return.

Kath, of course, feared the worst, having waited in the room wondering what was going on all that time and hearing sirens tear down the main street. She needn't have worried, I wouldn't have let anything happen to him.

If Lee was mad yesterday for climbing to the Philippi Acropolis when it was cold, overcast and early morning, then words fail me to describe today's adventure.

To the north of Drama lies a hill with a large white cross secured about three quarters of the way up. Though my owners had decided simply to wander around on the lower reaches of the hill in a mad quest for unusual birds (which today, according to Kath's bird list, included Syrian Woodpeckers, a Goshawk, Bee-eaters, a Booted Eagle and a tortoise - the latter of these must obviously have evolved for, the last time I looked at the Natural History books, it only had a hard shiny shell and four scaly feet. There were also plenty of EIs), they had been drawn upwards by ascending steps until they found themselves with just two flights to climb until the summit.

The weather was hot - no clouds, just sun - and as we approached the last few steps I could see Phillipi's Acropolis some ten miles away *below* us. Unknowingly, they had climbed further today than Lee had the day previous.

The cafeteria on the pinnacle of the hill was closed but, as we rounded the rear end, all I could smell was cat scent making my skin crawl and the hair on the back of my head stand on end.

I squealed my feelings and they came to an abrupt halt.

'What's wrong?' Kath said.

'Cats! In the plural!' I replied. 'And more than one, too!'

'What do you want us to do?' she continued. 'Can you smell a mousehole to go down?'

'Nope. Hardly likely to be one either.'

'Just because your nose is telling you one thing, Kesef, it doesn't mean it's unsafe here. Appearance isn't everything.'

'In my world, appearance saves lives.'

'I can't see any danger,' Lee chipped in.

'But I can smell it,' I insisted. 'Appearance is more than sight - my senses paint a picture that I recognise as being dangerous. Sight can be deceptive.'

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I thought for a moment, then continued.

'Scent can speak of safety even when your eyes would tell you there's danger. But the testimony of both nose and eye when they concur should be trusted. Sit down a moment - let me tell you a story...'

Deep in the recesses of a forest where no man had ever set foot and where seldom a beast would go because of the thick undergrowth, there lived a ferret that went by the name of Ferdinand.

As ferrets go, he was most unusual and, if you had seen his small frame that scurried around his territory in search of prey, you would have probably mistaken him for something else. But he'd always believed he was a ferret, had been raised by ferrets as, he supposed, his mother and father had been before him and he had, quite naturally, taken on ferret ways.

Perhaps it was his small size that made you sit up and wonder just what sort of beast this was - but there was never a time that Ferdinand ever doubted that his true vocation in life was to live, eat and breathe the nature and character of a ferret.

Until, that is, the day that changed his mind forever.

But, I'm going too fast, as I do constantly in my story telling, and I should begin where the reader can appreciate the tale that I'm about to tell. There's background information that you need to consider and, if you could, smells, sights and sounds that you need to take in and appreciate for all these things had played their part in shaping Ferdinand to be the ferret he was - or, thought he was.

But, of course, you don't see what I see, as a hamster, and can't perceive the immensity of what's around you because of the way you live - nevertheless, let me try and paint a picture that you can at least recognise.

Ferdinand began each day with a yawn.

That may not sound like some devastating piece of information that would change your life - and indeed it isn't - but it *is* the fact of the matter. There was nothing, believed Ferdinand, that was more important in life than that first restless yawn that signalled the start of another hunting day.

Soon (and the actual time varied immensely with the passing of the seasons), a twitching pink nose emerged from the nest where he'd slept that night and two furry paws followed soon after with a scratch and a pummel of the soil around him.

On rainy days, he'd return to the soft bedding for a further nap, hoping that, somehow, the rain might blow away and the sun emerge from behind darkened skies, but on bright ones he fairly skipped out into the familiar surroundings, welcoming the smells and sights that imposed themselves upon his senses.

Then came the thought of food - and usually a dream of the largest egg in the world through the midnight hours, prompted him to visit the local nests in search of its

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fulfilment. It was never long - during the summer months at least - until he was crunching his way through the semi-tough shell that held within it that soft, warm liquid that pleased his stomach.

Life went on, the days spanned out into autumn, then winter and finally spring again. Smells changed with each passing week, the bright aromas of summer giving way to the mustiness of a damp November chill when the desire for just one more summer day before the snow was always a welcome dream.

Animals were caught and eaten if they strayed too near the nest - or if they were unfortunate enough to pass his hiding place where he watched time slip by into the night.

Life was good for a ferret - Ferdinand was sure that that's what it was meant to be like. After all, it's what his parents had always told him to do. But there was something inside him that never quite believed what he'd learned. Something, that, well, just didn't witness with the words he'd stored up in his memory since those early childhood days.

And that was probably why the day did eventually come when...

...yes, now is the right time to tell you the story.

Ferdinand wasn't hungry.

Having eaten his fill of duck eggs, he'd nestled his tired frame into a healthy growth of moss that lay near the bank of a stream that gurgled and splashed its way to the larger river below through a seemingly endless cascade of rapids and falls.

His eyes were barely open but, never to be taken surprise by a would-be predator, his eyelids were never perfectly closed and any sudden movement or shadow would immediately snap his eyelids open from even the deepest of slumbers.

Ferdinand couldn't remember how long he'd been dosing in the tranquil state but a sudden rustle not five yards away from him warned him to the fact that he was not alone. His eyes emerged from behind closed shutters in the briefest of moments, and a small furry-like object looked quizzically at him with black beady eyes and a slightly tilted head.

'Not a predator,' thought the ferret. 'Just another little meat package on legs.'

The fur ball approached, its gaze growing more intense with each advancing paw. Two yards away, it abruptly stopped and stood on its hind quarters, sniffing the air to detect if any scent lingered in the gentle breeze.

'If I wasn't so full,' thought Ferdinand, 'and so tired, I'd have this fur ball for dinner.'

Having failed to detect any scent that was alarming or perplexing, the furry creature paced cautiously nearer - perhaps just a couple of feet away - and then took up a position facing the ferret with a curious grin on its face that beckoned friendship.

'Hamster?' it squeaked.

'Ferret!' said Ferdinand.

'Ferret?' it squeaked.

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'Yes. Hamster?' said Ferdinand.

'Yes. Ferret?' it squeaked questioningly, realising that the vocabulary used so far wasn't exactly going to get an award in the field of literature. 'Are you sure?'

'Ferret!' said Ferdinand. 'Ferret born and ferret bred.'

The hamster eyed him nervously, then the smile returned to his face as he squeaked, 'Hamster! You're having me on!'

'*Ferret!*' said Ferdinand.

'Hamster!' said the fur ball.

'*FERRET!*' insisted Ferdinand.

'Hamster, hamster, hamster!' squealed the fur ball with a giggle in his voice that caused his front paws to groom his head with the mirth of the statement.

'Come on now, it's plain and obvious that you're a hamster!'

'Ferret born and ferret bred...' recited Ferdinand.

'...Ferret paws and ferret head.

'Ferret mouth and ferret tail.

'Ferret claws a...'

'What tail?' squeaked the hamster. 'You don't have one! Look at it!'

Ferdinand turned to look behind him - something that he'd never before done - and gazed at the small skinny stump of skin that protruded from his rear end.

'See?' said the hamster. 'Compare that to mine,' and he turned round to wave his rear end in the ferret's face. 'Look familiar?'

Ferdinand was puzzled. He gazed at his 'tail', then at the hamster's, then back again at his.

'They certainly look the same but, no, surely not...' thought the ferret, before he spoke out the words, 'I tell you, I'm a ferret. I live like one, hunt like one, eat like one.'

He eyed the hamster menacingly even though the thought of food was far from his mind. 'I am a ferret through and through.'

'Hamster!' said the fur ball.

'*FERRET!*' said Ferdinand.

It was then that a window opened before him in his mind and scenes from his early life flashed before him like a choreographed show displayed on a giant screen. Images of distant times - and lands - and smells that he'd long since forgotten came flooding back to play once again in the theatre of his mind.

He remembered the blindness of the nest, the squeaks and warm fur that gave him comfort when he crawled into their embrace. He felt the security of just being there beside his protection and shield to the outside world...

...and then he remembered the agony of the silence when the warmth turned to tepidity to coolness to cold and the hunger that welled up within his stomach so suddenly that it was as if they'd never been there before. Then there were other smells that he

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didn't recognise but which he came to know and grow accustomed to, the strange whining and chirping that drew near and enveloped him in a warm cocoon of loving protection once again - only this time there was something different about it, something strange - something that he couldn't associate with that former time when everything had seemed so perfect and satisfying.

Change.

Something had most definitely changed but Ferdinand was at a loss to remember just what. Had he been able to witness with his own eyes what had taken place, he may have been able to come to terms with it as it transpired, but being blind and almost helpless, there was almost an inevitability in its acceptance.

But there had been change. He definitely remembered change.

Now he could see. His mind dragged him abruptly forward to his first hunting lesson when he ventured from the burrow in search of food to eat. His mind displayed that first attempt when he followed his mum and dad out into the excitement of that outside world and tried to catch something worthwhile.

What a failure it had turned out!

'And what strange long claws mum has,' he'd thought. Yes, he distinctly remembers being surprised at the sharpness and length of the claws - and the size.

But parents were supposed to be bigger than their offspring, weren't they?

Yes, but the claws...

...the claws.

Ferdinand felt his eyes looking down toward his claws, then looking over to where the hamster lay before him.

'Very similar,' he thought. 'Very, very similar.'

A cold shiver ran the full length of his back.

'But mum? Dad? What claws they had! What tail they dragged along behind them when they hunted for game! How different they were from me!

'And yet,' thought Ferdinand, 'this hamster is just so like me.'

There was a sudden silence in the activity in his mind as the hamster squeaked, 'Well?'

Ferdinand looked at him with a puzzled expression.

'Well?' said the hamster again. 'Are you a hamster?'

'Tell me,' said Ferdinand, 'about hamsters...'

What can I tell you about hamsters that you shouldn't already know? What words can I use to convey our nature, our ways, our life that you must already have experienced? But tell you I will seeing as I'm called upon to relate the person I am.

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I remember the warm fur and squeaks from the nest when my eyes were no more opened than a hazelnut is when it falls off the tree. I remember the comfort and security of knowing that I'd been brought into this world and that now I was going to be provided for until that time when I could stand on my own four paws.

And then my eyes opened - what a day that was!

I thought I was blind at first because the darkness of the nest confused me - it made me think that my eyes weren't functioning the way they were meant to but then, a little away from me, there was a pin-prick of light that I gradually managed to bring in to focus.

There were four of us in all, each one a bundle of fun and fur that were so much of a handful for our parents that there must have been days when they despaired of ever being able to bring us all up to maturity. But they did.

I remember my first venture into the outside world, too.

Brightness all around me with subtle shades of green and blue, splashes of red and yellow that seemed to top the most elevated of skyscrapers that you could barely see the top of if you stood at their base. It was a great day - an opening experience that never ceases to amaze my mind and capture my imagination - there's just so much good food to eat that I hardly ever know where to begin.

I live in a burrow, a dug out hollow that I make in the ground, and rest for the most part of the day - but, on occasions like today, I often have a run during the light hours just for the sheer delight of it.

And, well, look at me! You can see what I look like because I stand before you now with characteristics that are identical to you. The same proportions, as well - same shaped nose and eyes and ears and mouth.

Your fur is a bit matted but essentially it's the same and your tail - well, need I say more?

The evidence, my friend, says...

'...hamster!'

'*Ferret!*' said Ferdinand.

The hamster knew that he was getting nowhere. Ferdinand, though he found his heart racing within him as the hamster spoke of his upbringing and his experience, changed his mind in that split second the hamster pronounced him to be the same as himself - but, even now he was having doubts and conflicts within.

Then the hamster had a great idea. It was the sort of idea that you get but once in a lifetime in the most tricky of situations when there seems to be no way out of the problem and when all you try and achieve seems to be going to waste.

'I know,' said the hamster, 'let's go to the pond. We can look at our reflections in the mirror of the water and see ourselves as we really are!'

'Mirror?' said Ferdinand. 'What's a mirror?'

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'Sheesh!' thought the fur ball. 'Hasn't anyone ever told him about refraction of light and all that?'

'Not to worry,' he said, 'it's one of nature's ways to cause us to be able to see us as others do.'

The ferret rose to his paws and gave a long weary yawn that made a short, brief squeak at its widest point. The hamster pointed with an outstretched digit and the two walked, in unison, to the small water hole that was no more than a felled oak's distance away.

Water Aves assembled themselves almost regimentally around a small dip in the surface of the undergrowth, their long, spindly stalks pushing their leathery cups skyward where one or two bees were even now coming to collect pollen.

Nosing through the dense cover, they came to a sudden drop over which the tender roots and shoots of the advancing Aves fell away to reveal a small body of water that Ferdinand had never before discovered.

All those times that he'd passed this collection of plants and yet never once had he ever felt drawn to discover what lay within!

Up until now, that is.

Now his heart raced to discover what he was - or, rather, what he was meant to be. Countless days into his life, the thought that he might be anything other than a ferret had never come to his mind (there was no reason for it to) and, had he been too hungry to allow this animal's approach, it might never have seen the light of day.

The two animals, paw to paw, with almost a reverence that you could feel in the air, crawled nearer the edge where the plants fell away into the still fresh water.

Ferdinand paused in his advance.

'Well?' said the hamster. 'What are you waiting for?'

There was a nervousness in Ferdinand's body that almost made him pull away from discovering the truth about himself, that almost made him turn round and flee to the safety of what he'd come to know - that, at the very worst, would compel him to eat his companion as his next meal.

He stared at the hamster questioningly but said nothing.

Then, back at the edge of his world that lay in front, that edge that possibly could change his entire experience and acceptance of himself.

He pushed his body forward until, like the fur ball, he found himself staring down at his own reflection in the still waters.

'Hamsters!' Ferdinand squeaked.

'I don't understand,' said Ferdinand. 'Why are things the way they are?'

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'That's a tough question,' squeaked the fur ball as he reclined on a pile of straw and downy feathers that he'd softened together for his own personal use deep in the recesses of his burrow.

The hamster had taken a big leap of faith in inviting this 'ex-ferret' to his burrow, but he was sure that, deep down in the other's heart, a sudden change had taken place that would eventually work itself out into the way he lived and breathed - and, personally, he was hoping that his hunting habits would be completely revolutionised before they finished their conversation.

There was very little light for them to see by, but the hamster had opened up the roof slightly through the grass roots that hung down from the ceiling so that there was some degree of murkiness that meant their shadowed silhouettes could at least be perceived.

'I think that,' began the hamster, 'judging from what you've told me, in your early days you must have been adopted by a family of ferrets - but why they should adopt you rather than eat you escapes me at the moment. I've certainly never heard anything like it in my entire life!'

'So, what happened to my own parents?'

'Well, I don't think the ferrets ate them - you said that there was a time when you knew they weren't there, when you felt cold and alone. The ferrets must have found you at that point when you would have died had you not had some sort of protection and food provision...'

'...and they raised me as one of their own?'

'Exactly! It happens in the bird world,' the hamster assured Ferdinand, 'though the bird parents are usually oblivious to the origin of their sibling. They must have taken pity on you - but I can't think why.'

The two hamsters sat quietly together listening for the first sounds of evening from above. In the distance, the screech of swifts was petering out to be replaced by the territorial declarations of blackbirds and thrushes.

'So, though I was born into a hamster family, something went wrong,' said Ferdinand, 'and I found myself being brought up to be something that I hadn't been destined to become?'

'Yes, that's right! Your ferret foster folk,' said the fur ball, trying to get his lips to work round that difficult phrase, 'thought they were bringing you up for the best, but all they did was frustrate the person that you were meant to be...'

'...and all the time I thought I was a ferret?!'

'You had no idea that things could be any different,' he insisted, 'nor could you have done. Whenever a baby is born, it has to rely on the parenthood it's born in to. Any mistakes must necessarily be carried over into the next generation - and beyond.'

The two hamsters snuggled together to keep warm, pulling the soft bedding around themselves to protect them from the chilling night air.

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'We'll grab a couple of hours sleep,' said the fur ball, 'and then I'll start showing you what you were supposed to be...'

As it turned out, there were two cats.

One extremely timid that came within no more than six feet, the other a young kitten that proceeded to climb all over Lee and Kath as they sat having lunch. Fortunately, they kept me securely fastened in the main body of their rucksack and I gained a couple of hours sleep before the long descent back to the hotel.

We returned around three, Lee and Kath physically drained for the first time this week.

'I'm exhausted,' Lee said, sitting on the bed to undo his shoelaces.

'Me, too,' Kath echoed. 'I think we overdid it today.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I need a good long rest after that journey. It wears you out being carried...'

Greek television is an Odyssey.

My owners had gone out, as usual to the Pizza Loganta, leaving me behind on the bed with the remote control and an opened container of orange juice. For the time being I wasn't hungry, being more intrigued by the thirty channels of Hellenic programming that I hopped through over the course of the next hour and a half.

Soaps in Greece are very similar to England - except that they're more tacky and seem to be limited to two - or at the most three - individuals in a seemingly endless dialogue within only one set. All I can say is that the dialogue must be riveting or else the tv channels that broadcast them are shortly to go out of business.

The weather forecast for Russia - in Russian - provided a few notable highlights and, to be honest, I was interested to see how my home land of western Mongolia was faring. But the relevance to Greece must have been somewhat limited. I expect they'll be out of business before long, too.

Other channels were puzzling, as well. For instance, why does the Eurosport channel have American motor racing on? Surely the prefix 'Euro' should exclude it?

Greek football also stuns me - rarely does the commentator break out into a sweat, the voice remaining clear and even despite the most controversial incidents. Unlike British reports, though, there appears to be no breath taken between sentences but Lee did point out to me that it was possible that there were two commentators who worked in tandem.

Bring back John Motson, I say - and I never thought I'd ever hear myself squeak that.

Yes, Greek television needs to be experienced - perhaps there should be a British satellite channel devoted to the highlights? It would certainly raise a few eyebrows.

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
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Lee and Kath arrived back around nine, coming with a pile of goodies - potato, sausage and, of course, pizza base - all enveloped in a grease-proof wrapper that lined the rucksack.

So far, so good - the police had still not been called...

TINY - THURSDAY 17TH SEPTEMBER 1998

'Hamster rides!' quacked the duck. 'Get your free hamster rides here!'

'Oh look!' Lee nudged Kath. 'The ducks are coming towards us to be fed.'

They ferreted around in their rucksacks for the feta cheese filled bread that they'd brought with them and waited as the ducks approached closer.

'Free hamster rides!' the ducks continued. 'Hamster rides - free to all!'

I poked my head out from the side pocket and squeaked a welcome. 'Hey! Over here! Near the humans!'

'Don't give them too much dear, this is our dinner, don't forget,' Lee began throwing lumps of bread towards the approaching mallards, becoming excited as the quacks got louder and more frequent.

'Look at this litter lout!' said the duck in front. 'Tourists never respect our habitat,' and, with that, they began hoovering up the white cubes that were now piling up around their webbed feet.

'Stop it!' I shouted to my owners. 'They don't want bread!'

Lee and Kath hesitated and turned to face me.

'Oh sure,' Kath said, 'so why have they come out of the water?'

'They're offering free hamster rides.'

The last of the bread had disappeared and the ducks reverted their attention toward the side pocket where my head was poking out.

'Where's the hamster?' said one at the back.

'Over here,' the one in the front gestured with his beak. 'You want a ride?'

'Yeah, sure - just a minute. Help me out of here, will you Lee? I'm going for a duck ride.'

'Eh?' Lee stood with his hands on his hips, a puzzled frown appearing on his brow.

'Come on. I t'll be okay.'

Lee shrugged his shoulders, then lifted me out from the pocket after looking both ways for humans and placed me on the duck's back. I buried myself into the soft, downy feathers as we took to the water and out of sight of my owners.

'Oh dear,' Lee said, 'what have I just done?'

'No panic. I'm sure Kesef knows what he's doing...'

We passed under a wooden walkway used by humans and into a reed bed where the waters were calm and tranquil. Dragonflies hawked from the tips of the irises and pond skaters sent ripples bouncing to and fro across the surface.

'So, why do humans throw their food away?' the duck said. 'Are they nuts or something?'

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
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I thought for a moment. Certainly, if just my owners were being referred to I could respond positively and with a deeply sincere affirmation. But the duck was asking me about humans in general so I needed to tailor my response to his question.

'No, not at all,' I replied, 'they think they're feeding you.'

'Feeding us? Which self-respecting duck would want to be fed by them?'

'It's just a misunderstanding,' I continued, 'they don't know that you're litter freaks.'

'And what do they suppose we're doing when we stretch our necks below the water with our bums in the air?'

'Feeding - humans sum up most animal behaviour as food collection.'

'Food collection?' the duck quacked indignantly. 'If they could only see the litter that lies at the bottom of our streams! If it wasn't for us, what sort of state would the rivers and streams be in?!!'

'I know, I know,' I sympathised, 'but their misunderstanding can sometimes make for their improvement.'

Puzzled, the duck turned its neck, tilting its head in quizzical fashion.

'Improvement?' it said. 'How can their misunderstanding improve them?'

'Let me tell you a story,' I began. 'I was told this by a Greek hamster just the other day...'

It wouldn't be unfair to say that Tiny lived in a war zone.

That phrase may conjure up in your mind some far flung corner of the globe where certain 'dissident factions' have imposed guerrilla-like tactics on established governments or where one nation has risen against another in an attempt to conquer and possess. You may even envisage some inner civil war that rages within the country where you live.

But all of these examples of war are not what I'm talking about.

Tiny lived, very simply, in a house where there was war between the inhabitants.

Most of us like to think that war is something external to us, something that we would never take part in, something that is 'for them' - and we would certainly recoil at the mere suggestion that, wherever two people do not care anymore for one another and go out of their way to seek their own welfare over and above that of the other, a war zone has been created and a declaration made of intent.

But that's the way it was.

In Tiny's house, even though the group of humans that lived there labelled themselves with the word 'family' which implied unity, truth was, when you looked at the way the individuals acted, they were only ever looking out for number one.

Sometimes, it would look like a *real* war zone. Vases and ornaments would fly through the air crashing into walls and furniture that got in the way, voices would be raised and limbs would fly, heavy stamping around the four corners of the building making the light fittings shake and rattle.

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You would have sworn that a shell had landed outside the door and shaken the very foundations of that house but, as it was, the only foundation that was being destroyed was the one that bound this 'family' together.

Into such a war zone, Tiny was born.

Tiny was not a healthy hamster, she knew that her days were numbered - but she was the type of hamster that surveys her situation and decides with a defiant act of the will to make her life count in some small way so that, in years to come, not only would her name be remembered but it might be remembered favourably amongst those that had encountered her.

And so, when she found herself just nineteen days old, she began to do what only she could - in fact, perhaps it was even for such a time as this and for such a situation as the one that was presented to her, that she was born in to this world. Tiny would never have thought this way - and, perhaps, it's not right that I should talk this way myself - but I mention it only in passing.

A new litter had been born - almost unbeknown to the warring parties who'd made the birth more difficult than it should have been - much the same as it might be for a human in an earthquake zone. The food vibrated in the food dishes and the water spilled out through the metal funnel onto the cage floor but, undeterred, Tiny ran to the hamsters' (and their mothers') aid, collecting piles of food and bedding and brought them to where they lay.

If it was a surprise for Tiny, it was even more of a heart-stopping moment for the family - the two hamsters they'd bought had been presumed to be both male and therefore, naturally, un-pregnant. The stark reality of the situation hit the family into alertness the moment that they saw small worm-like creatures writhing about in the bedding.

For an albeit short moment, a truce was declared. Books were consulted. Friends were rung. The responsible pet shop owner was declared war on (though, thankfully, the actual battle took place off the premises). And all hands went to making the cage a better place to bring up a litter.

With the family's attention brought off themselves and on to a need, the truce became extended until peace was agreed and, united in the new births, they found that their concerns had changed. No longer were they bothered to play loud music that disgruntled the other members of the family (to give but one example). Loud music bothered the hamsters and the hamsters came first - simply, unequivocally and finally.

The secret weapon that no one had expected the other side to use had been fired and detonated with unqualified success.

Well, at least to a point it had.

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But the babies were getting bigger - and then Tiny heard one of the family talking about removing them soon to the pet shop. Tiny knew that this meant the truce would soon be cancelled and war would, once again, ensue.

No, that wasn't what she wanted - and she knew it - and they knew it too, even if they were too stupid to realise it.

No, she had to do something - leave her mark on this family for good - for very good...

As I've previously said, it was after just nineteen days that she hit on the idea when the family had mistaken her activity when the babies had first been born (I think that you humans refer to young hamsters as 'pups' - yes, I think this is the correct term - but I seem to remember seeing an owner suggesting that, perhaps, we should be referred to as 'hamlets' - and I prefer that to pups, anyway). Licking the babies clean was a maternal responsibility (no matter whose babies they were) and she'd gone about the business with all eagerness.

But the family had thought she was kissing them - as if some emotion of 'love' was being conveyed to these small fleshy coloured slugs in the warm bedding. Of course, licking them clean was love, but not in the way that they thought - hearing the cooing and aahhhs that emanated from the humans set her about thinking.

Was that all these humans really lacked? Was that why the war had been going on so long?

She intended finding out.

At the earliest opportunity (after several weeks of running around in feigned fright when they tried to pick her up) she ran over to the approaching hand and gave it a good long sniff. Noticing that the material of the human was draped quite a way down its arm, she grasped it in her paws and allowed herself to be pulled up into a cupped hand.

She licked the flesh - it tasted good - no, no, that wasn't the reason she did it. What the humans had mistaken for love directed towards the babies, they now mistook for love and friendship directed towards them.

The other members of the family came running - she was 'walked' into another pair of hands - then another. Each time she moistened her tongue and gave the recipient a long lick that dried her tongue and made its entry back into her mouth feel like sandpaper.

The humans went bananas.

Even though the babies were sold to the pet shop, they hardly seemed to notice they'd gone. Each evening, afternoon and morning - whenever Tiny had emerged from her nest (for it's not a good thing to drag a hamster out of its nest), she'd be lifted up into the hands of the family, stroked, kissed, played with (but gently) and fed the most tasty morsels that she'd never have imagined possible.

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And all this because she continued to dote on the family, licking their hands and arms, their face and neck, whenever she got close enough. The love that they received from her, they found easy to redistribute on to others - so easy, in fact, that the few friends that they'd had before Tiny now multiplied and grew so much that it was more common than not to find the house crowded with visitors.

But then, Tiny grew ill.

No one's quite sure just what happened, but it was merciful in the truest sense of the word. One day she was fine, running around in her compound energetically - the next she was gone.

One evening, the family knew that all was not well.

She'd become lethargic, tired - her eyes struggling to stay open and her appetite for food disappeared. As she exited her nest, the largest human gently scooped her up into his warm hands and she gave him a lick as she ascended into the focus of concerned eyes that moistened with sorrow.

The family gathered round, softly stroking her fur one last time as she lay panting for breath and not feeling any desire to move.

As each hand caressed her tired body, she summoned up her strength (and her spit) and gave them one last, lingering lick that brought tears running down their faces.

With one final, shallow breath, Tiny died in their hands and the family wept, hugging each other to console themselves, to try and push away their sorrow.

The family felt the loss deeply. They knew that they'd lost one of the greatest little bundles of fur that had ever walked the earth - but what they didn't realise was that, in losing her life, the family had actually gained their love for one another.

Centred in this one small creature, they found that, now gone, the bonds that had been forged there had taught them how to return love, to give love and to live lives that were centred in peace rather than war.

Tiny had left her mark on that household, alright - and, strange as it may sound, the family felt more human because of that one, humble creature that had turned their eyes off themselves and on to others.

Being carried around gave me time to look about and take in my surroundings. Had I needed to travel everywhere with my own wits, I would have needed to be on the lookout for predators and other dangerous situations that would have detracted from the observations I was able to make.

Wherever we went I noticed graffiti - not just the odd one or two doodles or an occasional six foot by three fluorescent blue word that seems to confront you in the inner city areas of, for instance, Sheffield where I live, but endless line upon line of etchings on every conceivable structure that you could imagine.

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I don't know what the Greeks think about the Technicolor walls that confront them throughout their towns but I know if it was present in England there'd be a very loud outcry to get the doodles removed.

To me, they look good - that's just my own personal opinion and, so long as the painting is done on your own property and isn't offensive, I see no reason to ban it. But that's only my opinion and humans must run their lives the way they feel they should.

But it wasn't until we arrived that first day at Philippi that the relevance of graffiti actually made me sit up and take notice.

On the bema seat, the place at which judgment was given to the inhabitants of the city, there was a doodle etched into the rock - a game, no less, comprising of eight or ten sections within a circle. This game seemed to be fairly common, too, another circle etched in a rock face within the Octagonal Church area where one could only go when the guide was present.

There again, in the amphitheatre, there were rough doodles carved into solid stone (it must've been quite a boring play) and on the rocks as we ascended up to the Acropolis.

In fact, it seemed to me that today's graffiti is nothing new and has been going on for millennia, each human wanting to make his mark in some way, to say 'Look, this is me!' or 'I'm here, this is my mark!', not to mention the endless 'professional' engravings that were scattered the length and breadth of the archaeological remains - how do we know, anyway, that they weren't unauthorised sentences by ancient spray can artists?

Long after men have died and been buried and their sons and sons' sons have disappeared from off the face of the earth, their mark will still be visible in the structures that stand the test of time far better than they themselves do.

Perhaps it's man's realisation that his life is but a twinkling in the eye that causes him to want to make his mark and leave something behind that will testify to his existence for generations to come? Perhaps there's a deep fear not to be forgotten by the next people and culture who will be born, live and die just like everyone else?

Hamsters are not so concerned with leaving behind something that will stand the test of time but, as I stretched out in my nest that evening, I wondered if my diaries might just continue to be read long after I was dead and buried in the back garden - or whether, at some date in the future, they may be found to be irrelevant and way past their time.

Tiny certainly left her mark, but not in tablets of stone. Hers was more effective than a few words could ever be and far more life-changing.

Whatever - at least for a time I would leave my mark...

THE JOURNEY HOME - FRIDAY 18TH SEPTEMBER 1998

Lee and Kath had not planned to experience a tour of Thessalonica even though, both on their entrance and departure, they'd planned to traverse the city, firstly, to make their intercity train connection to Drama and, secondly, to get to the airport from wherever the bus may drop them.

Though I'd travelled in the main suitcases before, Lee was unwilling for me to do so this time in case, like last Wednesday, a security check may be performed. Instead, I took up residence in the main body of the rucksacks, but a small hole in the zip was left me to peer out and, should it be necessary, jump out quickly.

They were the concerns, quite obviously, for the airport. Now, we were approaching Thessalonica in a bus and about to alight at a place that we hadn't been able to locate on the map. Looking back on it now, I realise why - it isn't on the map.

It appears that the tourist organisation who produce these 'guides' had conveniently kept its whereabouts hidden (probably in case there was a mass invasion by Turks and they opted for the bus route to conquer the mainland instead of the more usual method of tanks) even though the map post-dated the terminus.

Having arrived at the terminus (a toilet or rubbish tip by any other name), Lee and Kath considered the options.

A bus to the airport? Where from? There were no signs and no map to indicate where they might be picked up from.

Walk? Certainly cheapest - as they had around six hours to kill til the flight, this would have been my option, but humans - well, they make their own decisions.

And the only other option was a taxi - which, remembering the last journey into Thessalonica, should have been a horror not even worth considering. But, as fate would have it, a taxi was what Lee and Kath hired. At least I could be grateful that I wasn't stuffed in the suitcase and having to travel 'blind'.

Or, at least, I could be grateful at that moment in time until one of those things that Lee had read about in the tourist book and stored in the back of his mind, began to find flesh and bone and become a reality.

Though just Lee and Kath had hired the taxi, as the car travelled round the four corners of the terminus square, it began to fill up with other people who opened a door and jumped in. First, a well dressed woman shouted instructions through the window and, after the driver had nodded, sat in front.

Two more ran after the taxi (like the species of 'taxi' were about to go extinct - I think they call it the 'taxionomy'), tugged at the rear doors and pushed my owners to the middle seat, my travelling compartment being thrust upwards violently to be compressed against the roof.

'Sorry, Kesef,' Lee mumbled under his breath, pretending to speak to Kath.

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No sooner had the words passed his lips than the driver stopped the car and ran around some 'new arrivals', gesticulating madly and shouting invitations - must have been some sort of party going on that I was unaware of. More suitcases were crammed in the boot (from where I was, I could only see the lid being lifted up and slammed but my assumption is probably correct) and more people entered the taxi.

Perhaps we were attempting some sort of world record?

Then, finally, we were off. Lee opened the tourist map at the place we were and followed our progress. From where I was, peering down at the plan the wrong way up, I could follow Lee's finger and look out the window as we passed objects worthy of note.

The Byzantine walls were the highlight of the next two hours, as we weaved our way across the city, back and forth, remembering places we'd just passed and sites we'd just seen as we encountered them again after another twenty minutes.

The White Tower was good - we were stuck in a traffic jam for five minutes or so and I had a long look. The University campus is a monstrous affair covering many city blocks and we even saw the famous stadium of Kaftatzoglio. At one point, we found ourselves back within two blocks of the bus station as more people got in when others alighted and fresh destinations were given.

But, eventually, we arrived - and, finally, there were just the three of us (excluding the driver). If you ever decide to visit Thessalonica and don't want to pay for a guided tour of the city, just take a taxi to the airport.

Thessalonica airport is not a great place to spend time - I think it was George who noted in his Paris diary the fact that Lee and Kath tend to arrive far too early at places to make connections and today was no different.

Having numerous hours to kill and unwillingly having to pay out extortionate amounts of drachmas to buy things to read or items to eat, they sat in the departure lounge staring blankly at the glass panelling, getting excited as each plane took off (and there was only one of them about every half hour).

I excused myself from the rucksack and went for a short run round the airport perimeter. Unfortunately, though, there were no hamsters but I did find some interesting mosses and lichens that filled a hole.

I boarded the airplane on my own and met up with my owners as they sat down to their brief airline snack before landing and connecting with their flight at Athens.

The flight to London was uneventful but Lee met another hamster lover who sat in the aisle seat and was travelling to meet a friend for the weekend. They talked through many of the problems they'd experienced while in Greece and came to realise - albeit too late - just why certain things happened.

But again I cringed when Lee diverted the conversation away from Greek culture and society with the question, 'Are you on the Internet?'

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'Please,' I thought to myself, 'please say "no"!'

'Yes, at work.'

Just in case I might be got out of the bag, I quickly changed rucksacks and listened out for the hysterical laugh and mad screaming that normally accompanies what I knew to be the next sentence.

'Can I give you our web site address? Our hamster is going to write up his diaries of the holiday and it should be available for download in about three weeks' time.'

Needless to say, the address was politely accepted and little, if any, conversation proceeded from there on in. Just as the Council workers had feigned a lunch break to get away from the mad couple who were visiting them, this lady had to feign 'something' even though they were thirty thousand feet in the air with no parachute.

Very suddenly she fell asleep - she still had her eyes closed as they got off the plane, too. I think it was an attempt at sleep-walking.

If you're reading this, young lady, please accept my apologies for my owners' words. I know just how off-putting they can be and how you must have felt - I get it all the time (and I'm the one who he's talking about!).

We touched down smoothly and, to be honest, that was the last I remember - I was contentedly asleep in the bag until a sharp bump at almost two in the morning when the car came to an abrupt halt, having arrived safely home.

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EPILOGUE

Well, my diaries have come to an end - I trust you enjoyed them.

I look back on Greece with fond memories.

If you ever do visit that part of the country, above all else, make sure you visit Philippi and, if you find your hamster has stowed away on board your luggage, take him with you to make contact with the community on the top of the Acropolis and give them my greetings.

Finally, if you haven't already done so, have a read of some of George's writings - he's the real author that the rodent world respects, not me. He was proficient in his lifetime and has the very highest accolade from myself and most others who have encountered his works.

Thank you, dear reader, for reading to the conclusion of this diary - may I find time to write more, may I find new ways I can stowaway on board my masters' luggage!

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
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The Community in Eastbourne

THE COMMUNITY IN EASTBOURNE

INTRODUCTION

I

While the offices of the Rodent Weekly were closed this August and September, I availed myself of the opportunity to journey with my masters, Lee and Kath, to Eastbourne - a small town on the south coast of England where Lee's parents live.

It was planned to be a restful and laid back time, everyone having noticed that the pressure of having to produce articles for the Weekly seemed to be taking quite a toll on me, with more frequent outbursts of rattiness with each passing day.

All my colleagues in fur were extremely supportive of me and I must now extend thanks for all their efforts in trying to make my last few weeks as comfortable and pleasant as possible. That's why, when the offices were closed, the editor-in-chief insisted I journey to somewhere - 'nowhere' - so that I could forget about the pressures, hang up the old wpc and get some much needed rest.

Ah! If only life was that simple!

At the top of Beachy Head, but many meters behind the edge that consistently crumbles, I discovered a hamster hole that intrigued and perplexed me. I hadn't thought it possible that hamsters still lived in these parts due to the lack - it appeared to me - of any suitable habitat and food source, so I was immediately suspicious that this may be a trap set by a predator.

I consulted Lee who'd brought me here on one of their flying trips to 'see the sights' and enquired whether any Bengal Tigers had been seen in the area recently. He assured me that it was quite impossible and that, had any sightings been made, they would have been recorded in the local papers which had been, largely, silent.

I leant over the hole and gave a loud, friendly squeak while my master sat with me in case anything nasty should befall my invitation for a meeting. All I heard, though, was the scampering of rodent paws ascending the tunnel gradients and the hiss of fur as it scraped against the burrow walls.

'You smell like a human,' the squeak ascended up the shaft. 'What are you?'

'A Russian hamster by the name of Dak,' I squeaked back. 'What you can smell is my master's presence. Shall I tell him to go away?'

Lee understood immediately and retreated some ten metres, staying perfectly still while watching the hole as I descended out of sight for a few brief minutes.

I was instantly accepted into their community and found their warmth both inviting and satisfying. But Lee was unsure what was going on so, after a short time of exchanging the pleasantries, I ascended into daylight once more and squeaked him over for a chat.

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If you've ever read in the Eastbourne local press of strange goings on at the top of Beachy Head during August and September, may I just point out that it's probably the incident where Lee crouched with his ear to the ground to hear what I was trying to squeak to him.

It seemed logical that I should stay the full week with my new found rodent friends, something that both my owners were delighted should happen. If only I'd known that, far from being a time of rest, it would be a time when my literary skills would be put to the test and I'd be committing to memory stories that no human had ever yet heard.

Indeed, just how far these stories have been transmitted throughout the world is difficult to say. My colleagues even in the Midlands where I live had not heard of them - much less would I have expected my colleagues in both Greece and France who scratched their heads in bewilderment when I related them the details.

Maybe these stories are purely local, then. Or, maybe, they're confined to the chalky Downs where, so I've discovered, there are a string of hamster communities burrowed into the rocks from one end to the other.

Whatever, they need to be heard and contemplated for they represent a line of tradition that even the late, great George the hamster didn't discover in his lifetime.

II

In my introductory comments, I noted that there's a line of hamster communities which stretch the length and breadth of the South Downs in the UK. How or why these ever came into existence, I cannot imagine and the historical memories of the rodents is somewhat vague and limited when it comes to their exact origins.

[Lee's note - George's epic 'The Battle of Caldbec Hill', which went undiscovered until only recently, records the likelihood that this community should be traced back to a single immigrant who travelled over during the Norman Conquest of 1066. However, in George's history, the hamster is a Syrian whereas these were most definitely Russian.]

What is certain, though, is that community life is fairly fluid.

They know nothing of lives such as mine, where opportunity has been given me to write for the human population, though they aren't ignorant of the fact of captive hamsters kept as pets for the homo species.

Indeed, it was difficult to precisely determine how much they felt their communities could influence the outside world and I was, on more than one occasion, prompted into thinking that, apart from their own communities, they were desirous only to live a secluded and quiet life away from the main areas of human civilisation.

Being a bilingual animal, I was drawn to their language school for the young hamlets and was expecting that they'd be taught some basics in human speech and communication. What I actually discovered was simply details of the varied dialects that exist throughout the Downs and any attempt at conveying human ideas was ignored to

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such an extent that I had to repeatedly remind myself that I was, in fact, only a few metres from human civilisation.

My time, alas, all too quickly went and I rued the day when Lee and Kath came to fetch me from the burrow complex. It had been a most enjoyable time - and one that I intend writing about whenever I have cause to return - for the strange traditions and culture which presented itself repeatedly to me never once ceased to amaze me.

Any hamster reading this should rest assured that, should he ever find himself wandering lonely and in need of food anywhere near the chalk downland, he will find a most friendly welcome amongst the line of rodent communities which stretch many miles both near to and far distant from human cities.

III

And so I must introduce the reader to the series of stories subsequently recorded.

The community have what can only be described as a travelling and itinerant speaker circuit. I don't know what they would actually call it and never did hear any one squeak which summarised this phenomenon, but it reminded me so much of the early years of the christian Church where believers would visit cities and bring what knowledge they had to the fellowships they found there, that it may well have developed from such ancient occurrences.

There aren't, unfortunately, any written accounts available to support my thesis and, even if there were, it's unlikely that they would have recorded such a set up in the UK where I now was.

These itinerant speakers - known as the 'Wise Ones' - generally visit the communities once every two weeks and gather about themselves the young hamlets to instruct them in the most ancient of ways and wise sayings, even though many of their stories are more modern in origin - one that I've recorded here for the reader is about a journey on a bus which can't have happened more than seventy-five years ago.

The Wise One's origins are all shrouded in mystery and whenever I enquired about them, I was simply told that they had 'always been' and that no one ever questioned either where they had come from or where they were headed.

Such statements always puzzle me for I naturally expect everything to have both a beginning and an end but such concepts of perpetuity exist in this community that they seem not to question the validity of theorising about both beginnings and endings.

It's these meetings with the Wise Ones - and other meetings that were related to me - that I'm shortly about to relate to you. I have left myself out of the narrative almost totally even though you may perceive a mention of myself, unnamed, on a few occasions.

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I can assure you that my sole reason for compiling these five stories is to show rodents the world over that there still are unique communities of hamsters who have a lifestyle separate from most of us who throw in our plight with humans.

Without further ado, therefore, I must commend these stories to you - not as coming from my own paw but originating from the community life and culture of the Downs rodents.

IV

I must thank both Lee and Kath for taking me to Eastbourne with them. I know that they decided very early on that it was easier to let me come with them than to have me attempt to stowaway on board in the car for the journey.

Indeed, I was treated like a celebrity by both Lee's parents who also deserve hearty thanks for looking after me in those first few days before I discovered the community on Beachy Head.

There are many others that I need to thank but I will restrict myself to just a few of the more important to my life.

To Adrian and Sue - who moved shortly from next door before I journeyed south - thanks for looking after me when Lee and Kath went away in times past. I know you're not too far away still from Lee and Kath and I can always pop in when I feel I must but it would be wrong of me not to say 'thanks'.

Andy Mitchell, Steve Hamblin and Rodd and Marco all helped with stories as I tried to polish them into some sort of coherent form. I appreciate your input, guys.

Steve and Catrin continue to come round every month or so to see how both Ebony and myself are doing and I appreciate all your concern. Love also to all the hamsters in your house.

To Ganjette and the Great Furless One in Washington DC, these stories may come as somewhat of a surprise, seeing as you really only know my writings from the Rodent Weekly articles I've been producing for the Presidential Campaign. Hope you enjoy them.

Finally, Louise - a new friend in North Carolina who has read very little of my work so far. I trust Lee hasn't been plaguing you with endless conversations, emails and CDs. You have to bear with him, unfortunately, as I have to do - but he isn't as bad as first impressions make out.

Dak the Hamster

THE INVENTION OF THE WHEEL

For Andy Mitchell

It had seemed like an age to the hamlets since the last Wise One had approached the colony with his tales of illumination and intrigue - but it had actually only been a few short days when the days grew shorter and the adults were busy collecting supplies for the winter months when the ground froze like iron.

The autumn leaves had developed a crisp yellowness which mimicked the intensity of the sun, their cascading fall onto the ground providing the colony with adequate cover as they searched under the tree canopy for fallen fruits.

The youngsters had been largely oblivious to the necessities of storing food - as most youngsters are whatever species they come from - and they longed with expectation to hear the approach of another great Wise One which would fill their hearts with excitement and joy.

Just as they were beginning to sink into despair, the squeak went out from the most distant look-out sent to protect the colony and the young hamlets began to squeak longingly that, at last, this might not be another false alarm (though the adults were more concerned that a predator might be spotted that their colony would be protected than the call be used solely to mark the advance of a Wise One!).

They were not disappointed.

The 'all-clear' was met with hamlets running out frantically to greet the stranger and lead him to the 'Telling Place' where they would learn, once more, stories that instructed them in the right and true way that every hamster has followed before them and which, they hoped, every rodent after them might be wise enough to tread.

'In a faraway land,' the Wise One began when the youngsters were sat calmly with ears cupped forward to hear his every squeak, 'there is a contraption known as "the wheel". A strange object but, nonetheless, an important one - for humans build their life upon this geometric shape to the exclusion of most other designs...'

He paused to see if their understanding was limited as to the shape of a "wheel" and chose to explain himself to prevent any misunderstanding.

'A wheel,' he continued, 'has no beginning and no end - it's shape continues forever and, when it's set in motion, may run for such a long time that it feels like it cannot be stopped or hindered. In far-off lands, our species use these contraptions to exercise themselves, running in small circular objects that rattle and squeak.'

The hamlets were puzzled and their conception of a wheel somewhat limited - the Wise One chose to draw the shape in the soft topsoil which lay before him and the group began to understand.

'But a wheel has not always been,' he squeaked. 'There was a time when it came into existence and it's of that moment that I must now relate...'

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Life was square in the human society of the age in question - a strange phenomenon in itself seeing as most of Creation doesn't function on straight lines and right-angles but is circular and curved in all manner of shapes that show diversity.

But, for some reason best known to the humans (and certainly never shared with hamsters), life had become square.

When they built accommodation, they constructed it with four sides - holes in the walls (which they called 'wind-ows' after the first man who, having made a heavy wooden board to fit within the hole to prevent gales from blowing through the interior, dropped it on his foot. It was soon abandoned as it prevented any light from entering within until a much later date when someone came up with the idea of making just a wooden frame and filling it with another material known as 'glass'. I will save my description of this material until a separate story and then only if I get time), the roofs and at ground level - only the more advanced civilisations such as the Eskimo, American Indian and Saxon appear to have discovered the superiority of circular dwellings.

The humans' great mathematicians also talked about 'square roots' and 'right-angled triangles' and, even though there were revolutionaries amongst them who spoke of formulae for calculating the area covered by circles (with a formula derived from other circular objects such as pies though, even then, they often talked of it squared), these were in the minority until the time came when a tremendous revolution took place in their minds and lives.

Yes, that great time of change that swept upon them - but, there again, wasn't it just a return to what they should have never lost since the dawn of time? You see, the world had been created round by One who, as we all know, has neither beginning nor end - indicative of a circle in itself. But, when they drew away from the Creator, they necessarily lost the concept and importance of the circle in their own lives and experiences.

So, it should not be thought that what I'm about to relate is any great or new discovery that the humans were given by that certain hamster - it was, simply, a re-discovery of a truth of which they should already have been aware, a geometric principle that had originally been sown into the very fabric of the Universe from day one, though especially from day six when, most importantly of all, hamsters were created.

The Wise One looked heavenward to check the darkening skies which seemed to approach with such speed it had appeared to become as black as night. The young hamlets, though, had been oblivious to the approach of rain and, when it came - as it did frequently in those parts - it took them by surprise.

The group ran underground, through the burrow entrance and reconvened in a large circular hollow that had been excavated for just such a time. There were no artificial

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lights here and, being some feet from the burrow entrance - and round a bend at that - no light entered.

It was fortuitous that the story which the Wise One was about to continue relating contained neither gruesome scene nor frightening episode. Once the hamlets had desisted from tapping one another on the far shoulder with their paws and pretending it wasn't them, he continued.

They said it would never fly.

This didn't, initially, bother Batach the hamster because he'd never initially meant for it to fly. Indeed, flight was something as far from his mind as the east is, proverbially, from the west and any application that his invention could be applied to certainly shouldn't exclude the possibility of flight - but, as everyone knew, birds landed much better on claws than wheels. So it was unlikely that it could ever be put to good use in aviation.

In Batach's day, wheels were square - as everything was - maybe not the ideal shape to convey individuals on bicycles to and from destinations but at least, when they went up a hill, the cycle didn't roll back on itself if the incline was too steep for the pedaller to overcome the hill.

Microwave oven dishes were square, too - that is, they would have been had they been invented - and the jagged edges seriously scratched the sides of the compartment in which they rotated so badly that most people opted for the far easier method of using square gas cookers (some things never change) and square frying pans.

Omelettes were a strange shape as well.

But Batach was thinking through a revolution that would so change the course of history that his name really should have been recorded in the hall of fame (had pencils and paper been invented - and, if they had, they probably would have been square along with everything else).

Batach was that kind of rodent who didn't care what others thought of him - even though he would rather have been well-liked and loved - but who allowed his mind free reign to postulate theses that others shuddered at the very imagination whenever they seemed to be perplexed by them.

Not all of Batach's contemporaries were won over, either, even though Soccer was revolutionised from being played with a cube to a sphere - but the goal posts still remained rectangular - while other games such as Rugby largely kept the geometric shape and continue, to this very day, to play their game with a ball that has square ends.

Yes, Batach's invention was by no means universal in its acceptance - but it certainly did change the way that everyone thinks about the world and the way that most people function.

But let me tell you about that fateful day when Batach hit upon the idea of the circle.

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Batach couldn't work out why bogies were round and it was something that stuck with him (it wasn't the bogies that stuck, you understand, it was the *thought* of why they weren't square that stuck with him - otherwise I would have said that the bogies stuck *on* him which is a statement that probably goes without saying).

'If,' he reasoned, 'the universe was built upon the founding principle of squareness, a randomising of airborne objects should express that geometric shape and produce a square bogie.'

True, there was more advantage to be gained from having a round instead of a square bogie - not least because the latter object brought tears to the eyes when one tried to remove it. But it must follow that a square principle must influence a random event in a square way. But that was not what was taking place in everyday life around him.

He examined over 1.4 million bogies - in various states of solidity and liquidity - and never found one that conformed to a right angle or obvious evenly shaped rhomboid.

Though he was still a way off from discovering the circle, he released a paper entitled 'The Random Formation of Bogies and their Conformity to a Different Founding Principle to that Normally Accepted' which never really caught on (unlike bogies themselves).

In fact, the opposite was true. Humans from across the known civilised world (and parts of Yorkshire, too) condemned the paper as being 'overtly cynical' and 'justifying a regression of thought from square principles to a chaos based upon nothing but presumption'.

Batach was distraught - but still he continued thinking and rethinking, checking out his formulae and rechecking his postulations and equations which had founded his now historic paper. For four months he continued to re-examine all his data (and obtained a fresh supply of original material during a local influenza epidemic) but still he couldn't find an error in his algebra.

In his diary entry of fourteen Skangrickster (a month that has sadly become obsolete with the introduction of a supposedly more accurate calendar), he wrote

'Today I decided to turn my back on my past efforts and press on, having assured myself of my secure foundation through the bogie experiments, and must now postulate a new and more far-reaching geometric principle that will replace the old misconceptions of a square universe that expresses itself cubically.'

This was the date that revolutionised the world - it was the day on which he ignored the babble of his contemporaries and went for what he *knew* to be right. No matter that, in the world's eyes, he was despised, he knew that what he was doing was

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fundamentally important - he knew that he, just he, was meant for such a time as this and that only he could do what everyone else was too frightened to do.

'Please, settle down,' the Wise One squeaked, 'I'm sure that the older hamsters have the flooding under control. If the worst happens we can always use the escape burrow and exit out under the tree trunk where we will all be safe until the flood dissipates.'

There was a scratching and rustle of fur as the young hamlets heeded the words of their mentor and returned to a state of composure, oblivious once more to the dull thud of the water as it pounded on the soil roof overhead.

'Now, Batach knew,' the Wise One continued, 'that he had to do what he knew to be right and to ignore the gripings and criticisms of ignorant humans who could never comprehend the seriousness of his theorisings...'

If randomly selected micro-substances tended to produce only circularly structured compound products, reasoned Batach, that had to mean that the world in which they lived was also round.

This proposition may seem so obvious in today's age but, back then, when the world was considered to be square, the thought was startling. Could the world really be round? What would happen if animals and humans got to the 'other side' of that roundness, would they then 'fall off' the sphere because they were upside down? Or was there a type of invisible glue which exuded from the soles of everyone's paws and feet that stuck them to whatever they touched?

These questions, basic as they were to Batach's mind, were never satisfactorily answered until the 'glue' theory was once-and-for-all-time proven by empirical analysis many centuries later.

Nevertheless, a circular founding principle was what he proposed and he published his theory later that year to much derision and ridicule from his contemporary human friends who held him up to be 'a weirdo' at best.

But, the more they thought about it, the more they came to see the truth of his paper - the more they performed their own scientific experiments, the more they saw how the circle was the predominating shape of the universe and the geometric principle which explained the everlasting nature of the Creator Himself.

The circle - no beginning and no end - is now used in modern man's society to run entire systems and to encapsulate vast monetary systems *but*, sadly, Batach has largely been ignored by a civilisation that has forgotten that the world was not always circular but was, in a very real sense, square.

The square still tries to predominate - man being so fixated with a shape which pulls away from the founding principle of the universe...

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'...but it is to the circle and the wheel that we should always look in order for us to explain our existence.'

The hamlets had forgotten the rain in their interest in the story and they awoke with a start when their ears heard nothing - no rain, no dull thuds and no voice of the Wise One. The night dragged on and the sun was beginning to poke its head above the horizon when the adults entered the hall and urged the visitor to stay for a festive meal.

As they sat now, at the entrance to the burrow complex, they watched that big red ball rise slowly into the morning sky and wondered to themselves what it must have been like, all those years ago, when the sun was square.

THE DOG WHO CHASED AN ILLUSION

For Steve Hamblin

The Wise One had been staying with the community for a few weeks, hemmed in by the cold and bitter east wind that engulfed the community of hamsters and which had brought the chilling covering of snow that lay about the paths to the next village.

The young hamlets were not overly worried - they enjoyed gathering round him to listen to the stories of intrigue told in dramatic and, perhaps, melodramatic tones on each successive evening. But Spring was fast approaching and the Wise One was impatient to be gone, to tell the news of experiences further and further afield until every hamster might know the Truth.

The snow was melting with a plop and a splash as more blobs dashed themselves from off the trees' branches onto the mushy ground and, as he eyed the paths which were clearing almost hourly, he resolved to continue his journey the following day, but not before telling one final tale to his captive audience.

As he sat there now in the cool twilight of Spring, the young ones gathered round him eager to hear again the stories of far-off lands - of sea serpents and scorpions that no hamster had ever known in these parts, and of the glorious days that were soon to come when the entire world would be set free from its endless toil and weariness.

Instead, the Wise One chose a story to warn them - a story that was so ordinary you might wonder why it should ever be told. But a story that pointed the direction that the young hamlets should go as they grew and developed into mature, responsible hamsters within their local community.

Settling down, the Wise One began with a statement of fact and immediately captivated the hamlets attention...

Hamblin the dog was fascinated by light.

Not the type of light that provides illumination to animals and humans alike who walk blindly through places and areas where there's little that lights the way to determine the correct path, but the reflections that come, for instance, from a glistening watch strap caught by the summer's rays that stream through a window or the twinkling of a knife and fork as they glide over a food plate at dinner time.

Perhaps it was the movement that caught her eye rather than the light itself for, should the reflection stay motionless for any length of time, she would soon lose interest and curl up to sleep. But when it remained on the move, she could be seen chasing it, snapping at the movement and pressing her nose in jerky actions towards the light that left a mark of saliva from her wet nose and moist tongue.

It wasn't as if there weren't toys to play with - and humans, too. And it wasn't as if there weren't cats to chase and birds to bark at. But Hamblin the dog preferred rather to chase elusive images that never yielded the reality and satisfaction of the ultimate

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chase and which left the dog simply hungry for more of what could never satiate the taste of the mouth and the hunger of the stomach.

'Light is good and necessary,' the Wise One commented, breaking off from the story to give some explanation to the crowd gathered before him, 'and it provides all creatures with vision and illumination. But when you chase the light that provides neither of these two things - and can never do - then you end up chasing after an illusion that's unattainable.'

The crowd looked partially blank, wondering what the words meant, so he repeated his statement in simpler, easier-to-understand words.

'If you run after a fallen apricot and pouch it, you have food for your stomach,' he explained, 'but if you run after a picture of the same fruit all you have is a soggy mass of wood pulp if you try and consume it.'

They nodded and he continued.

There are fateful days in every animal's life - days when things don't appear to be going right and other days when there's little to hinder them. The fateful day in Hamblin's life was the day when her owners forgot to securely close the front door after having come in from a shopping expedition near where they lived.

Perhaps they should have been more careful to remove the latch and to push the door to. Perhaps these things happen to teach us about the way of life upon the earth. Perhaps there are reasons why calamities strike when we least expect them. Perhaps I'm using too many 'perhaps' and should get on with the story...

...the hamlets giggled...

...and I shall.

Standing at the entrance to the outside world, Hamblin peered out to see the twinkling of the sun on a window as the owner of the house opened the pane to clean it. A car drove by and flashed the rays into the dog's eyes that distracted her from the call behind as her owners disappeared into the garden for some rest and recuperation.

A passing pedestrian, the watch on their wrist moving with the motion of their steps, pulled the animal's gaze once more until she decided that the world outside looked so much fun that she needed to get involved with it - immediately.

Tentatively at first, she poked her head out the door and, seeing no obvious danger, emerged into a world that glistened and sparkled almost everywhere you looked. Filled with motion, light reflected everywhere from anywhere, and what caught Hamblin's eye in one moment was immediately forgotten when the next sparkle entered her sight.

Well, I'm sure you can imagine what the dog did.

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Like an animal possessed of something that gives no rest, she bounded around like a young hart chasing first one reflection, then another - always thinking that she was going after something but never achieving anything.

You would have thought that she might have got frustrated - but the taste of the chase only gathered momentum in her mind and the excitement pushed her on into running faster and harder for that illusive light source, the ultimate goal of her desire and vision.

'Now there are many here who are too young to hear what happened next,' the Wise One broke off the story telling, 'and I would ask that the adults amongst us would make a wise choice as to who should both stay and go as I explain the outcome of the dog's desire.'

The elders passed amongst the youngsters as very small rodents hid their heads under larger hamlets in an attempt to conceal themselves vainly from the penetrating eyes of the old ones. Soon, though, the small rodents were gathered up, bound for a quiet nap in various nest compartments - the whining of their protests being heard long after their presence was no longer with the listening group.

The Wise One resumed his story.

'Do you all know what a train is?'

There were nods from nearly all those gathered, though a couple in the front row turned to be told by their brothers and sisters behind them.

'Good,' he continued. 'It was a train that decided Hamblin's fate...'

Rail tracks glisten in the sun and sparkle with an intensity that distract the gaze of even the brightest human. Not far from where Hamblin the dog lived there was a railway track where trains thundered passed most of the day towards the cities where humans congregate in large numbers.

The dog found herself here after seeing one such machine go by, four coaches long and making such a grinding noise of metal upon metal that she decided, very unwisely, to investigate.

No sooner had she reached the top of the embankment than the rails attracted her attention - they shone brightly and hypnotised her mind into thinking that they were the ultimate light source that should be collected and possessed.

She bit at the track and recoiled with an oily taste in her mouth that she didn't recognise. She sniffed the gleaming metal but it was generally odourless.

It was then that she noticed a small green object in the distance - almost on the horizon - that shone as it reeled and rocked, growing larger in her vision as it approached with increasing speed. Hamblin raised her head with inquisitiveness first one way, then the other, trying to make some sense out of the animal's approach.

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Larger and larger it grew, eating up the glistening rails and distributing light into the dog's eyes as it approached. It made low, growling noises as the dog saw what she thought was a yellow reflection smiling back at her.

'Surely,' the dog thought, 'I've found the source of all light and am about to meet its maker.'

But though the illusion of what she saw reassured her that she was about to encounter a greater one than herself and to experience the ultimate reality, as the train approached, the driver panicked, pressing the horn repeatedly and turning his face to hide his eyes from the grim details when, finally, it...

'...now, now. I'm sure you all have graphic imaginations,' the Wise One interjected, 'but let us try to keep them under control and allow them to serve us rather than to control.'

The sounds of vomiting subsided and they settled back to receive a concluding remark.

'We must learn,' he squeaked, 'from these examples of failure.'

The Wise One noted that the hamsters who looked most nauseous were the adults who sat at the rear of the cavern endeavouring to keep the room secure from any youngsters who might have escaped the oversight of their parents.

'Many people chase illusions,' he concluded, 'thinking they will gain reality. Be careful in case you fall by the same foolishness.'

There was a paw raised at the back of the group and he motioned for the rodent to ask his question.

'Are you saying, then, that railways are inherently evil? Or was it the dog who was predestined to be deluded?'

Before the Wise One had a chance to answer, another young hamster rose to his paws to offer an explanation.

'No - you misunderstand, it isn't that railways are inherently evil...' he began.

The Wise One smiled with pleasure that another hamster had grasped the Truth conveyed by his parable, but it fell from his face as the hamster continued, '...it's railway drivers who are inherently evil and trains should not be trusted to give illumination.'

The story teller looked aghast and stepped forward to explain - and would have done - had not another hamster sprung to his feet and squeaked, 'What you haven't considered is that front doors mislead both animals and people alike which is why the community uses holes rather than wooden structures - it's they which are inherently evil...'

'Please, please,' the Wise One interjected, 'I think you've misunderstood my story. Let me explain it to you one final time.'

He cleared his throat, stretched out his paw and began, 'Hamblin the dog was fascinated by light...'

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THE TOWER OF ROTASTAK

For Andy Mitchell

The hamlets ran from every corner of the hamster burrow (a difficult thing in itself to do considering that most complexes are round) to greet the greying hamster who approached the outlying area from where the first lookout had signalled his approach.

They squeaked with excitement as first one, then another, jumped excitedly into the air at the prospect that lay before them of afternoon studies that would prepare them to effectively take their place as wise and influential rodents amidst a world that had grown sadly oblivious to the way its choices were taking it.

The Wise One tried calming the youngsters down but they grew ever more excited as they approached the amphitheatre - a semi-circular cup of excavated earth in which both teacher and pupil were able to sit together, over looking the colony, and share the Ancient teaching that had been passed down from generation to generation from ever since memory could recall.

Today was going to be a special day - a day when the Wise One would tell them secrets that they'd not yet discovered and which they would seldom have been able to fathom seeing as they would never have the insight that living so close to humankind had given others. Mysteries so deep that it made the hair on the back of your head stand on end (if your species had any, that is) and your skin crawl (unless you were a slug when it would make your glands simply produce more slime - this is the reason why those sparkly trails are left scattered about the garden and are initially indicative that gastropod minds are contemplating deep truths. But I really can't go further in to this here as my story is about something totally different).

The Wise One sat wearily on the moss-covered bank as the hamlets gathered round to hear his story. Their gurgling and expectation gradually subsided into silence as the old and grey hamster motioned with his paw for quiet across the entire colony.

'My tale,' he began, 'is a strange one.'

He paused to let the full weight of his words sink in to their minds and to give them a few more moments to quieten themselves down before continuing.

'I will tell you a tale that you may not believe but the facts of the matter have even now been written down by humans and are read the world over. This mystery will explain to you much that you have thought about when you sit alone at night grooming and it will give you insight into the reasons why, wherever we travel or wherever we find ourselves, we see division close at hand around us.'

He paused one final time before continuing, 'There was a man named Nimrod...'

...who owned a pet shop in a place that they later came to call Babel - you may have heard of this great and prosperous city and your memory may be provoked to recall that, in the aeons of time, five rodents broke the world record for bungee jumping in this city.

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These were, of course, the Hanging Hamsters of Babylon who went on to achieve much notoriety and fame the world over as they journeyed with one of the most ancient and original circus shows the earth has ever known.

The pet shop began life very humbly and, had you been a resident in Babel at that time, you probably wouldn't have been able to distinguish it apart from any other pet shop that was open the length and breadth of the land. But Nimrod had designs on being the greatest pet shop proprietor of them all, even better than the first pet owner of all time - a man who went by the name of Adam, who'd been given the rule over every animal that had ever been made but who threw it all away because he had a hunger that he couldn't resist.

But I digress, again.

This story is not about Adam (who I will tell you about should I get the time on some other day) but about the infamous Nimrod - the man who had aspirations to be the best and most glorious of all the world's pet shop owners.

As I've said, he had very minor beginnings and the ramshackle of a house that he chose to house the pet shop in didn't adequately mirror the ambition of the man - had his compatriots seen the intentions of his heart then what was soon to transpire might never have happened.

Nimrod had been a hunter - a good one at that - and he'd often brought home animals that his fellow countrymen had never before seen on his forays into the desert areas near where he lived. It was on one such adventure that he captured a group of Syrian hamsters...

...the colony of hamlets shook with fright. Being Russians, they'd heard the stories of the ferocity of these cousins of theirs who, when confined together, were quite capable of killing one another without thought of anything other than the protection of their own personal space (and how they ever managed to mate was beyond the conception - excuse the pun - of Russians).

But the hamlets also knew that Syrian hamsters weren't always ferocious (that was a common misconception) - they'd met many as they'd travelled through the land and had given shelter to numbers that they couldn't even begin to estimate (as a hamster can only count to five, this last statement doesn't mean too much) - but put two together and you were asking for trouble.

True, there might be peace amongst them for a while, but anything could trigger off that inevitable battle when the fur would fly in all directions.

Such are the facts about Syrian hamsters...

...and Nimrod was soon to find it out for himself.

I guess that's why he chose to keep them in Rotastak cages.

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I must pause here for the reader to understand what these 'Rotastak' set-ups are, seeing as they're predominantly a British invention and that they may not have made it across the Atlantic or even into Europe. Try to imagine - if you will - a round transparent plastic bowl with no bottom and no lid. Then add a red floor through which a hole large enough for a hamster to climb through has been drilled and also a lid which, similarly has this hole.

This, very simply, is Rotastak - and their design allows them to be placed one on top of another with connecting tubes through which Syrian hamsters can climb (the tubes are virtually useless for Russians as they're too small to compress themselves upwards through the transparent tubes - ladders need to be added).

Having given the reader an all-too-brief description, let me return to the story.

Scattered about his pet shop stood row upon row of Rotastak cages - one could hardly imagine the cost of such an enterprise seeing as each piece of equipment is exorbitantly and so prohibitively priced, but Nimrod found the money from somewhere (even though history does not record the exact whereabouts of his treasure) and he opened his little shop exclusively for the sale of these rodents into the homes of the inhabitants of Babel.

But, as I've previously said, Nimrod had already begun to see how ferocious these little beasts could be and, no sooner had they mated to produce more offspring, than he was forced to acquire still more cages to house the offspring, seeing as the demand for these furry creatures had not exploded as he had thought it might.

Then, Nimrod came up with what was probably the worst recorded idea in the whole of human history. He decided that he would make a name for himself and be the individual who brought together the Syrian hamsters into a peaceful cohabitation in which not one rodent would so much as squeak angrily at another...

The hamlets again drew a sharp breath, some began running about in blind panic at the thought of such a plan. Surely this man had nothing better to do with his time than think up hair-brained ideas that would never come to fruition? What type of man was this who would try and force a unity that was never intended to be, this first pet shop owner? And what was so important about making a name for himself?

'Now, hamlets,' the Wise One began, 'let us settle down to listen to the rest of the story. Even though these events are horrifying to us all, we must remember that this occurred a very long time ago and people like Nimrod, although they try today to make things happen, will never ultimately succeed.'

There was an unease amongst the community but they gradually stopped fidgeting and settled into a calmness that was forced into their bodies by their own will rather than anything that was inherently present.

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The Wise One looked round, knowing that such stories were difficult to portray accurately and calmly, but also aware that lessons needed to be learnt if this community were to not make the same mistakes again.

'So,' he continued, 'Nimrod began to try...'

...albeit tentatively at first, to unite the Syrian hamsters.

Trade had slackened off since the first surge of excitement that had swept through Babel at the grand opening, and it was rare that a hamster was sold most days. There was still enough interest in food stuffs, bedding materials and the like, but the acquisition of new animals had generally ceased.

Having a few boxes which lay around the shop, he moved many of the rodents during their sleep period and scrubbed thoroughly the plastic to remove any last vestiges of smell that clung on to the nooks and crevices where hamsters tend to do things that hamsters tend to do.

Stacking them vertically (an unwise thing to do if the height exceeds five units at the very most) he began building the largest Rotastak structure that the world has ever seen - no one has ever attempted to do what he did since - and most fortunately too.

As he approached the thirty-third level, the tip of the tower was seen to project from the roof of the house and onlookers noted with a certain awe (if only they knew then what we know now!) what a magnificent construction was being put together in their time.

But Nimrod still had to perform his most fatal error.

Having completed the fifty-nine storey cage unit, he returned to ground level to inspect his hamsters, still sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware that their cage had been removed from them and that they were about to embark on one of the greatest debacles that the world has ever seen.

Nimrod set about his task with a certain glee which can only be paralleled with one of those disaster movies where it's obvious to all those watching that the minor character who smiles with joy and says 'We're out of the worst' is not more than a couple of minutes away from being fatally wounded - or the character in a war movie who always pats his pet dog on the head before flying out on a bombing mission and who's always inevitably bound to go down behind enemy lines on 'that final mission' before the war's to end.

So, Nimrod was excited - excited that his name would go down in history, even though how it eventually was to be remembered was far from how he would have liked it to be.

Carefully, Nimrod took each hamster gently in his hands and sprayed them with an anti-biotic air freshener so as to remove any scent that might stick to the rodents' fur (don't, whatever you do, try this at home. Hamsters are naturally clean animals and see to their own personal hygiene but, being confined to a small space, they do need humans

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to make sure that their nest compartment is kept in pristine condition), and placed them at varying levels in his tower.

Having finished the transportation of the very last one, he walked the length and breadth of Babel, inviting friends, family and even strangers, to come and see the great unification that his own mind had conceived, planned and orchestrated, which would bring together a species that were prone to fight whenever they met one another.

This was a sight not to be missed and multitudes came to his pet shop - not only to witness the great spectacle which was about to occur, but to see if it was possible for one man to truly curb natural instincts that seemed to most of those present as if they were meant to be.

'Please be calm,' the Wise One insisted. 'Although I know that you've already realised what is about to take place, I must urge you to remember that this event occurred many moons ago in a land far away and that, here, these mistakes are not destined to be repeated.'

The hum of small rodent bodies shaking with fright began to subside as the Wise One once again took up his discourse.

The first hamster awoke sleepily and wondered what that awful smell was. Realising it was him, he washed himself thoroughly to remove the stench - even so, some remains were still left behind and for a full thirty minutes he continued extracting every last whiff that insulted his nostrils.

Then it hit him! He'd been time-warped someplace else for his surroundings were so different than they were when he last went to sleep. This is not an unusual occurrence as all hamsters know, but it *is* disorientating - we seem to be the only true animal species on planet earth who have been entrusted with time and space-warping capabilities and we have yet to determine a way to control these tendencies which can occur even while awake and in full control of our faculties.

The multitude watched the hamster's movement with excitement as he moved to sniff over a connecting tube and gingerly descended to a lower compartment where another hamster slept. As the rodent stretched himself and wandered over to the other bundle of fur, they thought that Nimrod's plan had worked for, mistaking the removal of that awful 'whiff' for a love-lick, they assumed that harmony had been brought through Nimrod's dastardly cunning plan.

But a few seconds later gave them the right interpretation.

The licked hamster jumped to his paws in fright and, turning towards his assailant, launched a vitriolic attack full of squeaking and hissing that forced the other into a locked battle which...

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'...now, calm down, rodents,' the Wise One squeaked loudly. 'I shall not detail the grave injuries that were inflicted on each other during that battle - I shall not do this because, apart from a few cuts and bruises, all the hamsters got off very lightly.'

'You see, news had reached the King in his palace that such a feat was being attempted and He knew Nimrod from of old. Indeed, He'd realised that such pride in one man to make a name for himself could know no limits to arrive at its desired end - that is, fame and notoriety.'

'He had watched the work continue from afar...'

...and had soldiers standing by ready for the disaster that He was expecting to take place. At the very first sign that all was not well, He ordered them to move in quickly, confusing the multitudes who stood to watch the great sight as they rushed amongst them with one aim in mind.

Entering the house of Nimrod, they laid an axe to the very root of the Tower of Rotastak, causing the units to fall cascading down to earth and scattering the rodents to the four corners of the city - and beyond - where they lived solitary lives (as they were intended to do).

Nimrod had lost the fame he'd intended making for himself...

'...but the King sent word throughout His entire Kingdom that such forced unity should never be attempted again - and that decree has stood the test of time, even though there are those who see Nimrod as a hero rather than a villain.'

The hamlets sat quietly, absorbing the story. Their minds were so taken up with its implications that they never noticed the Wise One rise to his paws and head west to another colony some ten miles away. When they finally woke from their mind dream, they turned, back to their colony, and vowed never to attempt to create a unity that was never meant to be...

THE CURSE OF THE CHICKEN

For Rodd and Marco

The Wise One relaxed under the cool shade of the oak that spread its canopy over the hill where he took a short nap. In the distance, he could hear the sound of young hamsters squeaking in play whilst their parents got on with the harvesting and reaping of the earth's goodness.

They had been told to leave him alone but there was something nagging at the hamlet's mind that approached, very tentatively at first, to seek out an answer. Of course, her approach was no surprise, the Wise One expecting something like this to happen ever since she'd asked those questions yesterday evening after their most recent story.

'Wise One?' she squeaked. 'Are you awake?'

'Yes, yes - I was only dozing. Please - come over. Let me tell you what's on your mind.'

The hamlet sat beside the mentor and looked innocently into the eyes of the One who held wisdom and truth. This had been the first Wise One she'd ever seen since being born and she was naturally intrigued - but whatever curiosity his presence had held in her, she put it all aside to concentrate on the issue that had not let her sleep.

'Well' the Wise One asked, 'what exactly do you wish to know?'

Hesitantly at first, she began, 'What *is* Truth? Are there absolutes? Is Truth purely subjective? Why can't other animals have Truth that's reality?'

She fell silent.

'There are many questions there,' the Wise One observed, 'but you're letting your thoughts become confused. There is One from Whom all Truth comes - find Him and you find all Truth.'

'But how *can* I find Him? Should I look through the beliefs of the animals around us? Should I participate in the ways of the rat and the vole - of the goose and the chicken?'

The Wise One raised a paw which brought the hamlet to a standstill.

'Do not think that all roads lead to the One from Whom everything good comes,' he began, 'for many have invented one in their own image and they can never come to know the True One. No, hold fast to what you know and allow Him to show what is right to you but - I say this as a warning - do not go after the ways of the rat or the vole, the goose or the chicken.'

He paused one moment before repeating, 'No, especially not the chicken...'

'Worship the chicken,' the guinea fowl said in the most southern of American accents, 'for the chicken is the image of our god, the representation of all that we believe.'

He turned to a book that lay on the lectern and opened it to the first few pages, quoting, "'And the supreme chicken created all poultry in his own image, in the image of

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the chicken they were created. And they were told to lay many eggs and to fill the earth with the sound of the hen as far as the east is from the west". And so we have been called to raise chicks to the name of the chicken god.'

The chickens clucked their approval and raised their wings towards the skies, clacking their bills and scratching their feet.

From below the hen house, the group of hamsters giggled with mirth. They had heard about these strange fowl who worshipped the creature rather than the Supreme One and had come to listen to their outrageous behaviour, having been visiting relatives who lived not a half night's journey from where they were now sitting.

Suddenly, from out the back, the farmer came, knife in hand, and thrust his arm into the coop, dragging a plump hen by its legs into the open, amid airborne feathers that gently cascaded earthward after the farmer's departure.

'Blessed be the chicken god,' said the guinea fowl, 'who has chosen our feathered friend for immortality' - actually, he'd chosen her for anything but - 'who has been predestined for this glorious experience.'

The hamsters giggled repeatedly as every sentence threw them into more hysterical laughter that they tried unsuccessfully to stifle for fear of being discovered. They knew the Truth, they knew that the chicken god hadn't brought the world into being - as much as they knew there was no hamster god or even patron saint that watched over them - but how these feathered creatures could ever have concluded such a theory was beyond them.

True - when you looked round the earth, you saw the work of an unseen hand. What was seen testified to what could not be seen - but to conform the image of the Invisible One into the nature of the chicken was absurd.

Even worse - they thought that this chicken god was like them, so justifying what they did by recourse to its ways. Instead of justifying what they did by recourse to who the Supreme One was, they upheld whatever they wanted to do by what they made their chicken god become.

Having created a being in their own image, they set about making it whatever they wanted to both do and be in whichever situation they found themselves in.

And that was funny - to these group of hamsters, I mean.

They should have known better, I know, but they were young and, well, they weren't going to grow up into adulthood, were they?

'Am I going too fast for you?' the Wise One broke off. 'I have the habit of running through these stories too fast. I tell them over and over again and they can become dry tales that I need to take my time with.'

'No - I understand so far. But, tell me, why was there any danger in the chicken god? If the truth is really a lie, surely it has no power?'

'Many have thought so,' the Wise One continued, 'but...'

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Although there are lies, it doesn't follow that the believers are powerless.

Because a belief structure is devoid of reason, it doesn't mean that there isn't a force behind it.

Only by clinging to the Supreme One can one ever hope to stand against the wiles of everything that's opposed to the Truth - but ridicule is a dangerous game to play when you don't have the reality of the Supreme One functioning within.

And so it was with the hamsters - who even went as far as to get involved in the worship of the chicken god. Reason would have told them to stay well away but, being young, they only saw the experience and the hilarity of the moment, perceiving nothing of what could happen - and what eventually did - only seeing that being 'on the inside' and in a position where they could watch the actions of these chickens to be something worth obtaining. Here, they reasoned, they would gain from first hand experience what all their fuss was about.

'We must welcome these new animals amongst us,' the guinea fowl squawked in a voice that sounded warm and kindly but, even then, there was something amiss that was clanging warning bells in the hamsters ears - yet, even now, they were propelling themselves onwards to learn more and the exhilaration of the experience egged them on to learn more about the chicken god.

When the chickens raised their wings, so did the rodents.

When the chickens sat quietly to listen to the words of the guinea fowl, so did they.

In fact, even though they knew that to take part in the new entrants' ceremony would open them to danger, they reasoned that, if the chicken god really didn't exist, there could be nothing harmful in what they were doing.

If only they had known.

'Known what?' the hamlet enquired.

'If only they had known what was about to transpire that very evening. My young friend, do not be deceived by thinking a lie is powerless - it can snatch at your very soul and destroy your very being. These hamsters didn't know that and they were about to discover that they should have stored up wisdom rather than play with fire.

'It was later that evening,' he continued. 'Yes - I remember when I first heard the story.'

Perhaps it was a fowl spirit - perhaps it was a poultrygeist - but, that evening, there was a loud knock at the door like only a chicken knows how to. The two hamsters huddled together in fear, the hairs on the backs of their necks bristling with anticipation.

They watched as the knob of the door creaked eerily, the chicken gradually unlocking the catch and hesitantly pushing the wooden frame as far open as it would go.

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There, in the doorway, stood the chicken, silhouetted against the frequent lightning and the dark night sky that had followed his approach. The light illuminated his features and they saw, in that instant, the scar on the face that they recognised from the words of the guinea fowl.

This chicken was the chicken from hell - the one that brought with it its own curse that had already taken the life of their colleagues just a few hours before. With a deep throated and blood-curdling drool, it squawked 'Buck-buck-buck-errrk' and flapped its giant wings, throwing its head from side to side to peer into the semi-darkness of the cabin.

Perhaps it hadn't seen them. Perhaps it was really looking for shelter for the night. Perhaps this was all just some ghastly mistake that the writer of this story would soon explain to his readers and the little hamsters would be safe.

But, no.

It stepped gingerly into the void of the doorway, pecking at the ground and scratching its foot on the rug as it approached the two cowering rodents.

'At least it knows to wipe its claws on the welcome mat,' thought one of them.

Strange, isn't it, that the most mundane of thoughts can go through your head when you least expect it? The hamster dispelled the thought almost immediately as the chicken let out the most horrendous cry, elevating itself to its full height and towering over its two victims that shivered in the cold breeze that had moved in with their adversary.

'They never found their bodies,' the Wise One concluded, 'but I guess that isn't important.'

'So,' the hamlet concluded, 'even those things that may appear innocent, can have a destroying power that it's safer to avoid than play with?'

'Precisely.'

The hamlet scratched an ear, turned and scampered away, stopping just a few yards away to turn and squeak a thank you over her shoulder before diving back into the burrow complex to consider the Truth.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT A POUND COIN

'Don't be obstinate,' said the Wise One, 'like the humans are. They think that their stubbornness and refusal to budge on particular issues is an endearing trait within their personality.'

He thought for a moment before continuing.

'Yes, they seem to always want to get their own way and, well, when you have two humans who have such similarly strong wills, the outcome can be most horrifying and the conflict can last for days.'

There was a paw raised at the far end of the group and the Wise one motioned for him to speak.

'What is stubbornness?' he enquired. 'Isn't that what trees are when they don't grow properly?'

The Wise One contemplated the hamster's misunderstanding before choosing to answer the individual.

'I actually said "stubbornness",' he corrected, 'but it would appear as if you've hit the nail on the head, so to speak. Stubbornness does produce stubbornness - yes, it does retard the individual human from developing properly - their lives become all knotted and twisted, and their outlook on life becomes both cynical and suspicious.'

He scratched his chin as he thought long and hard on the point.

'Yes, that is worth accepting fully.'

The questioning hamster sat proudly on his rear paws though his fellow rodents were quick to point out to him that he hadn't actually come out with the Truth himself - he had only misheard the words being spoken and all that this indicated was not his intelligence or insight but the fact that, had it been possible, he could have done with his ears syringing.

'I will tell you a story,' continued the Wise One, 'which I'm sure you will find humorous. I discovered this writing a long time ago in another land where humans commit their thoughts to what they call "writing".

'It was a small house I was staying in over the winter holiday period and we had very little else to do but to make reconnaissance missions into their kitchen to raid the traditional turkey.

'On one such venture, I seem to recall, we discovered a small piece of crumpled paper lying underneath their cooker. It immediately caught our attention and, when we'd finally got it back to the nest, we read...'

I normally travel to work by the local bus - not a small feat in itself seeing as I'm never sure from one day to the next whether the bus will fall apart before it gets there, crash or simply just break down. I've heard people tell me about the thrills and adventure they get at the amusement parks that are scattered throughout the nation,

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but if these people would only come to Sheffield, here in the UK, and take one short sixty pence ride on a Yorkshire Terrier bus, then I'm sure all that they've experienced up to that point would pale by comparison.

With deregulation of the services, prices have soared but, fortunately, weekly savers are still available which represent good value to the traveller so long as you stick to one specific service and bus company.

Terrier - and what a suitable and applicable name that is - charge just £5.95 for a week's travel and it's usually this that I opt for on a Monday morning when I'm torn between the lovely warm sensation of a slept-in bed and the harsh reality of another week of daily routine stretching to the excitement of one more weekend.

This particular Monday, however, was going to be, er, unusual to say the least.

The bus came and I plonked a five pound note and a pound coin in front of the driver asking for a 'weekly saver' with both politeness and forthrightness. It may seem strange to you, but I like to assume different persona some weeks just to alleviate the boredom and, this morning, I was Mr Upright - calm and plain spoken, Mr Upright - the one who doesn't get ruffled by problems and circumstance, the one who is always kind and considerate and...

'Have you got a pound coin?' the driver asked.

'Pound coin?' I thought to myself. 'A pound coin? Blind old coot, he can't see the coin I've already put down.'

I pointed to the money with the words, 'Yes, there it is,' but was immediately confronted by almost the same sentence with just one slight alteration.

'Have you got *another* pound coin?'

Perhaps it was me but I was struggling trying to understand what the driver was on about - or just 'on' - and must have looked puzzled. In my days at school, £5 plus £1 equalled £6 and the £5.95 was most definitely below the total amount I'd tendered. Perhaps someone had changed the rules? Well wouldn't that be just like someone!

'Another pound coin?' I was sounding more perplexed, I'm sure.

'Forgery,' the driver responded, giving me the sense immediately that, perhaps, he had not yet passed the Yorkshire Terrier school of the Queen's English - notably the subject 'Sentence Construction for Beginners'.

However, his grasp of English throughout the remaining journey didn't really indicate that this had been the case. His 'Up yours mate!' and 'What the hell was that for?' accompanied with appropriate hand signals assured me that he must have passed with flying colours and was possibly only having an off-moment when I'd stood before him.

'The coin's a forgery,' he said.

Oh, the coin's a forgery! Now I understood. I got the only other two I had out from my pocket and placed them on the tray.

'Both forgeries,' he said, 'you can tell by the colour,' and he placed a 'genuine' coin next to my three which did, I admit, show that my three were much darker.

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'Yours are lead painted over with metallic paint,' he informed me, 'but the lead's coming through which is why they're darker. If I put them into the machine tonight, it'll reject them and I'll be out of pocket.'

Not having any other money on me (okay, I lied. I had a ten pound note but I certainly wasn't going to have him take one look at it and say 'Forgery' all over again), the driver agreed to take the pound off me the following day when I got on the bus.

As I travelled to work I thought no more of it...

'...and that should have been the end of it,' interjected the Wise One, 'but, being human, the saga continued.'

At work, the problem began puzzling me.

I mean, what were the chances of me having three one pound coins in my pocket and them *all* being forgeries? And, upon closer inspection, I noticed that their minting dates were 1983, 1992 and 1998. Would a forger take the time and trouble to vary the dates?

I thought not.

I scratched one of the faces to try and remove the 'paint' but little happened save the colour got a little lighter.

Let me say that I was quite willing to throw the three coins away and forget my losses but there was something in me that was niggling at my peace and I just had to find out.

Fortunately, I had to pay in a cheque that lunch time and so asked the bank to check the weights - after all, if the driver's 'machine' would reject them, it had to be something to do with weight, didn't it?

Having assembled seventeen genuine one pound coins in a plastic bag, the teller placed my three beside them so as not to get them confused and pressed the magic button on the weighing machine.

Perfect! Spot on.

That convinced me even more that there was actually something wrong with the driver rather than my coins and I set about performing a little test for him the next morning. I deliberately spent one of the coins that lunch time after getting the 'all clear' from my bank and, when I got home, obtained a shiny pound coin from the wife's purse - with her permission, of course.

I then gave my attention over to one of those two 'forgeries' I had left. I scrubbed it, rinsed it and immersed it in Fairy Liquid. Overnight, I immersed it in a mixture of vinegar, a mild acid, and salt, an abrasive. In the morning I rinsed and scrubbed it once more and brought one of the sides up to a shade of yellow that was a bit lighter than the other forgery.

Then I went for the bus - armed only with a genuine coin from the wife's purse, a cleaned original and, to be absolutely fair to the driver, a coin that he had previously

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ruled as being a forgery so that, seeing and recognising it, could compare the other two by.

I need to point out here that, in England, we have numerous different types of pound coins so it's quite easy to distinguish one from another. Although each one is the same size and weight, the tails side (called the obverse or reverse but I can't remember which) has different designs and the three I had in my pocket were each different from the other - my wife's one bore the Welsh leek, I recall, though that's hardly relevant to my story.

The bus was on time and the driver seemed to recognise me - this was good for it meant I didn't have to explain what I was about to do. The doors opened and I walked inside up to the paying area and put down my three coins, tail side up.

'Which one would you like?' I said.

He looked at the coins carefully, inspecting them like some antiques dealer in search of the genuine article and as if his life depended on it.

Lifting my cleaned forgery, he stroked his finger across the tail side and smiled. But, on flipping the coin over, nodded disapprovingly when he saw the dark head, only proving his suspicions that it was, in fact, cleaned. In that instant I scolded myself for only taking the time to clean one of the two sides.

I had been practising the phrase 'Amazing what a little spit and polish can do, isn't it?' to deliver to him when he accepted the coin but, having seen him put it down and move on, the wind was taken out of my sails.

I think that's the reason why, when he lifted the uncleaned forgery and placed it into his money tray, I said absolutely nothing. I was astounded and so gob-smacked that I simply lifted up the two remaining coins and went to sit down in my usual seat, reading my magazine on the way.

Not only had the driver wasted my time and effort the previous day and this current morning, but he'd demonstrated that he actually was making it all up as he was going along.

When I finally got home that afternoon, I checked all the tv listings to see - just in case - the new series of Candid Camera had started, but all to no avail. It seems that this Yorkshire Terrier Bus Driver really was inept at being able to recognise a forged coin.

'So, why did this human bother?' the Wise One asked rhetorically.

'Because,' he continued, 'humans are obstinate and they like to prove their point of view regardless of whether they're either right or wrong.'

He thought for a moment and then concluded, 'You see, the human knew that first lunch time that he was right. Didn't he?'

There were nods of approval throughout the gathered crowd.

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'Why, then, did he need to prove his point to the bus driver? Why not just accept the knowledge that he'd discovered and rest content in what he'd found out? Why did he have to contrive a situation to prove his point?'

There was a raised paw - again at the back. He was motioned to speak.

'Were any of the coins those ones you get at Christmas which have chocolate in the middle?'

'Yeah. That you can pry the foil off the edges to get at the centre,' another chimed in.

The Wise One hesitated but answered, 'No, that's not the point of the story...'

'But if they had've been chocolate, you're saying he should just have eaten them, right?'

'No, no. That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying that...'

'...he should have made sure they weren't full of chocolate by sucking them,' another suggested. 'I mean, he never tested it out in case they were, did he?'

The Wise One hung his head and covered his eyes.

'What I'm trying to say is that we shouldn't be like the humans and continually expect that we must prove our point when it is, er, pointless.'

There was a short pause before another listening rodent squeaked up, 'So what *does* this story have to do with chocolate, then?'

EPILOGUE

'Where are the souls? Oh the sea doesn't know.
'Where are the souls? Oh the rocks cannot say.
 'Where are the souls?
God only knows how you're feeling today.'

from 'Beyond these Shores' by Iona

'It's idyllic,' I squeaked as I sat in the shade of a leafy tree towards the close of another perfect day.

'It's one of the few places,' said my companion, 'where you'll find beauty mixed with despair.'

'De...despair?' I retorted. 'Why do you say that?'

Beckoning, I followed as he led me through a series of underground tunnels, burrows and cracks in the rock, predominantly downwards to where the air grew thick with salt and the roar of the ocean became increasingly loud.

Just when I'd begun to wonder whether my paws would be able to carry me back up the descent, we poked our noses out of the chalk cliff into brilliant sunshine, overlooking the sea, chalk scree that had, presumably, fallen off the cliff and what I can only describe as 'man-made rubble'.

'Where are we?' I asked.

'The humans call this place "Beachy Head",' squeaked my companion, 'where brilliant white rocks jut out into the sea. There was a rock fall a while back which brought the humans to swarm all over the place - but, usually, the base here is quite remote.'

The sea was shimmering in the sun as it bounced and cascaded towards the cliffs where our noses poked out. Witnessing such a beautiful picture, I couldn't help but call my colleague's description into question when he used the label 'despair'.

'Are you *sure* there's despair here?'

He stretched out a paw and pointed to the rubble I'd noticed when I'd first looked out on the scene.

'And how do you imagine they got here?' he asked me.

Well, certainly not from the sea - some of the twisted forms were definitely items from what I could only guess had been cars. And not from the narrow coastal strip that hugged the edge of the ocean - boulders, strewn along the full course, would only have prevented such an advance.

No, the only place they could come from was above.

Above?

Why had they come from above?

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I looked heavenward until my eyes ceased to focus any further - how far *was* it to the top? Judging by our descent through the tunnels and burrows, it had to be many, many metres - too far to contemplate the fate of those whose twisted property had carried them over the edge.

My companion eventually broke the silence and my thoughts.

'There's despair in every twisted piece of wreckage that lies at the foot of these cliffs. No one could begin to tell you what pain there must have been in the people's lives to make them want to do such a thing - but each mangled heap testifies to what drove them here and to what they thought they were going to lose by their actions.'

'Lose?' I squeaked. 'You mean, they saw this as the better alternative to living?'

My companion turned his head to look out over the sea as we both fell silent. Throughout our return ascent, the picture never left my mind - the beauty of the rock and the sea, the gulls flying over in mid-heaven and there, directly below us, just as my colleague said, was despair.

What varied impulses would push these people to the point of no return?

One thing I realised was that I'd probably never know - and never could know. But it certainly gave me a balancing memory to all the euphoria of the previous week.

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The Rodent Weekly

THE RODENT WEEKLY

INTRODUCTION

Readers of the previous two volumes of hamster stories will already be aware of the existence of 'The Rodent Weekly', a regular magazine for both rodents and their owners.

Kesef, Dak and Ebony - three of our resident hamsters - wrote for the magazine between November 1998 and December 2000, covering specifically the run up and development of the American Presidential Election 2000 (with a hamster by the name of 'Ganjette' running as the Presidential Candidate - followed by Diddley Squat IV when she passed away) but taking time to deal with other issues as news broke (weighing in with a total of 217 articles, no less).

Prevented from covering the entire 'Hamster for President Campaign' (HFPC) through their untimely demise, we received a visiting rodent by the name of 'Nuffin' in the last few weeks who contributed substantially to the Rodent Weekly column before he returned to the London Editorial offices early in 2001 having spent Christmas with us.

The writings of these hamsters is voluminous and space doesn't permit me to include all their articles here. However, the Weekly gave me permission to use as much or as little as I desired for this third book as a fitting tribute to their contribution to the success of the magazine throughout those two years.

Besides, as the reader has now completed one independent work of both Kesef ('An English Hamster in Greece') and Dak ('The Community in Eastbourne'), it seems appropriate to show the reader that, even though their private works weren't as multitudinous as that of George, they were very much in the Public eye through their insightful editorials.

From time to time, articles written solely by or contributed to by members of the HFPC with input from Dak, Kesef or Ebony also saw the light of day in the Weekly's pages and these have also been given to me for consideration.

One or two of my efforts have also been selected.

I have tried to choose articles that rely little or nothing upon the context of the HFPC, knowing that another rodent has already expressed an interest in producing a factual account of the Campaign from its humble beginnings to the present day.

I have, rather, chosen the more 'neutral' articles written by the hamsters, although it has been impossible not to find mention of the HFPC as there was a fair amount of bleed over.

I've also been granted permission to use both the Assassination/Abduction and Hostage series of articles by the rodent historian - and I must extend a warm paw of thanks for his graciousness. It seems that there are already so many enquiries over these two incidents that a 'first report' is being demanded by the general public who have heard a great many rumours but so very little of the true facts.

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I should note here that the abbreviation 'GFO' is commonly used to denote the 'Great Furless One', a term used by rodents the world over to refer to their master, owner or keeper who they either respect or stay with. It's used frequently throughout these articles.

The editorials have been kept largely in date order although, for the first article in this series, I felt it advantageous to use 'Transcription - A Christmas Special' as it introduces the HFPC to the reader from the outset.

Lee H Smith

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Transcription

Wednesday 30th December 1998 - 'Christmas Special' Edition

A transcribed editorial of the major TV Channel's live Presidential Special held on Thursday 24th December with additional comments from Kesef the Hamster who attended the live broadcast at the studios

It's a packed auditorium that's shown the 'five seconds' board and large captions announce that absolute silence is now required until the bright green light once more lights up over our heads. The introductory music begins, solemn but with a certain swing that sets my paws tapping and my head rocking from side to side.

As the music begins to fade, an unknown voice announces, 'This is a Presidential Special coming to you live from Washington DC. Your host for this evening - John Zimmerframe...'

We're encouraged to applaud - which we do - and studio lights dazzle the presenters as the television viewers see the Anchor's face come into clear focus from out of the shadows.

'Good Evening,' he begins, smiling solemnly. 'I'm John Zimmerframe, your host for this special in depth investigation of the three major political parties that will be fighting throughout the coming year for their candidate to be elected President.

'I'm joined this evening by Political Analyst Bob Pritchard of the Washington Post...'

The camera cuts to a close up. 'Hi!'

'...and Gallup Pollster Andy Summons...'

Again, a cut and, 'Hello!'

'...in the studio but we'll be going live to the three major headquarters of the political parties this evening - the Republicans, Democrats and the surprise runners, the Hamsters - to get their comments on the New Year's campaign strategy.

'But first, as you know, our lines have just been opened for you to register your votes as to who you the people want to see in the White House in the year 2000. Philip Pridesworth will be monitoring the figures for us this evening so let's just bring him in for a moment before we turn to our first report.

'Philip, how's the voting going?'

The television flashes to a full screen picture of the presenter at a wooden desk with a monitor in front which it's evident he's reading from.

'Slow at the moment, John, but the Hamsters are leading by a whisker - ha! ha!' The television records his chuckles as the screen cuts back to the Anchor.

'We'll have regular updates throughout the evening but,' he pauses as if he's just realised what the previous presenter said, 'first, we sent out our reporter Pete Clydebank to deal with the plight of the Republicans. Pete, are you there?'

The monitor switches to a split shot with Peter Clydebank in one half and John Zimmerframe in the other.

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'Yes, I am, John...'

There's a short pause as the live image of the Anchor fades out and the reporter takes centre screen. 'Well, here I am on the streets of the City of London, that great city where Christmas has come all too quickly for some...'

The reporter is followed by the camera crew as he enters a public bar and walks over to the waiting landlord who leans on the counter with a glass of beer in hand.

'This is Brian, the landlord of this fine establishment. Now, tell me, I understand that your turnover has been down this year in the run up to Christmas...'

While the report goes out live, I notice the Anchor starting to panic, raising his hands into the air with a puzzled expression and looking round for some sort of guidance. Eventually, he presses the earpiece close to his ear, nods and his image comes back onto screen.

'Pete?' he interrupts.

There's a stunned silence, followed by the response, 'Er, yes?'

'What does this actually have to do with the plight of the Republicans?'

There's a long pause as Pete Clydebank faces the camera, the producer having cut to get a visual response. But something is dawning on his face that we're all about to hear.

'Oh,' he begins, 'Oh dear. I was told to report on the plight of the Publicans not...'

Zimmerframe interrupts him curtly, the London reporter's voice rapidly fading out. He turns quickly to an unprepared Bob Pritchard, the political analyst, and asks, 'So, do the Republicans really have much to lose in next year's campaigning, Bob?'

'Er, sure.' A look of panic now descends upon his face which says that this wasn't the question that they'd rehearsed earlier. 'They've got a lot to lose.'

'Like, what? Their reputation?'

'Yes, that's right, their reputation.' Again he falls silent but he finally finds his tongue as an idea hits him.

'There's an ancient proverb that fits their predicament well,' he continues, 'and that is "A bird in the hand is worth two cents less than a camel by any other name".'

Off screen, the Anchor is trying to make some sense of the bewildering reply as Andy Summons, the Gallop Commentator chimes in with, 'Don't forget that 20% of those interviewed on the street today said that if it wasn't for the 56% of voters who had already pledged support for the Republicans, their 25% influence would swing back to the Democrats. So we could see a major turn around here.'

Baffled by the mathematical logic, the Anchor turns to the Phone-in Poll looking for inspiration or just, at least, a little help from somewhere.

'Yes, voting is going well,' Philip smiles broadly, 'but, just like the last time you asked, the Hamsters have still got their noses in front - ha! ha! - I really do crease myself up sometimes.'

Again, his shoulders surge upwards as his maniacal laughter echoes down the mike.

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As if on automatic pilot, Zimmerframe looks into the camera and speaks slowly and calmly - he's paid for being the epitome of peace in any broadcasting storm and today he is demonstrating his talents to a tee.

'Now let's get our second report from Tony Suchard at the Democrat party headquarters. Tony, are you there?'

A picture imposes itself split screen as the reporter says, 'Yes, John, I hear you loud and clear. Great satellite link - didn't believe it would be so good.'

The Anchor once more begins to look worried, his mind seemingly toying over why there's a need for a satellite link, but he continues almost unflustered, 'So, tell us about the plight of the Democrats. Do they think they can turn round the polls this coming year?'

Tony Suchard laughs nervously. 'What would I know about that, John?'

'That's what you're supposed to be reporting on - isn't it?'

'Er, no. I've taken a plane to Kosovo to report on the plight of the Serbo-Croats - or, at least, I think that's what the producer on the other end of the phone said.'

John Zimmerframe is again full screen and says, 'Well, thanks, Tony, for that report. If we've any more time at the end of the program we'll get right back to you. Bob, the Democrats really have a mountain to climb if they're to get back into a realistic position of winning this campaign, haven't they? I mean, which party have ever reversed such a percentage lead before?'

Again, the suddenness of the question unnerves him and he fumbles through his mind for something to say.

'Percentage lead,' he repeats almost in a trance. 'Yes, the percentage lead is,' he grasps at whatever word his mind can find and opts for, 'large.'

'But can they reverse it?'

He looks round for inspiration and hits on another idea. 'I'm reminded of that famous proverb that "A Rolling Stone gathers many different wives in his lifetime" and,' he notices a youngster in the front row wearing a 'Pizza Hut' tee-shirt, 'and that "When in Rome, it's always best to eat Italian".'

Zimmerframe sighs deeply and is about to change the subject when the Gallup pollster again butts in.

'Don't forget that this sort of majority has only been reversed by a sub-culture intent on its own way when sufficient investment was put in to funds to advertise their ideals. It was 1938, I believe - if my memory serves me right - when the 65% majority of the people was turned into a 35% minority when the then President demonstrated that polls are really a waste of time and shouldn't be listened to.'

'Yes, thank you for that.' The Anchor glares at the comment but smiles reassuringly at the camera before turning, once more, to the Phone-in poll.

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'Well,' begins Philip Pridesworth, very serious but trying to stifle a laugh, 'there's been a slight paws - ha! ha! - in the public ringing in, but the Hamsters are still in the lead by a short - ha! ha! I kill myself sometimes - a short head.'

The camera cuts suddenly to the Anchor who's wiping away the first tear from his eye with a handkerchief.

'Let's take our last report from...er...about...er...'

There's a short pause and the audience can almost hear his expression tell them that the Presenter is losing the will to live. But he grasps the situation squarely by the throat and continues, 'Alan Cousins, are you there?'

'Yes, John, hearing you loud and clear.'

'I suppose you're going to tell us that you've been asked to report on chamois dusters?'

Alan Cousins looks serious and taken aback. 'No,' he begins, 'I thought I was reporting on the Hamster campaign from their headquarters? Have I messed up?'

'No, no,' the Anchor smiles broadly and begins to dance around in his seat with glee. 'Just an in-joke amongst the audience and myself. Please, Alan, go ahead.'

'Yes, thank you, John. Well the excitement can hardly be more intense here at Hamster campaign headquarters. It was just a couple of years ago when Ganja - now deceased - first came up with the idea to stand for President and they've come such a long way in such a short space of time that the Hamsters are living on the crest of a progressing presidential election wave.

'I'm joined this evening by Diddley Squat, the Press and Public Relations Manager for Ganjette's Campaign.'

The television pans out to include first his nose then his full face in the shot, whiskers resplendent from a sunflower oil application.

'Let me ask you, Diddley, how's the campaign going here?'

Diddley Squat looks square into the face of the reporter and squeaks, 'The campaign's going very well. We've made many friends throughout this past year and look forward to making even more in the following. It's not just about winning the election, Alan, it's about being honest with the public and taking care to be a true representative of the people who are lending us their support.

'We're concerned to make sure that every voice is heard as we press on to a presidential victory in the year 2000 and successful Government in the years beyond.'

'Some would say that a hamster vote is a joke vote. What would you say to that?'

Diddley Squat smiles. 'I'm sure some people *would* say that - mostly Republicans and Democrats, no doubt - but sincerity is what our detractors fall on. Hamsters don't lie, they don't steal, they don't pull people apart for the sake of it - we will be upright and honest throughout our term of office and we'll represent the people and be wholly for the people in each and every decision that we'll have to make.'

'Well, thank you for your time.'

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'No problem. Next time, Ganjette herself hopes that she can be here to speak with you.'

'Yes, that would be good. So, from me, Alan Cousins, at Hamster campaign headquarters, it's back to the studio. John?'

'Thank you, Alan. Do you have anything to say, Bob?'

This time Bob Pritchard is more relaxed but his little grey cells have still not recovered from the nervousness previously descended upon him.

But, with confidence, he states, 'Yes, a real threat to the big two - a dark horse ready to break into a gallop. I'm reminded of that proverb, here, John, which says "You can lead a camel to water but he's more valuable to you if you keep him in the bush". I think the Hamsters are fast learning that truth.'

'Yes,' begins the pollster, 'when...'

'Oh, shut up!' interrupts the Anchor, 'Who asked you anyway?'

The camera flicks quickly over to the Phone-in results and the audience sees a beaming Philip Pridesworth as he says, 'Well, there are just five more minutes to register your votes but it looks as if the Hamsters are in an unassailable lead and that they're wheelie going to win,' - he stifles a giggle, 'so you'd probably be nuts not to vote for them - ha! ha! I can't stand it...'

The outro music fades in and the camera pans across studio to Zimmerframe who looks into the Camera and says from the auto cue, 'I'm John Zimmerframe. You have been watching "Campaign Special". Please join us again next week when we shall be reporting on the continuing progress of the three major parties as they hit the rally circuit once more.'

The music fades out as the lights disappear from the Anchor and the lights amongst the audience go up. The green light shines brightly, signifying that we're off air but the audience sit in stunned silence waiting for direction.

When the lights come back on to the set, John Zimmerframe stands to his feet and asks the audience, 'Does anyone have a gun?'

Sheffield United 2 Tranmere 2

Saturday 7th November 1998

A soccer report by Kesef the Hamster

Certainly quite a day!

Lee had previously managed to obtain a cheap ticket from a friend at work to see this game so I naturally stowed away on board his new coat in one of the side pockets.

Football is a game that fascinates me - how 22 men can run around a grassy pitch for an hour and a half without any thought of eating sunflower seeds or broccoli shoots is bewildering. Even the odd crow flies over the ground from time to time just to see

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how the game's going while the pigeons that sit high up in the roof space are spotted by many.

The preliminaries went well though I couldn't help wondering if, perhaps, the Tranmere supporters to my far left thought that it was their home tie - they seemed to make such a mighty roar that I found myself looking around me to see if an epidemic of laryngitis had swept through the United supporters.

But, as the match got under way, they soon found their voice and yelled encouragement to a strange black figure who ran mainly in the middle of the pitch and seemed to only have contact with the ball on a couple of occasions.

They variously referred to him as 'four-eyed' and 'blind' (both of which don't appear to be possible - after all, if you've four eyes, your eyesight should be pretty good) and inferred that his parents hadn't been married.

The object of the game - as far as I can tell - is to make the crowd shout loudly. This is done by taking the ball as near to the wooden rectangles placed at either end of the playing field and, occasionally, putting it through the centre of them. This latter event only happened four times even though the players seemed to taunt the crowd by putting the ball anywhere *but* through the rectangle when it would have been much easier to do so.

I think this has something to do with trying to keep the crowd in suspense so that they can never fully know when this event is going to happen.

The lone black figure in the centre of the field got the majority of the crowd on his side, though, when he asked one of the red striped-shirted players to leave the field early in the second period.

As he left the field, he made an encouraging gesture to one of the other black figures who stood on the far edge of the playing field - pointing with his finger which made me think that he was saying something like 'Hey! You're the man!'.

The incident got the crowd to its feet and urged them on into louder cheering. I t had followed an event when one player of each side had run towards the rectangular object at great speed, the red shirted player being so fond of the other guy that he was frantically trying to embrace him and, at the very worst, attempting to remove his shirt from him as a token sign of affection and love.

Perhaps that's why the red shirted player was told to leave the field - maybe such actions constitute one of the highest achievements of this game of 'football' and so, having hit the target, there's little more he could have done?

Finally, the game was over.

And the result?

I think the red-shirted supporters largely won the day - despite the initial quietness, they seemed to progress through the game to be shouting louder and more consistently towards the end. I'm not sure if points should be awarded for verbalisation

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towards the black figure but, if they can be, then there really is no contest - the crowd won by a mile.

However, my owner, Lee, assures me that the game was adjudged to be a 'draw' - well, it just goes to show you how unfair the result was! To any unbiased spectator (as the crowd were) it was obvious that *they* should have won and those words I heard as we left the ground - 'we was robbed!' - are a fair reflection.

Mouse Trapped - Investigating the Rodent

Saturday 5th December 1998

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the investigation into Walnut Irregularities

There was a missing walnut.

The supply had been counted three times and there was a missing walnut.

Not a peanut, neither a brazil, but a walnut.

The Superintendent had been under suspicion for sometime but the investigation conducted by both CRI SP (The Central Rodent Investigation of Sinister Practices) and RATS (Robbery and Theft Squad) only had their noses to go on and the testimony wasn't enough to satisfy their consciences that they had the right mouse.

Besides, the superintendent had affirmed under cross-examination that he had '...never had edible relations with a walnut - either at present or in times past.'

The investigative procedures had ground to a halt and there seemed to be little light at the end of a very dark and imposing tunnel.

Then came the breakthrough - from out of nowhere, a counselling session revealed that the offender had not been alone in his feeding frenzy - an accomplice who was, even now, squeaking out a confession that the Superintendent had actively licked and nibbled on the shell before secretly devouring the contents over successive nights.

His underlings, it turned out, had thought him engaged on 'official business' that was seriously impinging upon the continued welfare of the siblings who depended upon his oversight of the Rodent Welfare Nutritional Support Food Silos.

That was in the past.

In the now, at this instant in time, the mouse sat before a packed house, the evidence overwhelming, but each one there present willing to give him one final chance to relate the complete sordid episode.

The chair motioned for order as the Superintendent rises to his rear paws, notes in hand, to deliver his speech. Accepting a piece of tissue paper from a colleague seated in front, he wiped perspiration from a damp brow before beginning:

'Good evening.'

He looked sincerely round the galleries at the rodent faces that peer down at him. 'This afternoon from this place, I will testify before this Independent Counsel and, yourselves, the grand jury. I will answer all your questions truthfully, including questions

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about my private life and all the types of food I eat - questions that no mouse would ever want to answer but which, being honourable, I feel obliged to do.

'It was a few months ago that I was first asked about my edible relationship with a walnut that was under my jurisdiction. And, while my answers at that time were legally accurate, I did not volunteer any more information than was necessary to satisfy those questions.

'Indeed, I did have a relationship with a walnut that was not appropriate to my office. In fact, it was wrong. And very naughty, too. It constituted a critical lapse of my own judgment and it was a personal failure on my part for which I, and I alone, am solely and completely responsible.

'Much as I have wrestled with my conscience and can acknowledge the difficulties that walnuts present to rodents such as myself and, much as I would like to say to you that I was inevitably driven to my edible relationship by the hard shell, the crisp inner skin and the soft but chewy nut, I must admit before you all that I am fully responsible for what I did.

'But, I want to emphasise that I never lied, nor did I tell anyone to lie. I did not tell anyone to cover up the fact of my edible relationship or to destroy the empty shells after it was over. I told no one at any time that they should take any unlawful action.

'Yes, I misled you. But I did not lie. I may have uttered certain inexactitudes but I did not contradict the truth. I stand by all the answers I gave when I was questioned on that first occasion, even though I meant by my words something different than what you thought I'd said.

'When I said that I had not had edible relations, I meant that I had - you misunderstood my words and I accept that it was my fault that I allowed myself to be misunderstood by you. If I had my time again, I would repeat all that I said then but explain to you what lay behind everything.

'Finally, fellow mice, there is much work to be done. You can be assured that I have never lied under oath - and never will do - and that the real problem lies with your understanding of what I say, not with the words that I choose to use to paint an errant image of my conduct.

'So, let us turn away from the spectacle of these past months and arm ourselves with the resolve needed as we push on to satisfy hungry mouths and rumbling stomachs.'

The Superintendent sank to his paws as the mouse-judge rose to his. He looked around at the multitudes gathered (crowds in which there was not a single hamster - apart from myself who was there out of duty to the Rodent Weekly - for hamsters do not find it enjoyable to see a fellow rodent have to give an account of himself) and began, in conclusion:

'There are a number of questions that still remain unanswered and we will move on to those in due course,' he paused deliberately, thinking how to choose his words.

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'When you say that you will never lie again, sir, is that statement the truth - or a statement that is legally accurate? And should we ask you to explain what you mean by the words you have just used, sir, because we may have misunderstood the content of your words?'

There were titters of mirth that whispered around the audience. The Superintendent rose on his rear paws to answer, but the judge waved him down.

'The hearing will adjourn' he squeaked 'we will recommence after lunch.

'Tell me - do you like peaches?'

Hammy New Year

Saturday 9th January 1999

Editorial on the week's news by Kesef the Hamster

Happy MIM?

Hey, wait a second!

It may have not gone unnoticed throughout the civilised world, but it came to me as a shock when, browsing the news items in America's papers, I stumbled upon two pieces of information that seemed to sum up, for me, the crazy notion that we're sane.

Did you remember to put your clocks back at midnight on 31st December? Or did you remember to do so before you went to bed or after you got up the following morning? And what did you do with the extra second they gave you?

Yes, that's right, I said 'second' - a whole second.

Seems that, ever since you humans started measuring time atomically, you've been plagued with necessary alterations to your clocks because the Universe doesn't obey your measuring system. You use the consistent decay of a Caesium atom (I seem to recall) which doesn't appear related to the way the planet is slowing down.

Of course, it was alright back with the ancients - they divided the daylight and night time into twelve equal parts that they called 'hours' and then into sixty more divisions that were called, funnily enough, 'minutes'. That meant that hours (and minutes) were longer or shorter depending on the length of the day but - hey! - who really cared? No one was going to complain and demand their money back.

Hamsters have a great concept of time - better than you humans. We do what we want to do, when we want to do it. Hungry? Then best find some food somewhere - if we were human, we'd have to wait til lunch time or tea time. But time is there to serve us not to be served. And we're so laid back with it all that hours seem to pass us by, along with days, and we don't get stressed out about it. For us, life is an ever-present event when we do as we want - after all, there's no time like the present.

Time doesn't dictate to us - that's why you seem to wait ages for us to get up and exercise on our wheels, for you to catch a glimpse of us emerging from our nests. We don't want to get up so we don't - okay, so the sun's gone down (we saw it, you know, we

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do have eyes!), but we think we'll have a major grooming session now and who are you to stop us?

Then there was that other time article I read - MIM.

Apparently, you still use some ancient people's numbering system whose kingdom died out centuries ago. The Romans, I think their name was - I used to think they were called the Womans until I was told that the plural of woman was women, but I've never been able to work out why, therefore, the Romans aren't called the Romen. Strange language, English.

Anyway, their numerical system is altogether confusing (to me, at least) seeing as they used letters to mark the years. I mean, think of the guy called Vic - do you call him 'Vic' or 'Ninety-four'? Is Ivy really 'Ivy' or should you refer to her as 'four'? And if you meet someone in the street and they greet you with 'aye-aye' should you take it as an exchange of pleasantries or as a two-fingered rebuke?

Time telling must also have been a nightmare and one that would have taken more time than it was worth

'What time is it dear?' a wife asks her husband.

'It's ex-eye-eye-eye-eye passed eye-ex,' he replies. You only had to mishear one syllable and you could be hours out.

Anyway, the human academic world is in turmoil (or so it would appear from the articles) - not to mention the film producers - because no-one can be sure just how the year 1999 should be written. Some say MDCCCCLXXXVI III which is a mouthful in itself - it would be surprising if anyone found any other time in the day to converse with someone if they were ever asked the year.

Others say MCMXCIX - still others MCMXCVIII. But my favourite is MIM - nice, concise, short and easy to remember. Not only that but, next year, the year two thousand, would be written by taking an M&M and putting them together.

And everyone knows what I think about M&Ms - even though I should never be given them.

All this makes me wonder just why you humans have constricted yourselves within time? You say to us hamsters that you're 'masters of your own destiny' but you're enslaved to a system that you invented to order your lives round!

You designed a framework that would serve you from day to day so you could tell when to sow crops and reap harvests - and then turned it into a monster that dictates to you the time you should go to the toilet or have a meal!

From slave to master it would seem to me - thank goodness I'm a hamster!

Extraterrestrials

Saturday 16th January 1999

Editorial on the week's news by Kesef the Hamster

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Austin, Texas - I read the report last Saturday of the discovery of two additional planets orbiting distant stars, now bringing to seventeen the total number of similar phenomena discovered beyond earth's solar system. Such vast distances through space make the mind reel at the 'facts' of Science that they can, indeed, detect planets which, to all intents and purposes, are invisible even with the use of the most powerful telescopes known to both man and hamster.

'We're not looking for a light representation of an object,' one astronomer tells me, 'but for detectable and measurable phenomena that prove the existence of planet-like objects orbiting distant stars.'

And just what are these phenomena?

'Wobbles,' I'm told. I think back to the times I've seen overweight humans struggle down the street carrying bags of heavy shopping and wonder if this provides evidence of new planetary systems - but, I'm assured, it's not those sorts of wobbles.

'As planets orbit,' the astronomer continues, 'they cause the star to alter its motion ever so slightly which we can detect. When we analyse this "wobble", we can estimate the planet's size, distance from the star and the approximate orbital path.'

Mon-mon, the educational advisor for the HFPC and second hamster in space, rings me excitedly from the Headquarters about this 'wobble'. I try to calm her down before switching the tape recorder on but it's all to no avail.

'Hamsters!' she squeaks at a higher pitch than even I thought hamsters were capable of, 'They've found the existence of extraterrestrial hamsters!'

Again, I tell her to think calmly and rationally and try to talk coherently so I can think about what she's saying.

She continues, 'The wobble!' she announces as the reason. 'The wobble that the scientists are seeing proves conclusively that there are hamster colonies on distant, far-flung planets millions of miles away from us.'

I struggle with the logic but ask her just how they "prove" that hamsters exist.

'A wobble,' she explains, 'is produced by any rotating object that is unequally balanced - that's why drivers have to have their wheels balanced when they have new ones fitted - and that means that these objects are not uniformly dense.'

'Now, the Russian Hamster is well known for spending large tracts of time huddled together in nest balls so, it stands to reason that there must be vast numbers of hamsters up there which are unbalancing planets and causing them to wobble.'

Suddenly, in the background there's a menagerie of squealing which distracts my attention from the conversation.

'What's going on?' I ask.

'Oh, it's only Diddley Squat and the newbies,' Mon-mon answers. 'They came to us this week from across Niagara now that it's frozen - they've been nested up three weeks waiting for it to freeze so they could join the Campaign team. DS is teaching them some - well, how can I say it? Some very unusual songs.'

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'Unusual?' I inquire.

'Yes, very unusual. He's taking old musical classics and changing the words so that they fit our circumstances.'

Does she have any examples?

'Well, the one they're singing at the moment is based on Sinatra's "New York, New York" only DS now tells them to sing it at meal times with the words "New nuts, new nuts".

'Last night we were treated to a unique version of "Chicago". Let me see, how did it go? Ah yes - "Sunflower, sunflower, you're my kind of seed". Honestly, he's getting so eccentric in his old age.'

I return to the matter at hand. How many hamsters does she think are present on these far-flung planets?

'I don't know,' she says, 'but we've sent a message to Captain Picard to see if the Enterprise can be sent to investigate the phenomena.'

'Enterprise?' I squeak, 'Isn't that just a television program?'

Mon-mon giggles.

'Don't be silly,' she says, 'everyone knows that it's real...'

Attempted Homicide

Saturday 16th January 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the attempted assassination of Ganjette

I've run as fast as my paws would carry me and stopped only for the minimum of rest breaks to arrive at the Hamster Campaign Headquarters as the sun slowly rises through the trees. Already there's a boundary of tape around the scene and Police officers stand at strategic points, forbidding the public from too close an approach.

I wear my reporter's badge and the barrier is drawn to one side, allowing me access into the crime scene. I wouldn't normally be admitted - a journalistic pass is no rite-of-passage authority at just any Police investigation but, being also a friend of the assailed, I'm given privileged access.

When I enter through the small door, the scene that greets my eyes is unnerving. There, slumped lifeless in the corner of the room, lies a fluffy tortoise shell feline, unmoving save for the gentle breeze ruffling its coat.

Quickly, in a mad panic, I run round the building, checking the welfare of the campaign staff - but I needn't have worried. There, in one small upper room, they sit huddled together responding to the questioning Police officer.

I soon learn that no charges are being brought - there are eyewitnesses who will state that the cat slipped in its final pounce and fell and that it wasn't pushed as might have been inferred by its limp body (though just how any hamster might have pushed the cat is open to one's imagination).

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No. The investigation, I learn, is not seeking a rodent to pin a charge of furs degree murder on.

But how did this actually happen? I gingerly walk over to where Ganjette is grooming and place a reassuring paw on her shoulder.

'It was horrible,' she squeaks. 'Fortunately, no one was hurt - but it was horrible.'

I sit back and listen as she relates the incident.

'It was the dead of night,' Ganjette begins, 'and we were all busy doing one thing or another. Diddley Squat was taking an exercise break on the wheel and there was a large huddle of rodents working on our new publications.'

'All of a sudden the cat was just...there. I can't describe it, it was just so horrible.'

My mind races through the information. A breaking and entering when there's sound coming from inside? Surely there must have been a quieter house to break in to!

'She was looking around standing in the middle of the floor,' Ganjette continues.

'She was just looking round as if she was searching for something...'

'Or someone' I thought. This was making the hairs on the back of my head begin to stand on end.

'That's when Diddley Squat pounced.'

'Pounced?' I squeak, trying to imagine what a hamster pouncing might look like.

'Wrong choice of words,' she apologised. 'I meant...I don't know what I meant. But he ran at the cat as fast as he could and buried his teeth into her rear end. The cat turned sharply about but, by this time, Diddley had run to a corner of the room where the rest of us had left for safer places to hide.'

'In a rage, the cat leapt towards him but Diddley timed his getaway to perfection and, at a split-second before the contact would have flattened him, he scurried away into a small hole.'

'The cat couldn't stop,' she paused, thinking through the scene that was replaying in her mind, 'knocked herself out. She was dead when the Police arrived - must've been its ninth life or she'd still be running around...'

I leave Ganjette in the care of Campaign staff as they scurry over to comfort a shocked rodent and I approach the chief detective as he goes about his business, pacing up and down, measuring fall distances and scratch marks.

'Straight-forward case of breaking and entering?' I offer inquisitively.

He looks at me with questioning eyes and then notices my reporter's badge pinned to my chest - a difficult thing to achieve as a hamster.

'We've got our first report back from our pawprint unit,' he converses, 'and the cat that lies before you is none other than Chloe the Claw.'

'Chl...Chloe...?' I stammer to a standstill. 'Wasn't she the cat that was linked to the JFH assassination?'

'Linked,' says the detective, 'but never categorically proven.'

'So you're suggesting that it's more than it appears?'

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'Precisely. Wouldn't you say that the positive identification of this feline assassin points that way?'

I don't need to think long over the thesis.

'Why, yes,' I reply and wander off into the shadows pondering the developments.

'Assassin?' I say to myself, 'But who would want to kill Ganjette?'

One thing is for certain - this is not the last I shall hear of it...

Homicide Developments

Saturday 30th January 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the developments surrounding the investigation of the would-be assassin Chloe the Claw

I'm a privileged hamster.

It's not everyday that the finest Police brains in the land call upon a rodent reporter such as myself to lend a hand into a criminal investigation. Ever since the incident - reported two weeks ago in the Rodent Weekly - the Police have been hard at work attempting to track down who might have hired Chloe the Claw to assassinate Ganjette.

They've been investigating links that came to light in a dawn raid on her owners' apartment and have been forensically examining the body to see what they might learn about those few short hours before, fatefully, Chloe the Claw killed herself in a frantic attempt at revenge.

I sit in an open chair as the Chief Detective walks into the office and greets me warmly. I feel a little uncomfortable, seeing as the seat has been designed for a human and realise that I must look like a pimple on the rear end of an elephant, but the human doesn't appear to mind and offers me a peanut from a bowl that sits a couple of feet away on his desk.

'No, I mustn't,' I respond, holding my paw up in refusal. 'I'm having my cholesterol count taken later and I have to avoid all food.'

He nods reassuringly, sits at his desk and peers over the ink blotter to focus on me.

'I think if I go through what we already have,' he begins, 'then you can hopefully give me any insights that we may need to carry out further investigations. What I'm about to tell you is public knowledge but I shall warn you if I'm about to relate anything that must not, at this time, be reported.'

I agree.

'Firstly, then, forensics.'

He pulls papers out from a large file and glances over a few introductory pages before settling on a flimsy typed sheet that he holds in his left hand as he reclines in his armchair.

'Yes, here it is,' and he clears his throat. 'Let's see...physical condition, first. The assassin was a fairly old feline and in a reasonable state of health for her age. She had a

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small cataract in her left eye which may have accounted for her fatal leap at the Campaign Committee member - there was also a small build up of catarrh on her lungs which would indicate that she was recovering from some sort of viral infection.

'Several fleas, a furball due for regurgitation in the gullet, scar over the right ear - nothing unusual in the other features of the body.'

I nod politely and draw a line under my notes as he turns to another page.

'An examination of her paws and fur was illuminating if somewhat perplexing. We found two very unusual catkins imbedded deep in her fur from a variety of willow that's not, as far as we know, found in the area of the incident. In fact, the only species known is some four hundred miles away, west, so it would appear that the assailant had travelled a long distance very recently...'

I note down 'Not local to the area'.

'...and, under the right paw, we found compacted soil that yielded a catalogue of varying grades of debris but the only common factor that we could be sure of was that they are fairly indicative of types of grassland where cattle are normally present - and present in very large numbers.'

I was building up a picture in my mind of an area - a type of area - that this feline could be reasonably expected to have travelled from. The options were still fairly open but with each new 'fact', my list was becoming shorter.

'You're aware that we raided the normal home of the, er, deceased?'

'Yes, I read about it in the human press but I was unsure just how much of it was to be believed - a lot of the details seemed to contradict.'

'Well, I shall fill you in on what we found. This supposed cat burglar was definitely an assassin - we found a catapult under her bedding that we now know was used in a bank heist two months ago - the Furs National, just for the record - and it may have been used in a catalogue of other crimes that we're currently looking in to.

'We found...' he stops abruptly, thinking how to choose his words, 'we found some human fingerprints on the catapult...'

'Well,' I squeak, 'that certainly puts the cat amongst the pigeons.'

He groans and I rather sheepishly raise my paw to acknowledge my poor choice of words. 'So far, these prints have gone unidentified - they certainly don't correspond to any known criminal.'

The detective goes on to summarise the leads that his unit have been following - leads that I'm not allowed to divulge until a later date - and he brings the summary of evidence to a close by emphasising the need for accurate reporting by myself. The chief has still not given me any information that I could hope to comment on - it has been presented to me in a very factual and efficient manner but I'm at a loss to offer any real insights so I squeak, 'Is there anything that might have direct relevance to the rodent world that I could help you with?'

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He looks at me pensively. 'Yes, of course. I've been leaving that to the end - until you knew the summary of the investigations so far.'

He opens a red file, hidden under the one previously referred to, and lifts out a pink sheet of paper which has the bold title 'Rodent Help Needed' printed in large letters at the top.

'We initially thought that the reason for Chloe's attack on Diddley Squat was the defence that he put up when he saw the cat enter the building.'

I nod. 'Yes. That seems to be the most logical explanation.'

'But is it possible that Diddley Squat was actually Chloe the Cat's intended victim?'

'Wha...?' I become speechless for a few moments. 'Why? Ganjette, surely, was the target. If she'd've been killed then...' I struggle for words.

'There are other hamsters that could take her place. What if the function of Diddley Squat is so fundamental to the Campaign's success that the assassin was hired to eliminate him from the Campaign staff? Look...'

He pulls out a photograph taken at Chloe's home. It shows a basket with a blanket half covering the base, pulled away to reveal a small brochure of Ganjette's staff, each listed with a picture and a name. Circled in red is the photograph of Diddley Squat and the initials 'DS' have been written high up in the right hand corner.

'This is certainly something,' I squeak nervously, 'that needs to be given much thought...'

The Hamster Inertia Movement

Saturday 13th February 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the organisation allying itself with Ganjette's Presidential Campaign

Election campaigns throw up peculiar allies and deceitful friends but some coalitions can truly be worthwhile. The marriage, however between Ganjette's Presidential Committee and the Hamster Inertia Movement (HIM) is particularly uneasy seeing that the latter frequently take it upon themselves to speak on the former's behalf without any authority being bestowed upon them.

HIM is a strange organisation as they go, one that often defies definition but one which is desperately crying out for some sort of classification.

Questions come to mind such as 'Why are a community of rats helping a hamster election campaign?' and 'Can rats really be trusted when it comes to pledges of support?' to say nothing of the alleged sinister goings on that surface in news articles almost weekly - stories that are so difficult to prove that doubts linger as to their authenticity and accuracy.

Their spokesman - a Rufus Rat - rings me at the Rodent Weekly offices at my request to outline HIMs objectives.

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'We are pledged to support legislation for short exercise runs for all hamsters,' I'm told, 'and the right of all free-thinking rodents to take part in excessive and unwarranted sleep. Not only that, but we want all hamsters to evolve into a kind of fur ball that only eats, sleeps, reproduces and, er, runs, er, well, yes, very similar to what they already are now.'

I point out that these are not the aims of Ganjette's Presidential Committee.

'Subliminally they are,' is the response, 'and, perhaps, these fundamentals are what, secretly, every hamster is really looking for when rodents get into office. And rats can lend a strong hand in activism and revolution, in overthrowing the masses that oppose the will of rodent force throughout this world.'

Such words are not the words of Ganjette - nor her supporters - Ganja would be turning over in his grave if he could hear them now. I contact Party headquarters and talk through HIMs position with Sir Fuzzy Logic, the Campaign's speech writer.

'We're being followed by a group of fanatics,' he squeaks, 'who do us more harm than good. It's not surprising, though, as throughout history there are records of great movements who've had a more "lunatic" element that they've been unable to shake free from. All I can emphasise upon your readers is not to accept what they say as being the voice of Ganjette or of her Committee - check it out first.'

I return to Rufus a few hours later with more questions and learn that HIM now have a web site devoted to 'the cause'.

'We've just put together a campaign screensaver,' I'm told. 'It's like a Hamster Computer Pet but it's more realistic than any of those Cat and Dog ones that are on the market. Besides, it's free.'

I inquire about its functions and why they developed it.

'We wanted to promote the Election Campaign,' he squeals, 'and what better way than to remind people of the Hamster candidate as they sit at their computers? Well, actually, not as they sit there.'

'It's just like a hamster,' he continues. 'You never see the rodent at all when you're in front of the screen and it only comes to life when you go away from it and switch the lights off at night.'

'Then it wakes up - like some hidden virus - runs on its virtual wheel inside the hard drive and embeds its teeth into all the wires throughout the circuitry so that the computer is rendered useless by morning.'

'We're also working on a version that will escape from the computer and bite through most of the electrical circuitry throughout the house - and beyond.'

That doesn't sound like too good a program to promote the Campaign, I tell him.

'Yeah?' says Rufus. 'And just what do you know, hamster?'

Assassination Update

Saturday 20th February 1999

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Report by Kesef the Hamster on the further developments surrounding the investigation of the would-be assassin Chloe the Claw

I had been giving the Police disclosures of a fortnight ago much thought and, during those waking hours when reality is not quite a present possession, I had been letting my mind wander on the possibilities that the findings were opening up.

I even talked with Diddley Squat on at least three separate occasions but to no avail. Why anyone would want him out the way was a mystery to the both of us - and to just about every other hamster who was currently working at Campaign Headquarters.

Then I had a call from the Chief Detective - an urgent request - that I attend their investigation unit for a further update with 'possible final conclusions'. I scurried over as quickly as my paws would carry me and sat, once again, in the chair facing the Policeman.

'Developments,' he said solemnly and I could see that these facts were to change my thoughts on the matter drastically - that, no matter how abstract I had been thinking, what was about to transpire was to reiterate what I'd feared. Namely, that I had not been thinking wildly enough.

'Developments,' he repeated and eyed the green file that lay open on his desk. He turned over two leaves, then raised the folder to inspect a paragraph that it seemed he'd not seen.

'Yes, developments,' he sighed - this time the voice was more like a sigh. With that, he looked at me squarely in the face and began my briefing.

'One of the leads that we asked you to withhold has brought us to a very interesting catalogue of information which we categorised under three separate headings.'

He turns the page and continues, 'Firstly, we managed to find the treasure trove of which I spoke to you a fortnight ago.'

I look up in amazement from my notepad and the Chief Detective nods reassurance that this was not a dead end. I had been previously instructed that the same brochure that contained Diddley Squat's photograph and his initials in the corner, also contained a loose piece of carbon that appeared to show the location of 'something' hidden underground.

So, they actually found it...

'We found mask making equipment - small, detailed handiwork that had been stored away for use at a later time.'

'Small?' I interrupt, 'How small?'

'Hamster small,' I'm told, 'the facial mould that accompanied the paste had not been used but it could only have been employed to obtain an impression on a rodent that was at least as small as a hamster.'

The detective lets the information sink in for a moment before he continues, 'Secondly, there was a cave also marked on the map, unusual in the least, and we decided

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to investigate it as it didn't seem to have any relevance to the location of the chest. We discovered that, far from being a small hollow, the cave was, in fact, a series of underground catacombs.'

'Catacombs?' I asked.

'Yes. A series of caves used as burial places that are often used for other, more sinister, practices.'

'Oh,' I squeaked. Up until that time, I had always thought that a catacomb was a piece of grooming equipment but I had obviously been mistaken.

The Detective continued, 'Here we found news articles that stretched back into the times when men first produced reportage on current events - and the theme of these articles was scandal. Quite selective they were, too - only scandal that involved the very highest citizens in the land and how they lost their power and authority through misdemeanours.'

My mind was beginning to work overtime - it was my own fault, I should have brought some food along with me to gnaw on. I pushed all thought of hunger to the back of my mind and tried to concentrate on the Detective's words.

'And, thirdly,' he paused. I thought he'd stalled for that's the way it appeared at the time but the next piece of news was what was causing him distress.

'Thirdly,' he began once more, 'at both scenes - the treasure chest and the catacombs - we found a plethora of rat prints - quite fresh, too, maybe a week old at the very most.'

'Rats?' I squeaked quietly to myself. Then aloud, 'Rats?'

'Yes, that's right. Rats.'

I quickly thought about the implications. 'So you're saying that rats were behind the assassination attempt on Diddley Squat?' I questioned.

'We don't think that it was an assassination attempt, anymore,' he corrected, 'that's not the way our investigations have been leading us. We started out by thinking that there had been an assassination attempt on Ganjette - then on Diddley Squat - now...'

He raised both hands into the air as I interjected, 'Then what?'

'Well,' he said, 'make sure that you do not, just yet, publish what I'm about to tell you...'

Who was Chloe the Claw working for?

Saturday 6th March 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the further developments surrounding the investigation of the intrusion of Chloe the Claw

A cat intruder. Diddley Squat the target. Mask making equipment. Cuttings from the newspapers on former scandals. Rat prints. Just what did all this add up to? Though I

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have been trained to sniff a good story out and was instructed by the finest hamsters in the known world, this wasn't making too much sense to me.

What else was there? Catacombs, a cat with catarrh and cataracts - and that catapult which had almost led to a cataclysmic catastrophe. There was something that tied all these together, something that each of them had in common that pointed towards a unified solution, but I was unsure just what.

'We can go no further than a thesis,' the Chief Detective informs me. 'A well informed thesis, no doubt, but how we could ever make any of this stick in a court of law is dubious. Besides, most of this is the best path through a series of seemingly unrelated facts but which cry out for an integrated answer.'

I am, once more, sitting in front of the Detective, wondering if this will be the last episode in a saga of criminal investigation that has, so far, spanned six full weeks since that fateful day when Chloe the Claw - well known assassin - broke in to Hamster Campaign Headquarters and fatefully killed herself when she slipped and knocked her head on a wall after leaping at Diddley Squat.

This week, the folder colour is blue - another change. I wonder why the change in colour each time I attend the office but think better than to ask owing to the nature of my visit here.

'So, what do you think was the plan?' I ask. 'I mean, what does the evidence you've pieced together cry out to you?'

He leaned back on his reclinable chair and peered over the edge of the desk to where I was sitting. Realising that I had now disappeared from view, he pushed himself upright and began, 'Kidnap. It appears that Chloe the Claw had been hired to kidnap Diddley Squat.'

'But why?' I object. 'Ransom?'

'No, no. Something much more sinister. Let me add up the clues we have and present them to you in a tale of what we think would have happened had everything gone to plan.'

I nod my approval, turn to a fresh page in my notebook and adjust my ears to get the best reception.

'They knew that Diddley Squat was courageous - they were expecting him to attack the Claw. They expected that he'd stand in the gap between Ganjette and the attacker, thinking that the Presidential Candidate's life was at stake. And they planned that, after a short skirmish, Diddley Squat would chase the cat out of the building and away from the other rodents.'

'So they were going to feign a withdrawal of Chloe the Claw from the premises? But why?'

'Because - and this is where we're putting two and two together and maybe making six - because they were going to trap Diddley Squat and take a facial impression. They were going to make a mask of the Campaign's Press Manager.'

'But for who?' I squeak. 'Surely not the cat? And who's "they"?''

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"They" must be someone who could be passed off as a hamster - someone who could be passed off as Diddley Squat himself because they would have then sent the impostor back into Campaign Headquarters who would have assumed his role and function.'

'And?' I squeak impatiently.

'The rest goes without saying,' he stops abruptly and closes the file on his desk.

'Er, yes' I mutter, thinking quickly, 'but just so I can quote you would you mind explaining it in your own words?'

'Of course. Whoever hired Chloe the Claw wanted to discredit the Campaign through scandal. They almost certainly didn't want to create an incident but claim that an incident had taken place that would blacken the character of Ganjette and push voters away from her cause - and Diddley Squat (the impostor, that is) was to be the one who was going to carry it out on their behalf.'

My paw shakes with the realisation that this 'story' is so near the facts of the case that it's virtually a matter of 'Case proven, m'lud'.

'But who do you think could have hired the Claw?' I ask.

'Difficult to say,' the Detective ponders. 'Perhaps we'll never know.'

But my mind is racing over the facts and the rat prints on the treasure chest come to mind - then my interviews with the Hamster Inertia Movement - and then, very suddenly, I begin to smell a rat...

Further Clues

Saturday 20th March 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the continuing investigation into Chloe the Claw's intrusion into Hamster Party Headquarters

Just when I thought I was beginning to get a grasp of the complexities of the Chloe the Claw investigation, it seems as if a sudden twist is inevitable. Having been content that Chloe's intrusion had been an assassination attempt - first on Ganjette, then on Diddley Squat - I realised that all was not what it appeared to be and that the assassination was, in fact, an attempted kidnapping and replacement.

But it seems there is at least one more twist in the tale.

I had received an email from the Chief Detective to meet him in a secret location but was unable to make the rendezvous as he'd forgotten to tell me where this location was - obviously too secret a place to divulge such sorts of information to a mere reporter.

But, having been contacted once more the following day to present myself at Police Headquarters, I excused myself from the general meeting my colleagues were having about a request for a higher rate of sunflower seeds per hour, and used a taxi to get across town. I usually prefer to walk and dodge the wild cats and rabid dogs that prowl

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the streets, but I just had to take a big risk due to the importance and so chose a possible appointment with death.

Soon, I sat before the Detective who surveyed a purple folder laid out on his desk and I waited with baited breath to hear what developments were so important that I had been required, initially, to attend a secret location.

'It seems that some of the evidence has proven to be somewhat of a red herring,' he began.

I thought quickly - at no point had we ever discussed the possibility that there was anything fishy about any of the discoveries so far, but I was about to hear my established conclusion blown to smithereens.

'The rat prints,' he said. 'Our unit now informs us that they're fake. Very clever fakes, too, put there by a person or persons unknown to obscure our search for an accomplice or hire. It would appear that there is no rat connection.'

'You mean,' I squeaked hesitantly, 'that we were supposed to think that the paw of a rat was in this abduction along with the cat?'

'Precisely. Apart from the rat prints, there's nothing that points towards them.'

I sat silent, struck dumb by the revelation that had undermined the perfect solution that I'd been harbouring for almost a fortnight.

'May I throw another red herring in?' the Chief Detective asked. I nodded my agreement and, with that, a strange looking fish seemed to come out of nowhere and landed on his desk with such a loud, wet 'thwump!' that I jumped a centimetre or so in the air and ruined the page of the notepad I was opened at.

It was...a red herring.

A real red herring!

'This herring - this ex-herring - was held up in a fish tank not four blocks away from Chloe's home, refusing to give itself up for a traffic violation having been told to pull over repeatedly by two officers who were not acquainted with this case up til then.

'It was a long siege - but we managed to eventually smoke the herring out using some new Police equipment. We thought it would've been a routine arrest but, although the herring had gone in to the building, it was a kipper that emerged from the site - this same kipper that you now see laid before you.'

'You mean,' my mind was racing, trying to put together the pieces that had, until that time, seemed only discordant notes in a symphony. 'You mean...that this red herring was really a kipper all along?'

'No, no,' the Detective corrected. 'I mean that the kipper was the red herring in disguise because, after we'd smoked it out, it thought it could camouflage it's escape and so elude arrest.'

'But where is this leading you with regard to the Chloe the Claw case?' I squeaked, not understanding the connection.

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'Nowhere at all,' he said. 'I was just wondering if you could use a little protein while I explained the other developments to you.'

I declined the invitation but listened intently as he drew a deep breath and returned to the subject at hand. I tried to return my mind to a serenity that was difficult to capture - I just knew there was something fishy going on and I was still smelling a rat.

'It's this fish that's connected with the case,' and he drew out another sea animal - this time a cod - and placed it neatly on top of the purple file.

'This fish was found three blocks away from here in an area that we now know Chloe the Claw frequented. It was gasping for its last breath on a street corner when our officers turned up.

'Before they had a chance to call for Medical assistance, the fish latched onto one of their hands and gurgled out this confession.'

He pulled a sheet from another file and read, 'It was the fish wot did it...gurgle...cough...they needed Squatty out the way...cough...I found out and now...now...gurgle...they've got me...gasp...look under the...'

I leaned forward to hear the last word.

'Well?' I squeaked. '"Look under the" what?'

'I don't know - that's when it breathed its last. But we're treating it seriously - especially now we've proven that the rat prints were a plant.'

This was getting weird - now the rats were even turning into parts of vegetation.

'You're sure that the fish were behind the hiring of the Claw?'

'Yes, definitely. We have other information that I cannot, at this time, disclose. But, believe me, that's the way our investigations are going.'

'Just one final thing before I go,' I squeaked. 'How did the cod meet its end?'

'Tragically, I'm afraid, Kesef - it was battered to death...'

Cats, Rats, Herrings and Cod

Saturday 3rd April 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the continuing investigation into Chloe the Claw's intrusion into Hamster Party Headquarters

'So, let me get this straight,' I squeaked, trying to get my mind round the new developments in the mysterious case of Chloe the Claw, 'the cod was a red herring?'

'That's correct,' the Chief Detective smiled.

Boy, this was really getting surreal - a cod that was a herring. I continued, 'And the red herring was, er, a red herring?'

'Precisely,' he encouraged me.

'And the fake rat prints were also a red herring?'

'No,' he corrected, 'the rat prints were a plant.'

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'But what type of plant?' I thought. 'Surely, if they were a plant, they would have flowered by now and yielded a satisfactory conclusion?'

The detective hadn't finished his explanation and he continued by explaining that the Police were now thinking that the fake prints were placed there not to be discovered and taken as genuine but to be discovered and be proven false, thus discrediting any theory that pointed at rat involvement.

Having now realised the truth for what it was, the finger was pointing back at rat involvement and, specifically, the Hamster Inertia Movement (HIM).

The Chief Detective opened the orange folder and flicked over a couple of leaves left there since last Fall. He ran his finger down a long column of statistical information, stopping two thirds of the way from the top, saying, 'We've definitely discounted fish involvement - after all, which fish, having donned a plastic mask, could survive for long enough to discredit the Hamster Presidential Campaign? They would have to return to water every five minutes or so and blow their disguise. No, a rodent has to be behind this venture and the deliberately fake rat prints point us to the old double bluff.'

The Double Bluff! Weren't old films made of this sort of intrigue? Wasn't the cloak and dagger that made the plots twist first one way, then the other and hold the audience throughout the running, part of that era in cinematography? And - hey! - wasn't it Rufus the Rat who had a private collection of stills from the greatest Hollywood gangster and detective movies ever made?

I was beginning to smell a rat yet again.

'There are reports,' the Chief Detective said, 'that rats were witnessed in the area of the incident during the preceding week. This was something that we initially discounted because the area makes it natural for them to occur in large numbers. What we didn't realise was that certain suspects are unable to provide us with adequate alibis for the night in question.'

My head was spinning with the thrust and counter thrust of suspicion and theory but I had to go along with the projection of the Policeman - it seemed too logical to deny.

'A rat,' I whispered, underlining the word in my notepad three, maybe four, times. 'A rat.'

'We have already begun investigations - I will keep you informed.'

The detective rose to his feet, bid me well and gestured towards the door. I found myself wandering out almost in a daze from his presence and sitting down outside the building staring into space.

Then a sudden flash of inspiration came to me.

I turned the page and wrote in bold letters at the top 'HIM hired her'. Then, underneath, I scrawled 'Start with HIM' and made a note to make certain investigations myself, to nudge open a few doors and see what lay behind them. It may have taken the Police this long to arrive at a list of prime suspects, but I was assured of my own

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investigative ability to bring those suspects into focus with a bit of clever questioning and careful planning.

I jumped to all four paws and ran away from the building, back to the offices of the Rodent Weekly, to begin my mission.

The Final Frontier

Saturday 17th April 1999

Final report by Kesef the Hamster on the investigation into Chloe the Claw's intrusion into Hamster Party Headquarters

It had seemed a simple matter, to me, of investigating the attempted kidnapping of Diddley Squat, seeing as the Police had reached a definite conclusion as to who the prime suspects in the case were.

For four days after my previous meeting with the Chief Detective, I'd rung and rerung HIM's headquarters, disguising my voice, getting others to confirm my story by post, in order to contrive a situation where stark admissions of guilt would be forthcoming from their head rat, Rufus, that most fiendish of sinister perpetrators who continually distanced himself from danger.

It was going to be a simple matter of arrest - I had the tapes. I had the letters. I had the photographs of monetary handovers and plain brown envelopes that bulged with sunflower seed payments.

I had it all.

Rufus knew it, too - I told him.

Knowing that my evidence was securely stashed away in safe deposit boxes that only myself and the editor knew about, I agreed to meet him at an old disused wharf where rarely anybody ever went but which was squarely in the centre of Rattown. He was wanting to meet the hamster who'd outwitted him and congratulate me on an efficient investigation.

Standing now in a warehouse piled high to the ceiling with empty drums, with my four paws bound with string and my mouth gagged, I was starting to wonder just what had gone wrong.

'So,' squealed Rufus, 'you thought you'd outwit us and get away with it?'

'Blubflubalub-dub-scrubagrubdub,' I replied, trying to wrestle the gag from my mouth to answer him back. This piece of cotton was proving more difficult to chew through than I'd anticipated.

'That's very easy for you to say, hamster!' Rufus squealed.

There was a cackle of rat laughter behind me as Rufus' henchman cowered in the corner, spitting saliva onto the floor with glee, their eyes red with both anger and contentment.

'Glubalubhubstub,' I snarled back.

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'Yeah?' Rufus sneered. 'And just what does that mean?'

'Glubalubhubstub,' I repeated. Gosh, was this rat stupid or what? Didn't he understand plain English?

Thinking that my words were important, he loosened the rag that was gagging me and said, 'What did you say?'

'I said "Look out! Behind You!".'

Too late, Rufus reeled round and saw the last moments of the anvil - attached to a rope - swinging towards him at full speed. He only had a second to jump alarmingly before he was hit, full force, by the speeding metal lump and sent spinning across the floor, dazed, into the path of the onrushing mass of rodent Police officers that had co-ordinated their action with the Chief Detective.

The rat gang, now seeing that their leader lay unconscious and that their time of supremacy was fast diminishing, fled towards all four corners of the building in a mad panic, desperately seeking a crack in a wall or something to get away from certain arrest.

'You took your time, Furlock,' I squeaked. 'What kept you?'

'Evidence,' he replied. 'We were just collecting the last pieces of evidence that we needed before we could wrap the case up.'

'I thought the transmitter in my pouch had stopped working - I was sure I was a gonner!'

The case of Chloe the Claw was at an end - thankfully. We'd come a long way since that first night when it appeared to everyone that a cat had tried to burgle the offices of the Hamster Presidential Campaign Headquarters, through thoughts of assassination attempts, abductions - involving cats, rats, herrings and cod - and through multicoloured file covers that seemed to be used for different weeks of the year.

Yes, it was over. And I was glad that it was...

Beavers and Buttheads

Saturday 24th April 1999

A report by Dak the Hamster on the goings-on at the Tidal Basin

'Strange goings-on,' the report read from the Editor as I opened the file cover 'Investigate whether we might have grounds for rodent discrimination.'

Not a clue as to what he was going on about at all, just these two cryptic sentences that immediately drew my attention.

Fortunately, that same afternoon, Kesef was free and we both made our way to the Tidal Basin near the Jefferson Memorial where we witnessed heads being scratched and humans removing trunks from an earmarked area for conservation - very strange indeed when you think that they should be planting, not felling, them.

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But all was not what it at first appeared. Kesef was the first to note that certain smell of saliva on the stumps, that mustiness like a kids' worst nightmare of Castor Oil, and we knew that we were on to something big - I mean BI G!

Or, even BI G!!!!.

To our trained noses, this smelt like Beaver - that friendly old creature who changes stream flows with its dam building activities and which causes humans to tear what little hair they have from their heads in despair. As we paced hesitantly on the damp soil, the foreman approached, curious as to the nature of our investigation. He calmed down when he heard we were from the Weekly.

'Problems?' my colleague asked him.

'Yes, you could say that,' he began. 'We've been discovering felled trees these past three weeks now and've been unable to put our finger on the culprit. We knew we were looking for some wild critters with iron-like teeth, able to gnaw through the toughest wood - that was obvious...'

'And that naturally led you into thinking about Beavers, right?'

'Heck, no. Our first thought was that it was the Osmonds again. But, having found hairs attached to most of the bare wood, we then directed our attention to the possibility of Beavers, yes.'

'But it's a conservation area, right? I mean, you just have to let the Beavers be?'

He shuffled uneasily and looked around at his workmen who were removing another felled tree.

'I said, "You just have to let the Beavers be".'

'I heard you the first time,' he said. 'I was trying to think how to answer. Look, the bottom line is that this is *our* conservation area not the beavers. While we certainly shan't shoot them, they have to be removed.'

'But I thought that conservation meant the encouragement of all wildlife?' Kesef chimed in, echoing my sentiments entirely. I mean, one can hardly label an area as being favourable to wildlife if you then wage war against some of its inhabitants, can you? And where would it all end?

'Erm, well, not exactly. Conservation is a nice buzz word that means, er, we do what we want to for some species but only those ones we want to help - endangered species and all that - you know.'

No, we didn't know - but we were certainly beginning to understand.

'We must trap the culprits and move them to a safer place where...'

'Safer place?' It was my turn to be indignant. 'Here you're prevented from killing them because it's a conservation area but where you release them such restrictions probably won't be in force - what sort of rodent rights are these?'

He lifted his hands and turned to go. 'Sorry, I really must be getting on with my work - it's been nice talking to you.'

Kesef and I stood looking at one another, wondering at the comments.

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Need I really type anymore?

Kesef Goes Hyper

Saturday 8th May 1999

A report by Dak the Hamster on the goings-on at the Rodent Weekly

I've seen numerous reports this week from many varied sources but none has really gelled in me that the writer has hit the nettle firmly on the head or has grasped the nail firmly with both hands, gathering no moss while they do so.

The one that made the most sense stated unequivocally that Kesef had started training to get on the next NASA Mission, though I contacted a representative who stated that, as far as he was concerned, the only rodent planned to take part in the next mission was a rat by the name of Rufus who was to be the Flight Controller - well, some things never change.

Others rumoured that Kesef was seeking a mate - Spring having now arrived - and that all his frantic attempts at running and feeding were demonstrating his innate desire to show himself to any would-be females that he was up to the task of providing both for her and their offspring.

Kesef categorically denied it.

So, having been woken once again by my colleague's incessant wheel running (and whoever gave him the squeakiest wheel in the world needs to have his head routinely checked out - you hear me, Lee?), and the crack-crack-cracking of sunflower seed after sunflower seed, I decided to do a most unusual interview - one that I had never before attempted - of maintaining all my professional decorum while running at full pelt trying to keep up with my interviewee.

This is by no means a hamster first - the late, great Snowball once attempted to interview Carl Lewis while he was taking part in the final for the Olympic Gold a number of years ago but, sitting on top of the competitor in the next lane proved inadequate as Lewis was away from the blocks and clear before she had had a chance to open with 'What do you think your chances are here today, Carl?'

But, I thought I'd try.

I started at the wheel (one of two Kesef has) and asked the question that was on the tip of every tongue (and I should know - I've looked at mine in the mirror).

'What's made you suddenly go so hyper, Kesef?'

'Well,' began the reply, 'the problem through the winter has been that the musculo-skeletal frame has been...'

I lost the end of the sentence as he disappeared out through the exit hole and off somewhere else in the compound. I made for the other wheel, presuming he'd be there, but soon discovered that his scent wound upwards to the feeding compartment. Almost a

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foot away from the entrance, Kesef exited and accelerated towards me, and passed (I stood amazed that there was enough room in that minute tube) squeaking:

'...toning every *muscle and performing athletic exercises to finely tune every fibre* that's in my body...'

It was a good example of the Doppler effect.

This wasn't as easy as I'd first expected and I opted for plan B. Positioning microphones in each of his compartments to pick up any response I'd get from my questions, I caught up once again, put another question to him, and listened to the response through headphones which were wired from the main control desk.

This was more successful.

'Training,' he began. 'Just training.'

'But what for?' I questioned, seeing that, as far as I was aware, there wasn't anything to 'train' for.

'The new Campaign,' he responded. 'Ganjette is reputed to be travelling over the States on the Campaign Trail soon and I need to get in prime shape to be able to keep up with her. Must start now - it'll be too late next month.'

'Then you're not looking for a mate?'

There was a silence - so sudden did it occur that I had to check my instrumentation to make sure I was still connected to the control panel. No, everything was still working, it was just the wheel that had temporarily stopped. I turned the volume to max and winced as Kesef shouted.

'It's lies, you hear? All lies...'

Hostage

Saturday 15th May 1999

Report by Kesef the Hamster on the incident at the Campaign Headquarters

Perhaps the campaigning had been going too well that security had become lax to the point of non-existent? Perhaps the Campaign staff really didn't anticipate another attack such as had come from Chloe the Cat way back in January of this year? Perhaps the indications from the criminal underworld had not been accurately interpreted? Perhaps I had better stop using 'perhaps' and get on with telling the news story?

I was resting in my nest compartment at the offices of the Rodent Weekly after having just completed an article on the newly developed 'Five Fruit Diet for overweight hamsters' (an article which shall not, now, be published owing to a copyright infringement and a series of discredited scientific papers which had been presented at the human Calorific Seminars in New York). Some don't realise that such articles must be meticulously researched and, as in the case of this one, a guinea pig sought out to test the claims of the writers.

And guinea pigs are not easy to come by in Washington.

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But, having procured the services of just such an animal - on loan from the zoological department of the local university - we'd set about instructing her concerning the precise method and calculation of the said diet. However, both Dak and I were not getting very far, due to the guinea pig's inordinate inability to count sensibly.

Initially, she'd objected to having to eat five pieces of fruit, maintaining that she preferred a diet of nuts, seeds and raisins that, it was obvious to all, was the main reason why she was such a hefty creature, more rolling around the office than actually walking. Eventually, though, she decided to follow our commands and opted for an apple, an orange, a banana and a pear.

This, we pointed out, only made four pieces of fruit - but with uncanny Coney logic, she insisted that the pear was, in fact, two due to the similarity of the words and we were forced to give in or else we could see the argument going on well into the daylight hours.

It was as I was resting in my nest compartment, then, exhausted after a difficult and strength-sapping encounter, that Dak ran in to the office shouting in panic 'Hostage! Hostage!' gasping for breath and shaking me violently from my half-sleep.

'Wh...what?' I dozily squeaked back, 'Hos...hostage? Where? Who?'

Dak was already showing signs of obvious panic, jumping up onto the side walls and biting the metal bars that had been fixed at the window to prevent burglaries.

'The Campaign headquarters,' he shouted. 'A cat is holding some of the staff hostage.'

Without a moment's thought, I grabbed a fresh notebook and pencil and scampered out across town to Chevy Chase as an endless line of Police cars screeched passed me.

'Strange,' I thought to myself, 'it must be teatime back at the Police Precinct - but it's only one-thirty.'

When I arrived, it was like a scene from back in January when Chloe the Claw had caused havoc at the Headquarters. Yellow incident tape was stretched round the boundary and the Police stood some hundred metres away from building where, occasionally, a furry face was seen to poke its nose out from the window and sniff the air for information.

From behind me, I recognised a double pair of paws approach and turned to see Ganjette hastily coming towards me.

'Simon!' she gasped. 'They've got Simon!'

'Is that all? Is it just Simon?' I inquired.

'We think so. We've counted all the heads of the hamsters that we know to have been working at the Headquarters today and he's the only one who we can't account for.'

'Have any demands been made, yet? How many of them are there in there? What's this all about?'

'We've heard nothing, Kesef.' she squeaked. 'Oh, Kesef, I do hope Simon's alright...'

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At the time of going to press, this is all we currently know. Though Police think there's just one captor, they can't be absolutely certain and there have been no details made known to the public of any ransom being demanded.

It has been confirmed, however, that Simon is definitely inside and appears to be the only hostage being held.

Daily updates of the crisis will be published on our main Web News Site and a fuller, more detailed article will appear in next week's Rodent Weekly.

Hostage Developments

Saturday 22nd May 1999

Report by Dak the Hamster on the continuing hostage situation at the Campaign Headquarters

[Editor's note: Much of what Dak writes here will not be new to those who have been keeping in touch with the Hostage developments on our main Internet News Page but, for those of you who do not yet have an Internet connection, or who have been unable to get access (the volume of traffic crashed our server on more than one occasion), we have dealt with the incident as fully as space will allow us here.]

The cat, who we now know to be none other than Ferdinand the Fang, gained entrance to the Hamster Presidential Party Campaign Headquarters early last Thursday morning, dispersing hamsters and other rodents working on the Campaign through every conceivable opening out in to the surrounding countryside.

Simon, who'd been developing a series of notes on historical figures and their relevance to the current Campaign, had locked himself away in his nest compartment to think about some of the information he'd just read when the commotion prompted him to descend into the path of the Fang as he prowled about looking for a hostage.

Having sealed up any ways of escape, Ferdinand released Simon into a securely locked cage and waited for the Police cordon to be imposed round the building - inevitable though it was, it took almost an hour and a half to achieve, Ferdinand having cleverly timed his act to coincide with the Department's morning tea break.

Then came the ransom demands late on Friday afternoon (and too late for the Rodent Weekly to report on). Fourteen thousand unmarked tins of tuna flavoured cat food to be deposited in a Swiss security vault, two plane tickets (kitten class) with open destinations and a guarantee from the cat's owner never to use 'that wire brush' to groom him again.

The real sticking point was the wire brush, the owner stating angrily that she'd only just bought it and not to use it now would be to waste over \$5. After a quick collection, though, compensation was both offered and accepted and the way seemed open for the crisis to end by Monday morning, except...

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...except, for some reason, it dragged on, the Fang appearing at various windows throughout the building, snarling ferociously, while Simon popped up from time to time to wave at the crowds that had gathered and show himself to be unharmed.

Tuesday came and went - as did Wednesday.

In spite of repeated reassurances from the Captor that the hostage would be released, deadlines arrived and then departed and, strangely enough, the crowd began noticing a change in the Fang as he repeatedly showed himself at the window on an almost hourly basis.

Thursday came - deadline day for the latest edition of the Rodent Weekly - and more promises were made and, yet again, every one broken. The Police Officers were unsure what to make of it.

'We know that there's no harm being done to the hostage,' the officer in charge told me, 'so there's no reason for us to consider storming the building which may result in us putting Simon's life in danger. We have to simply sit it out and wait to see what happens. If nothing breaks by weekend then there are a few alternatives that we can consider but, for now, we can but hope that this will be successfully resolved.'

As I settle down to maintain my vigil along with the Campaign members, I can't help but think that there's more than meets the eye to this hostage situation and that, something - unbeknown to all of us - is transpiring within the building that could bring about a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Daily updates of the crisis will be published on our main Web News Site and a fuller, more detailed article will appear in next week's Rodent Weekly.

Kesef Dies

Saturday 22nd May 1999

Report by Dak the Hamster on the death of Kesef

I found Kesef in his toilet area the evening of Wednesday 19th May, lying on his side. This wasn't, in itself, unusual - he often used the place for a whole range of activities including grooming and eating, so sleeping was but a logical extension.

It was his lack of breathing that bothered me, though. There was something distinctly, er, solid about his appearance that made alarm bells ring in my head and announce to me the fact that all was not well.

But you never can be too sure with hamsters - we tend to go into hibernation when we get older and our state looks remarkably like the final outcome. But Kesef's stiffness didn't point to that conclusion.

I offered his nose a sunflower seed but no movement - a hamster hoop had a similar effect - not so much as a twitch.

Yep, this hamster was most definitely dead.

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The humans upstairs in bed would not be able to be waked now that the clock had passed eleven o'clock so there was little point in trying anything. I pulled a few strands of bedding over Kesef's lifeless form and waited til morning.

The next I remember, there was that familiar sound of the clunk of the compartment units being dismantled as Lee accessed the toilet area to retrieve Kesef's body.

The same ritual ensued - the sunflower seed, the hamster hoop. Lee tried lifting him up by his paw and realised his entire body was solid. He muttered something under his breath that I didn't catch and went to get a receptacle to put Kesef in.

And that was that.

No more Kesef.

Death is often sudden and we have no way of knowing when it might come upon us. Kesef enjoyed life and wrote with a vitality that I've always tried to emulate - but I will always remember my absent friend as I pen my subsequent articles.

If it hadn't been for him, I would never have been able to learn hamscript and how to operate the word processor without waking our human owners.

Yes, Kesef will be sorely missed...

Diary of a Hostage

Saturday 29th May 1999

The Almost Unexpurgated Diary of Simon the Hamster, hostage of Ferdinand the Fang

[Editor's note: Those of you who have been keeping abreast of the Hostage developments on our main Internet News Page will already know of the successful release of Simon the hamster who had been held captive in the Party Headquarters for around a week and a half.

This article, collected by Dak the Hamster, is presented here with permission from Simon, as the concluding finale to the crisis.

In the interests of brevity, we have removed Simon's frequent references to his love of sunflower seeds which occur at least twice in most paragraphs and his lengthy biographical poetic epic 'How do I love thee, fair seed?' which ran to approximately fourteen thousand lines.]

Thursday 13th May - It started like an ordinary day with fresh food and sunflower seeds, a drink of water, more sunflower seeds and still more - it always amazes me how crunchy those seed shells are and I can't help extolling the virtues...<snip>...but there you have it.

Balu woke later - she needs her beauty sleep (but don't tell her I told you so), she's been getting a little crinkley round the edges this past few weeks which belies the fact

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that she throws her sunflower seeds out from her cage whenever she finds one. Honestly, if she'd only listen to me and enjoy the frequency and delights of...<snip>...stay much younger.

It happened while I was studying a historical biography of George the Hamster, an English rodent who'd lived about a decade or so ago and who'd become famous in his own lifetime across the human world for his literary works that reiterated the mistakes that many had made and from which we all must learn. He also was a great sunflower seed eater and this was possibly the reason behind his success - loving, as he did, the crisp outer layer that gives way to the smooth...<snip>...projectile vomiting.

There was a commotion from below - like some sort of scuffle between hamsters fighting over some...<snip>...and the cat stood in front of me, large and menacing he was with yellow teeth and sharp claws. I was thrust into a small cage in which was a wheel, food, sun...<snip>...and plenty of fresh vegetables in a dish to my right.

This was the cage that was used for accommodating the new arrivals but it served me well as I'd previously stored some historical reference books in one of the corners and so was able to busy myself through the early hours of the crisis with study, taking my mind off what may possibly await me should the ransom not be paid. But, so long as I have a sunflower seed in my paws, I don't mind how I go - the security of that inner seed...<snip>...more than anything.

I settled back to read most of the night, oblivious to the attempts at negotiation that were being staged.

Friday 14th May - I awoke next day to the sound of faint purring coming from the other side of the room.

'Hey! Feline!' I shouted, jumping my captor out from his sleep. He raised his head off the carpeted floor and peered at me through one half-opened eye.

'Yeah? What?' he mewed.

'How about some sunflower seeds? Over there behind you in that large jar.'

He looked behind him and sighed deeply, regretting being wakened from his deep sleep. 'Alright, alright! Can't a cat get a little rest round here? Look, I'll take the lid off the jar and nuzzle it on its side - you help yourself when you want.'

And, with that, he opened the cage door, returning to his catnap for the remaining eleven of his forty winks. Hey! This was my kind of cat! Unlimited access to sunflower seeds? That greatest of all rodent foods, whose shell...<snip>...and slips down into one's stomach gently?

Realising that this cat was unlike others I'd met - and, besides, I didn't think he would dare eat me if his ransom demands were to be met - I sat in front of his whiskers and asked him, 'So what am I worth, then?'

'Worth?' his meow was puzzled. 'Hadn't thought of that. What are you worth? Mmmm...'

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'You mean you haven't some great and carefully thought out plan to demand a ransom and a safe passage away from the scene of the crime?'

He looked at me carefully. 'Nope.'

I threw my paws into the air and gasped, 'Then what on earth are you doing this for?'

'Couldn't stand being groomed again with that new brush my mistress has got - so I ran away. Hey! D'you think I could demand it be destroyed? That'd be good.'

'You're aiming too low,' I told him, 'you have to make some outrageous demands if you're going to be believed.'

'Like what?' he purred, beginning to see that this could work out to his advantage. 'Like demanding that the White House is given over to the domain of hair-brained animals?'

'No, no. That's already happened on more than one occasion. No - how about thousands of tins of food?..'

'I like tuna...'

'Okay, thousands of tins of tuna-flavoured cat food and some airline tickets away from here.'

'But I don't want to go away from here!'

'You don't have to use them - but you have to make certain preconceived demands if they're going to take you seriously about the hair brush.'

'Go on, then, you tell them...'

'I can't do that!' I squeaked. 'I'm supposed to be the hostage!!! You'll have to do it!'

'Oh dear,' he meowed. 'I don't like speaking to crowds...'

Then, reluctantly, 'Well, if I must...'

The demands were presented to the Police that afternoon and I watched as worried Police officers (that was good - if Police Officers look worried you know they're taking your demands seriously) retreated to radio the Precinct what needed to be arranged for a swift end to the hostage 'crisis'.

I contented myself with playing hide and seek with the cat - who I later found out to be called Ferdinand the Fluffy (though I understand that some papers gave him the nickname 'the Fang' to make him sound more sinister) - using appearances at the window to incite the crowd to cheer and applaud which attracted the cat's attention when he was too far off my scent.

It was a good day and we both looked forward to a successful end to the grooming...

Saturday 15th May - Wrote 'How do I love thee, fair seed?' today while we were both waiting for the Police to accede to my, er, the cat's demands.

The afternoon brought bad news from their ranks - Ferdinand's owner had categorically refused to throw the wire brush into the trash bin.

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The Police apologised profusely to Fluffy who looked like an innocent kitten as they explained the situation to him. As the officers withdrew, I heard one turn to the other and say, 'Must be a psychopath - look how calm he is. Not even a glint of emotion in his eye.'

This, again, was good - it would work in our favour. They would be more willing to accede to the demands if they thought they were dealing with a psychotic, though the row of men with rifles continued to grow around the Headquarters that afternoon.

Of course, Ferdinand the Cat isn't like that - he never was. They never knew that it wasn't just him who was running the show but the both of us - when he returned to tell me the news, I hung my head in despair.

'What?' I squeaked. 'Is your owner nuts? Doesn't she realise that you could eat me at any time if she doesn't follow the Police's instructions?'

Ferdinand looked at me distastefully.

'Yuck!' he growled. 'That would be appalling...'

Sunday 16th May - The owner relented today which was a great relief to all the Police officers and a source of much rejoicing in the Campaign Headquarters as we piled high the remaining sunflower seeds in the middle of the floor and danced round them.

Then we gorged ourselves on the seeds, me having to open the shells for my friend and feed them to him one by one. I read him my 'Ode to a Sunflower Seed' that I'd written in the first two weeks of my life and it relaxed his tired frame so much that he drifted off into sleep before I was even a third of the way through.

The poem seems quite immature now, but it did express the feelings I was beginning to develop towards the seeds that are the source of all pleasure and much...<snip>...a two litre Mustang.

We set a time for tomorrow when Ferdinand would release me - how was I to know that he'd suddenly get cold paws?

Monday 17th May - It was going according to plan until Ferdinand panicked, thinking that the Police had given in to his demands solely because they had some sinister ulterior motive to spring on him when his back was turned. How little he knew, poor cat!

I tried to calm him down but all to no avail - I even played hide and seek with him for one, hopefully, final time to get his mind off his fears and worries but it didn't work. I could see that his paws were shaking and that this cat needed some intense talking to if he was ever going to carry off this great victory.

I began talking about the Presidential Campaign and how the election was coming upon all of us with such great speed that we were wondering if we would all be ready in time.

My first priority, you see, was to get his mind off his own predicament and, as deadlines came and went, I did at least succeed in getting him discussing the finer points

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of hamster politics and the aims of the Party once it was swept to power on a wave of euphoria and uncounted sunflower seeds which...<snip>...with a small furry creature that resembles a water-shrunk koala.

Tuesday 18th May - More deadlines and more talking. I was beginning to lose my voice I was discussing so much with Ferdinand and we demanded an extra supply of sunflower seeds to be flown in from a nearby pet shop that I knew to exist.

The cat was now relishing these seeds - and well he might. These were some of the finest and most oily flavoured seeds that I'd ever tasted. When they're like this, you just know that they're doing you so much good that it's difficult to stop eating them.

I think that's what makes Sunflower seeds so important to a hamster's diet - the taste and the smoothness as they slide down into your stomach. I wrote these next lines while I was waiting for Ferdinand to rejoin me having had to explain to the Police Officers for about the eleventh time why I was not being released as arranged.

'Oh, sunflower...<snipped repeatedly>...so, I love thee.'

It was at this point that Ferdinand really started to grasp some of the principals of the Hamster Movement and to commit his mind to thinking through the importance of a rodent Senate where the affairs of the nation may be thought through and remedied.

Although, up to this point, we'd discussed the Campaign, Ferdinand and I had conducted more a series of question and answer sessions and the feedback that I was getting from my captor was limited, to say the least. I began by putting it down to the extra oil from the sunflower seeds that we were feasting ourselves upon, the...<snip>...but soon began to realise that this cat had all the potentials to be a great furlosopher if only he would let his mind wander and think about concepts and policies that needed addressing.

He asked me a strange question, too, one that made me question the way his mind was leading him at the time but which I can now see to be fundamental to what was about to transpire. We had been discussing how empty sunflower seed shells could be employed to prevent buildings located on the San Andreas fault from suffering earthquake damage, when he looked up with some surprise forming on his face and asked me, 'Why do cats chase rodents?'

This has long been a puzzle to us hamsters, especially when most felines today are well fed, live in comfortable apartments and rarely need to fend for themselves. We have conjectured many things - such as the irresistible scent of a hamster which attracts the animal - and the more abstract ideas like cats being under some direct orders from an alien sub-species bent on removing our kind from the planet - but none there are which rest easy with us. So I opted for the most usually accepted explanation.

'It's because cats are jerks,' I told him.

'I don't say that with any anger,' I added, 'but it's the best estimation that we have when all the evidence has been considered.'

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He nodded his understanding (I could see that this would cause him to think long and hard), he buried his head in his paws and went to sleep. He continued restlessly for many hours and never woke up the rest of that day. I busied myself with chores around the Campaign Headquarters and had a nasty fright when I noticed one of the securely bolted doors to the outside world had been left ajar the last time Ferdinand had been outside to talk to the Police.

With much effort I managed to secure the door once again to prevent the others from re-entering and settled down to a long and eventful series of dreams, some of which saw me running through sunflower fields like an action replay and climbing to the very tips of the flowers in search of the ultimate dietary experience.

But reality is better than fantasy and I woke several times to eat my fill, once again, of that most virtuous seed, that king amongst the natural world, that sheer elevated...<snip>...with preconceived ideas that condemn to oblivion the contradistinction contained within Einstein's $E=mc^2$.

Wednesday 19th May - More deadlines came and went, more sunflower seeds were shelled and more discussion continued about the ideals and beliefs of the Hamster Presidential Campaign.

Ferdinand asked me another strange question today that gave me my first inclination as to what he was going to propose later on in the week when the siege was finally to draw to a close.

He said, 'Is there a place for a cat amongst the Presidential Campaign Staff?' which took me by surprise because, up til that point, I'd never even considered that it was possible that a feline would want to ally themselves with us. But, such is the draw of Ganjette, that I shouldn't have thought it impossible.

But, was there a place?

Then I thought back to the incident of Chloe the Claw that the other hamsters had told me about and realised that, with cat protection, that incident may have been prevented. Yes! There was a place for cats amongst us and I told Ferdinand that, if he didn't mind the long hours - and low pay (for we work because of our commitment to the movement, not because we want to retire as millionaires someday) - then he would be most welcome to live and work amongst us as an honorary rodent.

This had the effect of making him shed a tear or two and he purred softly that evening as he slept facing the picture of Ganjette that hangs on the wall at the far end of the Headquarters.

I could see that the rodents who stood behind the tape that separated us from the outside world were beginning to look concerned - some puzzled - so I frequently went to the windows and waved cheerily to show them that all was well.

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Occasionally I gesticulated with my paw to show them that there were just the two of us in here - but I think some of them misunderstood judging by the response it seemed to harvest from the younger hamsters (crude bunch).

When one older rodent shouted, 'But how many syllables?' I decided not to try and relay that information again.

The Sunflower Seed supply was continuing to decline and I estimated that we had only around 1.2 million left. I began to compose another poem that evening to the greatest of all seeds but got stuck with a rhyme for 'million' on the ninety-seventh line.

Ferdinand offered 'Armageddon' but it changed the tone of the poem into Apocalyptic prose so I gave up and took an early nap.

Thursday 20th May - More deadlines came and went.

That's no surprise, I know.

Ferdinand asked me who had to approve the acquisition of a cat bodyguard - not asking for himself, he said, just curious in case a friend might ask him one day and he wanted to make sure that he gave the correct response.

I told him that the final decision had to be Ganjette's but that we often made decisions apart from them that the candidates would endorse because they knew that we'd thought long and hard over the implications of the actions we'd taken or begun.

This friend, he said, (who was hypothetical) could begin almost immediately (or, at least, he thought that that might happen in the future if he was asked, otherwise there'd be no point in asking, would there? I mean, the friend had to have a willingness to start straight away or he'd not need to know immediately) so would there be anything to stop him from doing just that?

Not as far as I could see, I said, but, as it was all hypothetical, I could only give a hypothetical answer which may (or may not) be the decision that would be made if fantasy became reality. But, as it stood, if it happened today, there would be no problem.

On one of Ferdinand's meetings with the Police, I burrowed through the soft hamster tissues that he was using as a bed and found jottings and ramblings that indicated to me that he'd already begun to think about the policies that Ganjette was espousing.

It came as no shock to me, then, when, upon returning, he told me that he needed to have a serious talk.

He wanted to join the Campaign, he said, wanted to leave his mistress and her home, to throw his lot in with us. Would that be acceptable?

I jumped up and down with delight so violently that the crowds outside thought I was being tossed in the air by my captor. Of course, I said, but there just needed to be solved this small problem of the hostage situation that was not all that conducive to be used as a recommendation for employment.

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We talked further and decided to end the siege the following day.

Friday 21st May - In the strangest end to a siege that I have ever known, Ganjette came to the front door to discuss with me the possibilities of having Ferdinand as bodyguard. It took very little time for her to agree - knowing as she does my acute perception of character and how it has been proved faultless on numerous occasions.

Even that time when the pet shop owner sold us some duff sunflower seeds, I knew beforehand that he was lying when he told us that they were amongst the finest produce that he had ever bought. I remember writing a lament which went something like 'O wicked seed which dost betray thy promise within...<snip>...and only useful for the scattering in the bin'.

Ganjette waved the rodent crowds into the building and they hesitantly approached, heard the decision and entered the building to resume work on the Campaign (a temporary Headquarters had been set up about a mile away and this was dismantled a few days' later when everything had returned to normal).

The Police stood by speechless, wondering what had happened - and the guy who held the air tickets in his hand, slipped them into an inside jacket pocket to make sure that he took good care of them - so much so that I seem to recall him leaving the country that same day bound for Rio de Janeiro.

Yes, the hostage crisis was ended...

We didn't lose anyone...

And we won a friend...

Diggin' the Beat

Saturday 5th June 1999

A report by Dak the Hamster on the central role of Music in the life of the Hamster Presidential Committee

'No, no,' said Balu. 'What's that piece of music called?'

I had asked her for her 'all time favourite' - whether classical or pop - and she had been racking her brains for what seemed like a month (this article would have been printed in a May edition if she could've remembered), trying to conjure up the right title that had been eluding her. We had already had it called 'A paler shade of pink', 'A lighter shade of purple' and 'A greyer shade of pale' but she was sure that it wasn't any of these, even though she thought herself close.

She gave it one final attempt after grooming herself violently to try and summon up the remembrance from somewhere deep within.

'Er,' she paused, then squeaked, 'That's it! "A light shade that's whiter".'

She stopped abruptly, then reflected, 'Or was it "A soap that washes whiter"? No, no - that's an advert I saw yesterday...'

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Bewildered, I turned to the remaining Party members who had graciously agreed to answer my 'public interest' questions for a column I was trying to write while world news seemed a little thin on the ground.

'We all enjoy music,' Gabrielle began as I watched Balu shaking her head from side to side, up and down, in a vain attempt to work out the title. A little later I would hear her gently hum in the background as I spoke to others in the room. 'And we've followed the development of musical instruments with much interest throughout the centuries. In fact, I don't think there's been a generation that hasn't enjoyed the contemporary music of its day.'

'A greater shade of white,' Balu whispered. 'No, no - time, just give me a little more time - I almost had it then.'

'We *have* struggled with some of the titles given to the bands, though,' Gabrielle confessed, 'and that led us into some apprehensions which prevented us from embracing the early works until we'd checked them out.'

Does she have an example?

'I remember that the "Beatles" were a problem - crawly, creepy things that snip at you for no apparent reason. They looked like beetles in the early days, too, with their black suits and haircuts - wasn't until Sergeant Pepper (we like red peppers, you see) that we gave their music a go.'

'...a purpler shade of lilac...no, no...'

'"Johnny Vomit and the Paper Bags" we never got in to - hamsters were always frightened that there might be holes and it would all get too messy for comfort.'

'What about classical composers like Giuseppe Verdi? Are you in to the old orchestral pieces?'

Gabrielle looked puzzled. 'Gew-sep...?'

Simon whispered into her ear some words of explanation and the light dawned on her face.

'Oh, you mean "Joe Green"? Yes, of course - we like all types of music...'

'...a paler...a whiter...paler...whiter. No - whiter definitely...'

'Because a hamster can appreciate atonal sound harmonies,' Simon interjects, 'we can even enjoy simple noises like cutlery being dropped onto the floor because there are creative dischords which blend to form harmonic octaves across visual spectrums of sound. The eddies in the sound dynamics also play a great role in forging new areas of musical interest...'

'...pale?...pale blue?...pale yellow?...just pale?...mmm...'

'...which is why what humans think is just their pet scratching in the pile of wood shavings is often a hamster experimenting with sound - though especially with percussion.'

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Balu taps me on the shoulder, smiling broadly. 'I've remembered - it's "Knights in White Satin",' she squeaks, delighted to have recalled the title, 'and it's by, er, by the, er, I think it was the "Moody Hues" - no, no...'

I excuse myself hurriedly, determined to put paw to paper and publish the article before July...

Kesef Redivivus

Saturday 5th June 1999

The mysteries surrounding the death of Kesef the Hamster by Dak

It was a deep sleep - or, at least, I recall it was. There was something in my dream about chasing walnuts (a popular hamster subject) and sunflower seeds falling from heaven when I heard the sound of an exercise wheel rattle.

I woke with a start and in a cold sweat - I searched all my memories and checked the sound out with all I had stored there. It sure sounded like Kesef's wheel but - no, no, Kesef was dead. Very dead - I remember finding his limp (but stiff) body that evening a couple of weeks' back, I'd seen them bury him.

Yes, Kesef had died - most certainly.

But that sound was, again, most certainly Kesef's wheel. But had that sound come from within me or without? Was it my dream or reality imposing itself upon my dream? I had no way of knowing but I found sleep difficult from that moment on, listening out for every creak and squeak in case - just in case - there was a twist in the tail that I'd least expected.

Early the next morning, the Editor contacted me - had I heard, he said. Had I heard that there were reports of Kesef the Hamster appearing in nut clubs all over town? Well, no, I hadn't heard - didn't even have an inkling - but I was on to it in a flash and made for the nearest sighting with my notepad and pencil in paw as I entered the area.

The crinkly owner nodded recognition as I sat down behind the table where he leaned forward to tell me what he'd seen.

'It was unusual,' he squeaked, 'in that we were just talking about his death and then this stranger brushed past us making for the door. His fur was grey with a black stripe down his back and there was white fur on his underbelly...'

'Could've been just about any Russian hamster,' I thought to myself. But then he said something I wasn't expecting.

'...and as he left the building there was an announcement on the PA which said "Kesef the Hamster has left the building" and we all gasped.'

'Some joker,' I laughed. 'Who controls what goes out on the PA?'

'That's just it,' he informed me. 'We don't have a PA.'

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up and a cold sweat run across my brow. 'Did you run after him?'

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'Oh yes - after a short delay. When we got outside there was just this bright object in the night sky and an unearthly whining noise as it seemed to lift upwards and onwards to a destination who knows where.'

This was beginning to make me edgy. I noticed that I'd written little on my notepad after my initial introductory paragraph and that I'd begun to doodle in the top corner, drawing pictures of alien spacecraft and Elvis Presley - though how he got into it, I have no idea.

But wherever I went, I found the same testimony - the grey-furred stranger, the lights in the sky, the same PA announcement. And all about the same time during the evening, the time when I'd woken in my nest compartment, aroused by that squeaky wheel.

Our rival paper, the Mammal Monthly, was first to carry the news, seeing as it's publication date was just a few hours after the sightings. The periodical had found circulation a problem this past year and sales had already dropped to figures that must have meant that survival was beginning to look doubtful.

But here they'd got the Scoop.

'Kesef sighted in Washington Night-club' was the front headline with numerous smaller articles scattered throughout its inside pages. There was even an editorial on similar phenomena throughout the ages - I bet that took some time to research...

...I bet that took...

...time?

I rang my editor from the nearest phone and questioned him briefly. Time was something that the Mammal Monthly didn't have. Being a periodical, the least time they'd need to typeset and print an edition would be two days and here were articles appearing in the paper about an event that had occurred just a few hours ago.

No, something smelt decidedly fishy about all this...

...and I wasn't in any mood to be fooled.

I scampered back to my nest compartment and discovered the wires leading to Kesef's old wheel - trickery! I put my cards firmly on the table with the Editor and he contacted his counterpart over at the M&M (as we like to call them).

An advertising hoax! Rats! And all the while I'd been hoping - just hoping - that, perhaps, there was some truth in all the rumours...

The Zentium XI

Saturday 19th June 1999

Report by Dak the Hamster on the new breed of processor chips

Zentium kindly requested my presence at the launch of their new Zentium XI Gold processor, a processor that will start production in about a month's time at a staggering minimum 17 GHz that can perform 19 zillion billion trillion calculations per second. The

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sheer magnitude of this amount of calculations has to be gasped at - and it makes it the fastest processor of information ever known to mankind ignoring, of course, the well documented speed of a woman's mind which is able to cope with cooking, working, cleaning, gardening, having babies, feeding them and a vast array of other things which their male counterpart very rarely manage to think about (let alone action).

'Artificial Intelligence' they call it, and so powerful will this chip be that it's rumoured that the computer with it installed will switch itself on when the operator comes into the room and will intuitively initialise any software program required without being prompted to do so.

I catch up with the Director of the Zentium laboratories over a buffet put on for the press and put my questions to him that are written down on the back of a small scrap of paper I managed to find on my way over - sometimes even reporters forget their notebooks.

'Yes, it will be fast,' he tells me, 'but the reports you've heard about it switching itself on are hugely under exaggerated. They escaped from the firm's think tank in the initial stages of the design. This baby will actually surf the Internet for you and make purchases in your name so supermarket shopping will become a thing of the past.'

'But you'll have to give it your credit card number - right?'

'No, not at all. It will search for it using a unique encrypted coding device and retrieve the number after hacking into the credit card on-line database.'

'But that means that nobody's credit card number will be safe, won't it?'

'Oh no, that's only speculation. It will be just as safe as it is now under the present system.'

I think for a moment and then realise that the statement isn't reassuring in the slightest. Just like the present system? Sounds like we could be witnessing the start of real on-line computer wars.

'True, that's possible,' he assures me, 'but we're building safeguards into the chip so that it will only do certain things and not others.'

Does he have an example?

'Well, yes. It won't steal, burgle, commit murder or defraud the integrity of any other system. It may crash other offending computers (though 'offending' could be defined in different ways by different operating systems - we'll include a programmable interface so the word can be defined by each user) and it may even be able to hack into the Federal missile command and launch warheads to all four corners of the earth but that just requires a minor tweak at the final production stage to alter - we think.'

'What about predictions?' I ask him. 'With the level of information that it's able to process and to forwardly project, will it be able to anticipate future events and run protective software programs to safeguard against them?'

He thinks for a moment, turns to look over his shoulder before lowering his voice to a half-whisper.

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'I'm not sure if I should be telling you this,' he begins, 'but we've already made quite a killing on the outcome of certain, er, horse races which it predicted accurately even to the point of telling us what colour socks each of the jockeys would be wearing.'

'So, can it anticipate and predict the end of the world? Or is that too big?'

'No, we've already programmed that in and it came up with a date.'

There's a long silence.

I hesitantly ask, 'And?'

'And, all I can really say,' he begins in a sombre tone, 'is that, after next weekend, nothing will really matter anymore.'

He smiles and then laughs. 'I'm only kidding, it's still working on a date but I'll get back to you when it spews out an answer.'

'What about predicting the more mundane things, then? What about predicting the times that any given hamster will get up from its nest to run on its wheel?'

'Oh no,' he says, confessing the limits on this artificial intelligence, 'there are some things that are just plain unpredictable...'

The World Ends Tuesday

Saturday 26th June 1999

Report by Dak the Hamster on the end of the world prediction from the new Zentium XI processor chip

'What?!' I squeaked when I heard the report from the mouth of the Director of Zentium that their new super processor chip had calculated the end of the world as next Tuesday. I stood dumbfounded on one end of the telephone line trying hard to imagine just what could possibly happen between now and then that could bring this life - which had seemed to most people to be going so smoothly - to such an abrupt and sudden end.

I mean, it wasn't even the year 2000 - how could some cataclysm or other strike without warning?

'This Tuesday?' I questioned. 'You don't mean *a* Tuesday, do you? *Any* Tuesday?'

'No,' he clarified, 'this coming Tuesday - 29th June 1999 - the world will come to an end and caterpillars will take over the world.'

Well, I could believe the latter but the world actually end? Surely there must be some mistake - couldn't I demand a recount or something?

'But how?' my voice must've sounded perplexed and puzzled as my mind span round with other one line questions such as 'Why?', 'Who?' and the extremely mysterious 'Pigs?' which seemed to bear no relevance to the matter in hand but it's amazing the way one's mind works when you get stressed.

'Well, the print out is certain,' the Director began, 'the Zentium XI doesn't lie - it can't do, it's programmed by man.'

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That last equation didn't seem to be logically provable but I gave him the benefit of the doubt. 'So, what's the series of events that will lead up to this end of the world?'

'Not this end of the world,' he corrected me, '*The* end of the world. Look, don't spread this around but the computer has given us signs to look out for that will be like a chain reaction in bringing the earth under the dominion of the caterpillar.'

'And they begin?..'

'...with Johnny Hermbaum buying some bubble gum from the corner store near where he lives.'

'But how can that end the world?' I protested. 'Bubble gum never hurt no...'

I stopped suddenly. I knew my statement to be not entirely true - there was that court case a year back when a piece of half-chewed bubble gum had been convicted of murder. I know the jury stretched a point and had to chew the evidence over for a while - but the verdict stuck.

'It's a series of events,' he said, 'that begins with that purchase. From there, the third piece of gum gets thrown under a passing truck which carries it through the gates of the Zentium factories and into the restricted area. Having become detached from the tyre, a technician unwraps it, chews it and, one hour twenty-four minutes later, chokes on it.

'Then an assistant rushes over and hits him forcibly on the back which propels the gum out into the air and onto the circuitry board of the Zentium XI I processor chip currently under development. And it's this - this, I say - that causes it to overheat and access the remote missile control panel in Moscow, launching nukes just about everywhere.'

I sat dumbfounded.

'But can't we just stop Johnny whatsisname from buying the gum in the first place?' I objected.

'Against the Constitution,' he answered. 'Freedom of Speech, Consumers Rights and all that - why, the lawyers would drag us into court if we even tried such a thing!'

'Well, can't you destroy the Zentium XI I chip?'

'What?!!! And risk losing our profit potential in its development? Are you nuts?'

'Wait, wait a minute - isn't the Antichrist supposed to appear before the end? Who's he supposed to be?'

The Director fell silent, his voice trailing off.

'I didn't want to tell you,' he began hesitantly, 'because I thought you might not believe me. But the Zentium XI processor names him as none other than [CLASSIFIED INFORMATION]...'

The World didn't end Tuesday
Saturday 3rd July 1999

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Report by Dak the Hamster on the end of the world prediction from the new Zentium XI processor chip

So, the world didn't end last Tuesday like the computer which houses the Zentium XI processor said it would. Neither did caterpillars take over the world (or, at least, it doesn't appear as if they did). And neither was Bill Gates the Antichrist (that was classified information last week but the US Government has allowed us to print the name in this edition - mind you, there's still time).

I dial the Zentium Director's number and am passed through, via the Secretary, to hear him sound mildly embarrassed as I point out the discrepancies in the prediction that his computer spewed out just over a week ago.

'It wasn't too far wrong,' he points out. I can imagine him shuffling in his seat now as I mention that you can't really be much further out than predicting an event that *didn't* happen.

'That's not what I mean,' he continues. 'Johnny Hermbaum really did go to his local shop to buy some bubble gum Tuesday, there really was a truck that passed the road where he walked back to his apartment and it really was one of our vehicles which entered the company headquarters where research is taking place on the new Zentium XII.'

'But why didn't the bubble gum get thrown into the path of that truck?'

'The unknown X factor,' he counters. 'That mystical element that no one can predict, that random circumstance that's always unpredictable by its very nature and definition. The Zentium XI is designed to anticipate the unexpected but not the improbable. We worked hard defining its bubble gum parameters and advancing its knowledge of chance and circumstance but - hey! - just how much work can you expect us to do on this thing?'

'Yes, but why didn't the bubble gum get thrown into the path of the truck?'

There's a short pause while the Director sounds like he's shuffling in his chair on the other end of the phone. I hear him breathe deeply before he speaks once again, in slightly quieter tones.

'Because,' he says, 'we approached our lawyers who told us that it would be unlikely that we'd get sued if we stopped the kid from throwing his third piece of gum into the road.'

'What? You messed with Destiny?'

'Er, no, actually we messed with the gum supply to the shop - there wasn't actually any connection with Johnny's sister in any of this.'

'The gu...what exactly did you do?'

'Well, the night before, with FBI and CIA help, we infiltrated the secure store and removed the classified and problematical substances so as to avert a crisis.'

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'You infiltrated the sec...' I begin to repeat. 'You mean you broke in to the shop and stole the gum?'

'Ssshhhhh! Not so loud. Someone might hear you. What else could we do when the fate of the nation - no, of the world - was at stake?'

'So, let me get this straight,' I ran this through in my mind to try and make it sound, somehow reasonable, but there was just no way.

'You broke into a local shop and stole their supply of bubble gum because your computer told you that it was the substance that brought about the end of the world?'

He thought for a moment. 'Yep, that's about the bottom line.'

'So all the other stuff was just irrelevant?'

'Er, not quite - that bit I told you about the Antichrist? It really is as relevant now as it was then...'

Squeak Recognition Software

Saturday 31st July 1999

Dak the Hamster on recent SRS developments

Those of you who followed the rise of George the Hamster will know that, in the beginning, dictation was the means he used to commit his stories to writing through his master, Lee. Subsequently, a hamsterglyphic script was developed for him - devised from the ancient hamsters at Qumran - which served his night-time activities well and gave Lee and Kath much needed rest during those dark hours when hamsters are most active.

Today's hamster is normally computer active and can DOS around the computer as well as - and in most cases better than - their human owners, and communication is no longer a problem between our differing species.

Although Squeak Recognition Software (the hamster equivalent of VR) has been available for some time, it's only recently that software packages have come to the stage where they're little more than a plaything, early developmental tools failing to analyse the real inflections needed to satisfactorily translate language.

However, with this week's launch of IBM's ViaSqueak Peanut-Pro edition, this has all been left in the past. Using an integral dynamic interface that relies less upon equivalent sounds and more on inherent abnormalities in individual larynxes, it's now possible to expect (rather than hope) for a squeak recognition that far exceeds 95%.

I caught up with IBM's developmental chief at a luncheon a couple of days ago, thrown to launch its release.

'We're really excited at the prospect of ViaSqueak being the first dynamic equivalent software package available in a whole list of new packages aimed at breaking down the division of other species through language.'

And what other software tools are in the pipeline?

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'ViaTrump for elephants (and those suffering from flatulence), ViaWoof for dogs and ViaChirp for common bird species should all be available this summer. Early in winter, we're planning both ViaQuack and Via\$' & *£ for woodlice. But ViaSqueak is a module that can be adapted by add-ons that will cost just a fraction of the full-price.'

I sit in the chair with the headset strapped over my ears and the microphone about a centimetre from my lips.

'The pleasures of art,' I squeak slowly and clearly, 'are numerous and too deep to mention.'

The hardware clicks and whirrs and I watch with baited breath as the text equivalent appears on the screen.

'The pleasures of farting,' it reads, 'numbers deep emotions.'

'It has to learn,' the IBM chief assures me. 'Here...' and he leans over me, correcting the errors in the text and hitting 'learn' in the top right hand corner of the screen - 'Try again.'

I do and, as if by magic, a word for squeak equivalent appears before my eyes.

'Amazing,' I tell him. 'How much will this retail for?'

'\$39.95 in most stores - but, as a gift, we've installed it on all the computers at the Rodent Weekly so you can see how good it is.'

Running back after the luncheon, with my cheeks full of whatever was left over, I boot up my computer and double-click on the icon, placing the headset over my ears. I hit 'squeak' and dictate.

'Those of yew who fallowed the rose of Gorge the Shamster will no that, in the beguine, dick station was the queen bee used to vomit this story to white paper throw his mister, tea.'

'Mmmm,' I think to myself, 'perhaps with just a little practice...'

The Matrix

Saturday 7th August 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on the Summer's Blockbusting Film

It was back in June that Lee and Kath - my owners - came back from the Cinema with glowing reports of a film that, they said, had so many amazing special effects and such a strange Sci-fi concept, that it was one in a million and would naturally run for a long, long time.

Well, they were right about that last bit...

I saw the film just last week and found in it nothing new - Neo exiting from an unreal world that existed only in the mind to reality where electronic beings had taken over mankind to be mere slaves of their system, re-entering at different points in time to traverse distance and to hop in space to take on the matrix's guardians.

Nothing that unusual - not for a hamster, anyway.

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You see, as I'm sure any hamster will tell you, we rodents are already well skilled in space-travel and can traverse distance to appear in our masters' houses where you least expect us. This is an innate ability within us and isn't something that can be defined but - and here I must give you an example - my colleague-in-fur (I speak of young Ebony) has mastered most of the techniques needed to baffle even the most astute and observant of humans.

They saw him by the curtains - but he appears by the hifi. They saw him climb the cardboard tube onto the settee - but he's back in his nest compartment. They even cornered him behind the case of wine that lies on the floor and there was only one way of escape that they watched with unswerving stare - and yet, the next they see him, he's pulling at the carpet, trying to get under the door.

It's no mere coincidence that we appear where we aren't - it's part of the mystery of the hamster, part of our essential being to confuse and mystify the minds of those 'more intelligent' beings who like to think that they're the first species who've tried to conceptualise time and space and then to traverse what they know to be its bounds.

Hamsters are truly spaceless - whether it be the simple matter of escaping from our cages when there's no possibility or evidence of escape or whether we're thinking of disappearing so totally that we're never again found - traversing great distances through the continuum that you have, as humans, so far failed to adequately come to terms with.

We're not restricted by the world as you see it - never have been as far as I can remember and never will be. And yet you still get so excited by such cinematographic spectacles that you haven't grasped the reality...

Neo knew that there was something wrong with the world - and, indeed, there is. But, to Neo, it was the unreality of what he thought was real. Actually, the problem goes far deeper than thinking that what we see isn't what we are - in fact, it's somewhat different, if I must be honest.

The problem is within - and yet, even though the Solution has been found, the Matrix still supposes that the solution is external to your experience. Human error - I put it down to. The problem with the world lies within you - the Solution needs to be applied within.

Only in that day will the guardians of the Matrix be defeated.

A Patron Saint

Saturday 14th August 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on the patron saint proposals

A while back, I noted in the ITN newsfeed that one Isidore of Seville, a sixth century bishop, was being touted as the 'patron saint of the Internet' by the Vatican

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who appear to have wanted to cover just about every corner of the world - even the electronic bits.

Funnily enough - and the reader may find this surprising - Bishop Isidore never actually surfed the web back in the sixth century and it seems quite unusual to think that any guidance could ever be given when the cleric would find it hard to know just what an 'on button' is and may consider the phrase 'booting up' to be a venerated assault on non-believers.

Still, I guess it only goes to show that, if patron saints are needed, the computer helplines can't be doing their job and those strange quirks of Windows must need some form of divine guidance.

Of course, if Bill Gates really is the Antichrist, one wonders whether his operating system will find time to obey the attentions of such a saint. I mean, all Isidore needs to be told is that his floppy is incompatible with his processor and that he needs an upgrade for the software to work, and I'm sure he won't be able to tell the difference between his right mouse-click and his 56K modem - especially when all he ever seems to have done is compile a hard copy of an encyclopaedia.

Hardly Encarta 99, is it?

Blinded by science - that's the problem.

But what about hamsters? Yes, all this talk of patron saints for the Internet got me thinking this week as I began to wonder whether hamsters should be given their own patron saint - a sort of cross between Arnold Schwarzenegger to protect them and Mother Theresa to care.

Of course, hamster literature has only recently come of age with George's web site and the voluminous writings of our late friend but - hey! - wouldn't it be reasonable to appoint George as the first patron saint of hamsters?

Sure, you could opt for some character like Isidore who has little or no knowledge of us creatures - where he lived he probably never once encountered any of our various species - but to have a rodent who's 'on the inside' would be better, someone who knows what it's like to be a hamster and all the troubles that are associated with it.

There are problems with this, though.

Hamsters would first have to be allowed to enter Heaven - something that the pope is probably not inclined to do seeing as it would open the way for other animals such as elephants and rhinoceroses to be included - and who would be appointed to clean up all the mess they'd make?

You'd have to have some sort of patron saint of the pooper scooper active in Heaven for eternity and I'm sure that's not the reason for being there.

And would there be enough space? How big is Heaven? Perhaps some of the saints could go into the construction business and extend its boundaries - a sort of 'holy brickie in the sky' firm (wonder if there's a patron saint of brickies, too?) who could look forward to cementing bricks together when they die.

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No, no - I'm going too far now. Perhaps hamsters never will get their own patron saint simply because it would open up the flood gates for all manner of animals who would have to be admitted into Heaven.

But there certainly is a ring to that title - 'St George, the patron saint of hamsters'.

Mmm, certainly catchy, that...

Eclipsed

Saturday 14th August 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on the recent world-wide solar eclipse

Hamsters are not freaked out like dogs and cats are by eclipses - normally, we'd just sleep through it all or, perhaps, open an extra sunflower seed thinking that night has come. I think this probably shows how advanced a civilisation we are and how much we've progressed beyond the ancient civilisations of canine and feline origin to stand, as we now do, on the verge of having one of our kind elected to the office of the President of the United States of America.

I was intrigued, I must admit, to learn that an eclipse was going to happen and, travelling with my master to his place of work, I was overjoyed that I could - very easily - witness the eclipse from the safety of a heated room in which tens of people were trying to see the very same event.

Of course, to maintain that air of dignity that befits a species such as ours, I had to hide myself away amidst the office plants - but I also did it to allow my master, Lee, to still be thought of as a 'nutter' (presumably meaning 'one who opens nuts') by his dear and valued staff colleagues when he talks about his 'dear pet' who converses with him.

Eclipses seem to bring out the best and worst in people - that just seems to be the plight of mankind and, however hard I'd like to explain the reasons for it, I'm sadly at a loss. But it was a real laugh to watch humans slap black goggles across their eyes to stare up at the sun behind the clouds and then to walk into pillars and chairs as they forgot to take them off before returning to their seats.

And the conversations were intriguing as well - one of Lee's colleagues actually insisting that the reason the sun went dark was because it was now in shadow.

Yes, I know, I couldn't work it out either - for every rodent knows that it's the sun which creates shadows so, even with a small amount of understanding, it would be quite difficult to work out how the sun could cast a shadow on itself.

But, bless 'em, humans are really dopey sometimes and, according to the human in question, the authority on astronomical phenomena had said just such a thing on the tv the night before and, if Lee was going to tell them the truth by disagreeing then, well, he's just so bigheaded as to be trying to elevate himself into the position of the new

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Astronomer Royal. He certainly would make a better one than his work colleague, that's for sure.

Mmmm...I had to side with Lee. After all, science was on his side. Wonder what Einstein would've made of it all? Obviously, they hadn't come to the realisation that light can dispel darkness - but it can't be the other way round.

I was reminded of some other human madcap ideas as I listened to the arguments as they continued - and, for all I know, there may still be people out there who believe such things.

Like, for instance, the belief that thunder is produced when large and menacing dark clouds bang together. I presume lightning is the result of the sparks produced by such a collision but I haven't heard that directly proposed - give it time, though.

Then there was some article somewhere or other - I can't remember where or when - that said that wind was produced on the earth when the trees began moving. Almost has an air of truth about it, too.

And what about helicopters that have no forward motion? Yep, heard that, too - apparently, they just take off and hover, waiting for the earth to rotate before setting themselves down in the place they want to be. I tend to wonder how it would be possible for them to travel anything other than in one direction but that never seems to be considered.

Oh, and someone else told Lee once never to jump into the air when he was travelling by jet plane. Why? Because, if he did, the plane would continue on its way at the same speed, but he would immediately stop moving and splat into the tail of the aircraft at lightning velocity.

Yep, there are certainly some strange ideas out there - can't think how they ever come about.

But the eclipse, well, wasn't that special? Wasn't that good to see?

It's just a shame that that processed pea in the sky doesn't blot it out more often - wonder where it goes to after it's eclipsed the sun? Beats me. Perhaps it gets eaten...

Supermarket Visit

Saturday 11th September 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on his latest visit to the Supermarkets

I like going to the Supermarkets. The fresh smell of newly baked bread that wafts across the aisles and the aroma of ripe fruit and nuts is like a breath of fresh air to the nostrils when you have to be caged up in a compound for many hours of the day, feverishly trying to come to grips with the latest turns of the politicians as they battle to be elected come next year.

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So I always ask Lee and Kath if I can travel with them - agreeing to stay well out of sight (well, okay, I don't keep to that too often but, believe me, I do try) so that I don't cause widespread panic.

There was the occasion that I was almost bought as a toilet brush about two months ago but the police believed my side of the story and my owners didn't have to pay too hefty a fine for what they said to that sales assistant. I'm still not sure that their comments would have been possible, anyhow, but I'd best not go in to that here.

Anyway, I digress.

Last week, I went to the Supermarket shortly after I'd got back from an extended vacation and found myself looking at the products as they were thrown into the trolley in which I was positioned. One thing I rarely do is to read the writing on the sides - they can be extremely boring and time consuming and alternate between free advertising for some other of the manufacturer's products and general ingredients or health warnings that you know full well that, if the product was actually safe, they wouldn't need a label assuring humans it was.

You can also be guaranteed that, on most food products, you'll find a label which reads 'contains monosodiumglutamate' as a sort of rite of passage thing. I've always felt that if you have to enhance the flavour of a product then it can't be very tasty in the first place - but that's only my opinion, you understand.

So, there I was in the trolley when an air freshener was thrown in and I noticed that, underneath the packet, there was this label which read 'Warning! Do not eat'. It struck me in that instant that the label was totally absurd - who in their right minds would eat a packet of air freshener?

Perhaps this was a new marketing campaign, I reasoned, that manufacturers were now trying to say what their product couldn't be used for so that consumers could be led into a logical conclusion as to how it should be employed - a bit like the Krypton Factor and those IQ tests that you find in newspapers.

I quickly searched the packet of a cake that Kath had thrown in a few minutes previous, hoping for a confirmation of my theory but, after an exhaustive look, I was disappointed not to find the label 'Warning! Do not use this cake as an air freshener' or even the more explanatory 'Warning! Eat product using the opposite end from the bum'.

This was strange and failed to make much sense to me.

I glanced a look at another product - lighter fuel this time - and noted the warning here 'Do not inhale' and, on the shelves, there was another similar product which bore a yellow hazard warning that stated 'Inflammable. Keep away from naked lights'.

I grabbed at another product in the basket, looking for some similar negative instruction - this time a tin of baked beans - and was again disappointed not to discover warnings such as 'Do not use these baked beans as lighter fuel' or, perhaps more relevant, 'These beans are more flammable than butane lighter fuel. Do not use the toilet while smoking cigarettes'.

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Alas - all my hopes were dashed.

I collared Lee when we finally got home and he tried to explain it to me.

'Manufacturers have to be safe,' he said. 'If there's a possibility that a product might be understood to be useful in another way, they have to state unequivocally that it shouldn't be used that way otherwise they could be sued.'

'But who in their right minds would eat Air Freshener?' I squeaked.

'Unfortunately, that's not the point.' He paused before grabbing at an Argos catalogue and, turning to the bed section, said 'Look, here!'

In front of me was the most sumptuous bed I'd ever seen, with sheets and quilts that looked so soft you'd want to stay in them all day. To enhance the selling potential, a young woman - complete with see-through black negligée - lay reclining between the sheets. Lee pointed me to the catalogue description on the opposite page and read out the description, concluding with the warning "'Sheets and quilts not provided". See? You may think you're getting everything in the picture but they warn you just in case.'

I thought for a moment or two, then asked him, 'So why doesn't it say "Voluptuous 36-24-36 female model does not come with the bed"?''

'Oh Dak!' he threw his hands up in despair. 'Don't be ridiculous...'

Civic Reception

Saturday 18th September 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on his latest visit to the Conservation Group that his master attends

I like attending the Conservation Group meetings - you get some idea of what they're planning to do in the area and I can nip out at night to warn the local mice or voles should I know that the spade's going to hit the earth near one of their nests. But, having said that, they don't always talk about 'doing the bizz' as Lee likes to label it.

Take their latest meeting, for instance - they were discussing the Lord Mayor's Civic Reception and the two free tickets they'd been sent. No one seemed all that keen but, as the main man said 'Someone has to go' and Lee, having a beard and all, had to be the best choice - not because he was actively involved in the conservation work of the Group, putting foot to shovel and maintaining the Valley, and neither because he had such a depth of knowledge about the area that he could talk non-stop for hours on the area and its magnificent attractions - but because he looked like what they would be expecting.

Come again?

Apparently, all Conservationists are stereotyped into having beards - or so they tell me - and the men just didn't have the time to wait to let theirs grow, seeing as the reception was just a few weeks away. Oh, and don't forget, the muckier Lee could look when they turned up, the better the image that would be portrayed. Perhaps a mud pack

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would be more in keeping with preparation for the event rather than a bath, then? Certainly, don't even consider that deodorant spray if you knew what was good for you.

I was, of course, invited - but, even if I hadn't been, I would have found a way to get in. The first thing I remember going through my mind when we arrived at the Town Hall and stood waiting for the room to be opened to all those gathered, was the words 'My goodness! Look at all those ties!'

I had half expected the word 'informal' on Lee's invitation card to mean 'Turn up in jeans and a tee-shirt' and Lee was, even now, cursing his decision to wear a worn out pair of khaki jeans and a loose fitting shirt over the top of his belt to hide the bulging waistline - either that or his jeans and shirts keep shrinking something rotten.

Well, they hadn't long to wait and were soon directed upstairs to a large hall where the Mayor and Mayoress greeted us as we went in, the food and refreshments being laid out at two opposite ends of the rooms to minimise congestion.

I've always felt that there was a certain art to taking part in a buffet having watched numerous of these in recent months, though I have not always been able to see practised what I am now about to relate.

A quick calculation round the hall and a simple sum of division of people into the food laid out on the plates, often gives worrying answers for most humans. For instance, Lee had calculated that there were just 2.3 Spring Rolls per person and, perhaps, two carrot sticks each should they be equally divided amongst those present. More worrying to both him and his wife was the current cake situation. The two large cakes didn't look divisible by very much more than a quarter of those present.

So, Lee thought, best implement the buffet strategy. This is a well-known strategy employed amongst humans the world over to get as much food as possible but, until now, I hadn't seen it performed at close hand.

It's a well-known fact that people who go first in the queue are the most hungry but, as they approach the table, they feel somewhat guilty that, should they take too much, there won't be enough left for those after them. That means that the 2.3 spring rolls per person is very likely to be under taken as, indeed, it was (except for one old guy who, I am being honest, managed to get so much food onto such a small surface area that it must surely have defied some physical law or other).

Anyway, I digress.

Those in the middle of the queue are normally not quite as hungry and take their quotient as an absolute maximum. Finally, comes those humans - the seasoned veterans - who know that one can eat much more freely being at the end of the queue than at the beginning and that, thanks to the human conscience, the first in line have left an overabundance of food on the tables.

And so it was. Though I may perhaps have condemned this buffet strategy in most other humans, the advantages of being in the pocket of one who can implement it so precisely and successfully has its added bonuses - not least of which is the Spring Rolls.

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The hall, I seem to recall, was gorgeous - with old paintings on each of the long walls and a beautifully maintained ceiling that bore what looked like pineapples amidst oak leaves - perhaps not the best room to hold a Conservation reception in had the attendees looked upwards, but at least you could admire the way it had been made.

It was, I must admit, a most enjoyable evening - and a kind gesture from the Council towards those Conservation Groups that had taken part in the Sheffield City Council's Environment Week which [sic] was held during two weeks in May and June this year. Long may these events continue - and especially the Civic Reception with the buffet. Perhaps, even if the Environment Week doesn't go ahead next year, there could still be a buffet?

But, I wonder - next year, would it be possible to have a chocolate cheesecake with some fresh pecan nuts and...?

The Tail Less Mouse

Saturday 2nd October 1999

Dak the Hamster reports on a new computer product

Can a mouse be said to be a mouse if it doesn't have a tail?

I don't mean, of course, those unfortunate rodents who have had their tails chopped off or severed in some freak natural accident and who can be easily distinguished as having mouse-like characteristics, but the more fundamental question of what makes a mouse a mouse?

Sure, the whiskers are important and, if modern research is anything to go by, we should, perhaps, rather define the question by recourse to a specific DNA strand that's unique to those rodents among us.

But, again, I'm not talking about that sort of mouse. No. What I'm talking about is that most common of computer accessories that you have even probably used to access this web site and find the page which you are now reading. Yes, that mouse - what makes that mouse a mouse?

You see, when it first came out, the shape of the body and the long piece of wire that protruded from its casing naturally looked like the rodent from which it took its name, the wire representing the tail. However, dirty work is now afoot to replace most of the mice on the world's computers with a product that lacks the definitive tail - the instructions from the mouse being transmitted to the computer via a receiver that's plugged in to the back of the stack.

But they still call it a mouse! Even though it has no tail and so lacks the definitive characteristics that make mice what they are, the company have baulked at the opportunity they had to revolutionise computer terminology by ignoring the obvious label 'hamster' for their product.

A mouse with no tail is a hamster - everyone knows that. So why haven't these products been renamed?

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This conspiracy may go deeper than at first meets the eye for, as I was assured by the Chief Executive of marketing of the firm in question, it was simply something that hadn't occurred to them and, even if it had, they might have found that consumers may not have perceived that the product did the same thing as the older version with a tail.

But a little editorial investigation revealed donations from the organisation into human Presidential Election funds from which both Republican and Democrat nominees have drawn to further their campaigns and so exclude Ganjette in her attempt to be the first rodent in the White House.

By choosing not to label the product 'hamster', the company have deliberately made sure that men and women throughout the nation are not reminded of Ganjette so as to limit her cause.

I would urge you all, fellow rodents, to boycott these products and chew any that you encounter wherever and whenever they occur until they are, at last, given their proper name of 'hamsters'.

Wall Climbing for Beginners

Saturday 13th November 1999

Ebony the Hamster gives a brief overview of the art of Wall Climbing

[Editor's note: This week, we welcome the paw of Ebony onto the editorial staff at the Rodent Weekly, a Syrian hamster of no fixed sleeping position. He is approximately six months old and has been collaborating with Dak on a few recent articles and will remain Dak's assistant until either he retires or death prevents him from continuing his reportage.

Ebony has found it difficult to master the hamscript that was developed way back in 1992 but, with continued study, he hopes to become proficient in it by the end of the year.

Finally, Ebony has been checked for Y2K compliancy and passed.]

So, your master has let you out to run round the floor. What should you do? First and foremost, get out of that boring old nest compartment and make a run for the nearest bit of cover you can see, just in case the removal of the entrance stopper was a mistake on their part. While cowering beneath the sofa, table or whatever, it's quite easy to determine whether the freedom was a mistake or intended usually by the tone of voice that's employed and whether the furniture suddenly moves above you.

If this should happen, make a run for something that's immovable or, at the very least, something that will take considerable time to shift. That way, you'll keep your time out of the compartment to a maximum.

But, once you've made sure that you can spend time out, the question always arises in any hamster's mind as to what strategy should be employed to cause the owners the

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maximum amount of disruption. While staying within the nest compartment makes available to the hamster the marvellously squeaky-wheel ploy which should be run on at the quietest moments of any video or film that's being watched, the same sort of disruption is not available to the partially free rodent when he runs around on the carpet.

So, just what is there to do?

One of those pastimes that always comes to paw is wall climbing which so disturbs my masters that they usually need to pause the video if they're watching one. But let's not think that wall climbing can be entered into lightly - there are only specific types of walls that lend themselves easily to an ascent.

Amongst the easiest is the radiator fixing. In the last forty years, humans have installed all manner of central heating systems that have radiators fastened securely to cold walls. Usually, the distance between the actual radiator and the wall affords splendid opportunity for the hamster to ascend the shaft by the normal compression/relaxation technique common and known amongst all Syrians.

The first a human will know about it is when two beady eyes peer at them from over their shoulder. Just be careful they're not drinking a cup of tea at the time as release techniques for human choking are not generally understood by rodents.

This 'initial contact', so to speak, demonstrates to the human owner that their pet is intending to climb, and a safe pair of hands is more likely to be underneath the pet when they attempt to climb as high as they are physically able in the ensuing weeks.

In my household, the first thing that happened was that a tube was positioned from the radiator leading onto the settee, a brilliant idea to allow me to climb all over the humans and so disrupt their evening to an even greater degree - romantic moments are also impossible when a hamster inserts himself between two sets of lips, one of which normally leaves an acceptable red waxy sheen on the fur.

Hamsters should always note the type of wallpaper hung in the room and the shape and dimensions of each corner.

The first determines whether walls can be climbed unaided and I've personally found that polystyrene-blown and heavily sculptured paper is the best for this purpose. The width of the artwork determines the security of the pawhold and, when attempted, large shouts of 'Don't do it!' will emanate from the humans' mouths followed by the sound of approaching footsteps and normally the positioning of a pair of cupped hands underneath the climbing hamster. For beginners, this is important should one fall so it's always to be recommended that the first climb be attempted in full view of the owners.

But the dimension of the corners is equally important and, as we all know, humans like to adorn their houses with shelves which are normally set up to touch them. This means that a narrow corner can be climbed - even without suitable wallpaper - by the compression/relaxation technique and new surfaces clambered on to after about eight

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or nine feet of climbing. My owners even position food on particular shelves so that I can rest a while and replenish my strength before another ascent.

Usually, by the time the shelf is reached, the video is off - as noted above - and the hamster has the master's full attention.

Another game worth playing - different to wall climbing - is cushion abseiling, a pastime that I've often taken part in and, to keep my owners on their toes, try to make sure I demonstrate at least twice when I'm out.

This involves, firstly, getting access onto a sofa - not too difficult a job when your owners provide tubes and climbing ladders to higher platforms like mine do. Once accessed, the hamster should grip the sofa material firmly - in much the same way as he would climb the wall - and ascend the back of the sofa, sitting looking at the owner from a height of at least three feet off the ground with the fall over the back edge beckoning. A gentle sniff down into the void is particularly fear-invoking amongst humans who remain scared that a fall of such a distance will seriously damage us.

Large flat surfaces are then often reached for and placed over the edge that we can step on to before being lowered back onto the seat of the sofa. If this should happen, have no hesitation in climbing the back once more - and again - and again - and again. In fact, do this as often as you want but at least until the maximum amount of disruption has been caused.

In the event of no platform being provided one night - your owners may not see you climb the sofa - make sure you turn around and look at them quizzically to prompt them to begin the game.

Above all, enjoy your time of freedom. There are no hard and fast rules of engagement that are to be applied in every situation - except the one of maximum disruption - and what one hamster finds beneficial may not help in another hamster's situation.

But, from my experience, wall climbing is one of the most fear-provoking characteristics we possess and should be employed by every Syrian wherever the wallpaper, corners of the room and sofa accessibility allows.

A Night at the Water Bottle

Saturday 8th January 2000

Dak the Hamster interviews the leader in Hamster Cinematography

Hamish 'Spielberg' McClinton is almost legendary. How he formed the Peanut Production company back in the late eighties and rose to both rodent and human recognition, writing and directing the early classics goes without saying.

He's known the world over for his lucid dramatisation of the standard English Classic 'Little Walnuts', while his modernisation of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer's Ice Cream' received critical acclaim wherever the film was shown.

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Hearing a rumour that McClinton was due in Washington over the Xmas period to visit relatives and friends, I hastily called his agent, hoping that he might grant me just a few minutes to interview him about his most recent success - the six part Sci-fi epic 'Curry Wars' which, controversially, were released in reverse order just to confuse everybody. Eagerly, both his agent and Hamish agreed and, one cold and dank December morning, I sat across from the legendary director, pencil and notebook in hand.

McClinton is a small, squat hamster who does most of his talking with his eyes. That may sound strange if you're a human, but the eyes have always played a major communication tool for all hamsters involved in the Arts. Besides, isn't acting about displaying emotions not just with words but with body attitudes and facial expressions?

No sooner had we sat down to discuss his latest work, than he offered me a hazelnut, brought especially for me from the growing fields in Asia from where he'd just flown in.

'About "Curry Wars",' I began. 'Many people felt that it was mistake to release the films in reverse order and, I must admit, that I'm still not sure just whether it will work. I mean, I'm constantly trying to forget the future as I watch the past.'

'It's a new concept in Cinematography,' he commented. 'Most people see the trailers for the films and so know most of what will happen anyhow. Why not let them watch the end, therefore, before we start a beginning?'

'Before you start a beginning?'

'Oh yes. We haven't yet planned what the first film will be all about. But I can assure you that it will be equally inspiring as the second movie - "The Vindaloo Strikes Back" - which was the most successful, to date, they tell me.'

I turned to look at the official ratings and nodded my agreement. The entire concept of the series - a secret recipe for Chicken Curry is stolen by a renegade space traveller from the local Indian takeaway called "The Princess Leyla" - had not been popular to many. Still, the figures don't lie.

'You've directed four now,' I continued, 'the most recent being "The Phantom Korma". Which, would you say, was your most successful villain?'

He scratched his head for a moment then squeaked, 'You know, I've not been asked that before but, I'm really fond of the arch-fiend in the newest one - the third of the sixth which we released fourth...'

I smiled knowingly. This had been the favourite of most everyone I'd spoken to - the sinister Chick P Dahl. With a red face and a smoking temperament, this character could make you feel he was talking to you just by his presence on the screen. And, even when he wasn't in shot, you kept looking over your shoulder just in case.

'Who thought him up?' I questioned.

'That was me, actually, after a night out at the local Indian. Actually, that was where I got the idea for the third film "Return of the Balti". I remember saying to my film crew "Capture me the atmosphere of a thousand vindaloos with side orders of rice"

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and - you know - I think they did just that. There was something, er, steamy about that one.'

Although there are still two films of the six-part series to be written and filmed, McClinton still has visions of where he's going to go from there.

'I'd love to do a few Byron poems,' he told me. 'Draft in some mammals for the main role of his classic "Donkey Oatey". I don't know if it'll come off but I have this nagging voice in the back of my head which seems to be urging me on to do some sort of classical reinterpretation.'

I guess the sky's the limit.

Hamish McClinton wished me all the best as we concluded the interview. Hung in my office over where I sit, is a personally signed photograph of one of the most legendary rodent film directors of all time.

I shall treasure that picture for as long as I live...

Welcome to a New Millennium

Saturday 8th January 2000

Ebony the Hamster shares his thoughts on the year 2000

Perhaps it's just me but I can't work it out at all and all these human celebrations are baffling me! On just about every side, I hear men and women exhorting me to 'Enjoy the new millennium' and telling me excitedly that 'Two thousand years of world history has come to an end'.

That's all well and good for, in a sense, each day of every week in each month and year is the end of some period of two thousand years - just depends where you want to draw the line. But what really gets me is all this hype for something that actually hasn't taken place - not yet, anyway.

My owner was telling me that his employers had a 'Millennium Working Party' to usher in the turn of the century - something to do with Y2K problems and planes falling out of the sky - and that his big boss was overheard saying that it was the best Millennium Working Party they'd ever had.

Yeah, right. Like when did they have the last one and can anyone actually remember?

But, besides this, has any human actually sat down and worked out just how many years had passed as of 31st December 1999? As I read the tabloids of the world's great nations, it seems as if very few had!

You see, the first year began on 1st January 1AD and ended on 31st December 1AD - so the end of the first year must be at the end, er, of the first year. So when have two thousand years expired?

Come on, don't be shy in answering - it's not a trick question, it really is as straight forward as it sounds.

That's right! The end of year 2000.

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So why did all the humans go overboard with the end of the 1999th year? What's so special about that? Beats me - I guess I'll never understand humans as long as I live but, to all who went bananas a week or so back, let me just point out that you got the date wrong.

Us hamsters will be celebrating the end of the second millennium on 31st December this year!

Britney Spears

Saturday 22nd January 2000

Ebony the Hamster reports on human look-a-likes

I'm sure it was Elvis.

Okay, okay. So it was in the local chip shop that I saw him as I sneaked a peek from my master's bag as we headed for the door and back home for supper. But it really did look like Elvis.

If he'd've wobbled his right leg and began to sing in deep, melancholy sounds, I swear I would have died from shock.

Then there was the supermarket with Britney Spears at the checkout.

Yep, that's what I wrote. Britney Spears served us on the checkout as we made the weekly purchase of tins of spaghetti and muesli, while Kath handed over her little piece of plastic in payment. I'm telling you, it was Britney alright and I had to stop Kath from going out the door just to get one more look at that till girl who, if I was right, doubled in her spare time as a pop star.

It happens to me time and again - déjà vu?

Haven't I already talked about this in a previous article?

Well, anyway, while we stood there near the door, I pointed with my paw to a short ode blue-tacked high up on the notice board and pressed home my point to my master - I wasn't the first to have noticed the similarities for there, eight feet from the ground, was the titled 'Ode to Britney' that I've printed below.

Kath had to rush over to the stationery counter and purchase a pen while I stood by the bags to guard them - but this was important. It's not everyday that you get conclusive proof that, just as some people believe that aliens are among us, the biggest stars in the business are equally taking out everyday jobs to associate themselves with the likes of us commoners.

Kath hurried back muttering something under her breath and she recorded the poem for posterity.

Really - just as much as that guy was Elvis, this lady was Britney Spears...

I've worked with a girl that looked like Cher,
And one who was the image of Whitney.

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But recently, these past few weeks,
I've been working with someone called Britney.

She models her looks and she wears skin-tight clothes -
Her hair is tied up at the sides.
And she sounds just like Spears when she yodels a tune,
So long as you close both your eyes.

When she goes out to lunch, she wears dancing shoes,
And she clicks both her hands to some beat.
She reckons she's going to buy a ham roll,
But she does dance routines in the street.

And now she is going on holiday to Crete,
Or, at least, that's what she's telling us all.
But her flight and her stay is tied in to match
Britney Spears tour of Europe this Fall.

So, in conclusion, Britney Spears is amongst us,
And she goes incognito by day.
And no one's suspicious or has thought it too odd,
That she works on the checkout at Safeway.

The Manuscripts of Alexhamstria

Saturday 5th February 2000

Ebony the Hamster shares a little about contraband manuscripts

'Ere, Guv,' said the voice behind me as I nestled down amongst some old discarded bedding for a short nap. 'Fancy buyin' a manuscript - kna what I mean?'

I turned to look quizzically at my questioner - not an easy thing to do for a hamster when he's in need of sleep and long overdue even the briefest of naps due to pressure of work. It seemed to succeed, though, and he continued, answering the questions that he appeared to read on my face.

'Ahm an 'onest rat - 'onest I am,' he squeaked, 'and I 'aves these manuscripts - acquired 'em like - and fought you may be int'rested to p'ruse 'em. Na obligation - na, none.'

He held up a series of scrolls wrapped in leather tubes and pushed one into my paws, encouraging me to open the seal and read the contents. I hesitated for a moment wondering whether I was doing right handling such seemingly ancient manuscripts - and

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such as were marked 'Made in the ancient library of Alexhamstria' - but the salesman insisted, so it must be okay.

Clicking open the metallic lock, I pushed back the outer leaf and read from the top of the page 'The Secrets of the Universe by Julius Seizure'.

'Mmm, interesting spelling,' I thought. 'There's obviously more to this rat than meets the eye.'

I decided to play him a long - just for a little while, you understand, I had no intention of deliberately causing him grief - but the deception that had just been tried on me needed to be brought to his attention.

'Forgery,' I squeaked. 'It doesn't have the feel of a real manuscript and, besides, it's misspelt.'

'MISSPELT?!' he exploded. 'Wass misspelt?'

'Julius,' I assured him. 'It's J-E-W-E-L-E-U-S. Obviously a forgery. Where did you get it?'

'Arve bin robbed!' he shouted. 'And Arve 'ungry marves to feed! Ah mister - be kind to a poor lonesum rat!'

To be honest, I wasn't sure whether he was attempting to deceive me further or whether he had, in truth, been deceived himself. I guess that's the difficulty with a lie - it seems to lead from one to another and, before you know where you are, the liar becomes so disillusioned by the lies he tells, he can no longer tell what truth is.

I'd met this problem before and only recently had been totally bewildered by a story I'd been working on for Dak, my colleague-in-fur, when he'd asked me to cover some Republican nominee or other - or was it Democrat? I can't remember - they're all the same to me, anyhow.

I'd read all the previous speeches and sat up most of the day, trying to piece together the policies that he would stand and fight an election over - but nothing I read seemed to harmonise with the other facts I knew.

For instance, to the Gay Rights Activists, he said 'I wholly support the liberation of your sexual orientation' but to the Born Again Christians Convention he'd told them that 'I stand for truth and integrity and will promote the knowledge of the God of the Bible'. There again, he spoke of 'the need to assert the right of the unborn child' and, two weeks after, 'the need to assert the right of the pregnant mother'.

I mean, which line is the guy actually taking? If the candidate becomes all things to all men, he will, in effect, be nothing to anyone. If the man says whatever will gain him the public vote, the voters will get a man who doesn't even know what truth is.

And that's a problem - no matter who the man is.

I returned my gaze to the rat who stood before me and decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, took out a small gold coin that can be used amongst humans to buy food items (I'll explain this custom at another time) and pressed it into his paws.

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What made me immediately think I'd been gullible was the chink-chink-chink that emanated from his knapsack as he wandered down the road in search of another victim.

The Last Teabag in Paris

Saturday 26th February 2000

Ebony the Hamster reports on a new literary discovery

There are not many sensationalist pieces of news in the literary world these days, now that a hamster's skills have been recognised for what they are - even though there will probably come a time when a Giraffe's symmetry in poetical prose and an Elephant's musical composition will be heralded as some great new discovery by mankind in general. But, this week, the human world greeted with delight a new Rodent Laureate on the scene with unspeakable glee.

Though America has long since acknowledged the place of hamsters in present day society and even allowed the beloved Ganjette to run as Presidential candidate, it appears that, here in England, a hamster's ability is only starting to be acknowledged by the upper echelons of society.

This recognition, then, has resulted in the world's first national Rodent Laureate, appointed to the Queen herself to sum up the mood of the rodent population, to skilfully put words together to create images and feelings that portray rodent life and to get paid for what they love doing naturally.

The first hamster 'by Royal Appointment' is, unsurprisingly, Biscuit, whose proud owner, Stephanie, was first to congratulate her hamster on the position.

'He has been foremost in Rodent literature for some months,' she told the Rodent Weekly, 'and we've secretly been having talks with the Royal family to determine the settlement.'

The undisclosed amount - believed to be a five figure sum of sunflower seeds per week - will go towards the upkeep of the cage and utilities needed to support such an occupation and position.

In celebration of the appointment, the Royal family have released the following poem written by Biscuit.

The blockade of the Asian ports made tea bags rare in London,
And brewing-bags were hard to find in Harris.
But intrepid rodents set themselves to find the final box,
Searching for the last tea bag in Paris.

They tried the Champs Elysees but it was all to no avail
For the cafés simply hadn't got a brew.
And when they scurried round the Arc they thought they'd soon discover

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A tea bag - but they failed to find a clue.

For three long months they searched in vain and touted for the tea,
But no one offered, no one seemed to care.
And once, they thought they smelt that fragrance ling'ring on the nose,
Though the smell just seemed to vanish in thin air.

Then they heard the rumours that at last there was a leaf
Located across town at Sacre Coeur.
And though they scurried fearlessly and got there through the rain,
All they ended up was getting soggy fur.

Again they heard a rumour from a source they thought was true
In the park in which you find the Eiffel Tower.
But being spring with blooming plants the report proved just a hoax,
For the smell was just a Himalayan flower.

Just as they'd given up all hope and when their souls were lowest,
A friendly stranger gave them all a wink.
He motioned with a bending finger that they should come quick,
And across the street they speedily all slinked.

There behind the oak-clad doors, their eyes beheld the site
Of ten thousand tons of tea that reached the roof.
And squeaking their approval they leapt and laughed out loud
That they'd found the last supply - and this was proof.

So exiting the building, they went back to their burrows,
And were happy that they had refused to miss.
At least they'd found the whereabouts (and now they could rest easy)
Of the final and last tea bag in all Paris.

Fluffy Bernadette

Saturday 11th March 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a strange new hamster to emerge onto the scene

She looked at me over the top of her gold-rimmed spectacles that gave her that certain air of intelligence and spoke calmly to me, 'So, what problems do you have that you want to discuss?'

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I thought for a moment, sifting through my mind like a gold digger panning for some small nugget, but it was all a blank.

'Actually,' I squeaked, 'I've only come to do the interview and go.'

She flipped open a notepad and wrote something at the bottom left corner, muttering something to herself under her breath and then saying loudly to me, 'So, how long have you been dissatisfied with your nest compartment?'

I thought long and hard for a moment - no, I wasn't dissatisfied, it was just a place to sleep. I returned her gaze and told her politely that she was mistaken.

'It is one of the most difficult things for any mentally ill patient to do,' she squeaked. 'Face up to the truth about oneself. But, believe me, honesty is much better than living in denial. Now, are you going to tell me the truth or not?'

I realised at that moment that there was nothing I could do that would justify my own happiness. After all, if that old stunt was going to be pulled that, even if I denied it, it was still true, what chance did I have? I began to feel like a politician under the crossfire of a studio audience - though, in that case, truth could never be discerned even if it was spoken.

'I've come here to interview you,' I repeated, 'and after that I must go. I have a deadline to meet back at the Weekly.'

Again she scribbled something down on the pad and drew a large arrow from one, pointing to the other.

'I can see that you were never happy with your mother - did she bully you into growing up? It's alright,' she continued, 'everything you say here will go no further than you, me and this notepad.'

'This is nothing to do with my mother!' I squeaked indignantly.

'My mistake,' she said, 'I often get confused with the mother and father complexes. What was it about your father, then, that so annoyed you that you find yourself having to put yourself under pressure to produce something every week?'

'There was nothing wrong with my father!!!' I shrieked. 'I've only come to do an interview!!!'

Almost unflustered, Fluffy Bernadette smiled knowingly and continued, 'Anger is a sure sign that there are pre-adult phobias that need rooting out and removing. It's only a matter of time but we'll get there if you face up to the past and allow me to deal with it for you.'

I threw my front paws up in despair.

'This is useless,' I thought. 'How can I possibly do an interview here?'

Fluffy Bernadette is therapist to the rich and famous hamsters who have hang-ups and problems they need to discuss. I'd been sent here by the Rodent Weekly because her name had started to appear in Medical Journals and advertisements on billboards, offering her services to the 'neurotic rodent who wants to be a better mammal than his fellow creature'.

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That had immediately got the alarm bells ringing in our own ears at the Weekly and I'd been sent - goodness only knows why me! - to interview her. I had failed - but, there again, perhaps this was something that was rooted in my past? Something that had attached itself to me as a hamlet?

'Don't be daft,' I told myself as I got up from the couch to go. 'If you believe that, you really *do* need help!'

More Fluff

Saturday 25th March 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a second attempt to interview that strange new hamster

I felt - after my last effort - that I had made an initial mistake by trying to interview Fluffy Bernadette - the psychoanalyst of the rich and famous rodents - at her work apartment over on the west side of Chevy Chase. The editor had arranged this rendezvous at a small rodent café nearer the centre of the city where rodents came to meet and chat about the things that were on their minds and to pass a few hours in friendly company.

She was late - I guess that's a lady's prerogative - and I'd started to play with the serviettes, crafting them to make some shapes and forms that I'd seen on an Origami program some months back on cable. I think the frog is my favourite design, though the water bomb is such fun that one can use it for indoor tennis and other games that need something collapsible that won't damage Lee and Kath's ornaments.

She emerged through the revolving doors and raised a paw to acknowledge my presence, scampering over to take up her position in front of me. We exchanged pleasantries and I ordered a drink for the both of us before getting down to business.

'Now,' I began, 'you obviously know why I'm here. Our readers have heard a lot about you and we wanted to put together an article about who you are and the type of work you do. It may even serve as a sort of advert for the services you can offer.'

'Yes,' she agreed, 'but what does this have to do with the relationship I had with my mother, eh? I was young and didn't know the ways of the world then and she was only trying to protect me, you hear?'

I could see this wasn't going to be easy - call it a 'feeling' or what you will, but I just got the impression that this interview wasn't going to go the way I'd been hoping.

'Let's...' I tried to choose my words carefully, '..talk about, er, your wor...no, no - sorry. I almost forgot. Our readers wanted to know what brought you to Washington - after all, we saw that you used to be an out-of-towner.'

She looked at me through the tinted glasses that had begun sliding down her nose and tried to compose herself.

'So, I guess my reputation follows me, then?'

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I looked at the notepad to see if there was something there that she'd read while I was writing. No, nothing that could've prompted such a statement. Was it me? Was it my parents or that incident I'd had when I'd trapped a whisker in a Rotastak tube as a young hamlet that was causing this reaction?

'Come on, Dak!' I told myself, 'You're getting neurotic!'

But this could work to my advantage. With an air of professionalism that shocked even me, I confessed in as vague a sentence as possible, 'Yes, of course, we have access to a very great many sources and we've heard all about what happened before you came here.'

'Oh dear,' she squeaked and paused for a few moments before continuing, 'Well, how was I to know it was a tomato? I hadn't any concept of such a fruit before I saw one there in real life - and it just looked, looked - well, you know how it looked. Oh, how Freud was right! Jung, too. But, you know, it was the pineapple that really caused me the emotional damage...'

'This hamster is hung up!' I thought to myself as she continued. 'She needs professional help!'

I let her squeak on about pickled walnuts and fresh gherkins that were covered in cream for a full ten minutes as I looked up a good counsellor and wrote down the number. I pressed the piece of paper into her hand and said, 'Give them a ring - I'm sure they can help. Honestly, they're good friends of mine.'

Naming a Hamster

Saturday 1st April 2000

Ebony the Hamster shares a little about how to name a hamster

How do humans select a name for a hamster? This may seem like proposing what is, to me, the ultimate question to the ultimate problem in life but it is, nevertheless, something that has been on my mind for the past few weeks and I've deliberately spent extra time in my nest compartment - rather than running on my wheel - just to try and think through the implications of what these humans label us with when they first come to meet us and take us home as their pets.

I mean, take me, for example. Why 'Ebony'? After all, I'm not ebony coloured, never have been and neither do I intend having myself dyed that colour. So, why 'Ebony'? Beats me - my owner has just started shortening the name to 'Ebs' which is preferable cos it hides the colour problem but, if they ever buy another hamster and call it 'Flo', that's the time I leave - I promise.

Now, I can understand some names of the hamsters that have gone before me in this house because, to a great extent, they were logical. Dak, my current colleague-in-fur, was named because the word means 'extremely small' and that's just what he is - he's

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still pretty tiny and I've often wondered why they don't call him 'Newt' - then, visitors would say 'Oh, what you got in there?'

And Lee could reply, 'It's only my Newt.'

Get it? Never mind...

Kesef, before him, was named because the word means 'silver' - Lee and Kath had had a few hamsters at that time and he was the greyest of them all when compared to the others - therefore, a logical name.

Arlev and Hakeem before him were so named because the former means 'Lion heart' (he was the first hamster of the two to discover the existence of a tube and descend its entire length - thus making him the braver), the latter 'Wise One' (he used to quietly meditate on proverbs and the sayings of the ancient sages most of the day).

These are all wonderfully logical - though George was a little bit of a misnomer. Apparently, so my owners tell me, George was named after a Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoon called 'The Abominable Snowman'. I can't go in to the ins and outs of just why that came about but, if you get a chance to watch the cartoon, I'm sure you'll understand.

Now, that brings me on to the naming of this new hamster over there in Washington - 'Jade' they call her. To anyone who's seen this hamster, can I ask you a few questions?

Does she look like a jade? Is she the colour of jade? Why on earth, therefore, choose 'Jade'? Why pick a name out the blue that doesn't represent the hamster who has to bear it for the rest of her life? I mean, such mistitling could psychologically unhinge a hamster! Why do humans do it?

Lee had his own ideas and sent the names 'Snuzzle', 'Gummidge', 'Bear-face', 'Furball', 'Huppim' and 'Muppim' to the owner as suggestions - see what I mean about humans?

Just tell me, will you? How does she look like a Snuzzle? And what does that word mean, anyway?

But did the owners actually stop and think to ask the poor hamster? Did they? Hamsters aren't incompetent at naming themselves, you know? They're really quite intelligent animals! But, oh no, humans would rather trundle along doing their own thing and choose totally inappropriate names for their pets!

Sheesh!

Makes you want to spit doesn't it?

Observations of an English Hamster in America

Saturday 3rd June 2000

Ebony the Hamster interviews his staff colleague, Dak

They said it would be never written - though just who the 'they' were, I have no idea. Must be the human press, I guess, cos certainly no one in the offices at the Rodent Weekly ever thought it wouldn't be committed to paper. After all, we're talking about

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Dak here - not some unhinged and irresponsible reporter who cares little for accuracy and content.

Exactly.

And written it has been - and, furthermore, released today on George the Hamster's main web site. You see, as most readers will be aware, Dak and I had to retire for several weeks back in May to recover from overwork, fatigue and, that curse of all computer users, RSI. But it wasn't long before Dak was feeling a whole lot better and decided to hitchhike all the way down from Washington to North Carolina where our owners had taken the opportunity for a vacation while we were 'away'.

'It was an interesting journey,' recalls Dak, 'one that I shall always remember - the way the greys and dirt of the city changed to the greens and browns of the countryside and the much cleaner dirt of the rural towns and villages.'

Spending just three days travelling south, Dak finally caught up with our owners in a small trailer park on the outskirts of Westfield, near Mount Airy.

'At first, I thought to myself "Are you kidding?", but I soon came to warm to the people here and enjoyed my stay immensely. There was such a contrast of people - from the slightly loopy to the certifiable - but each of them came to extend such hospitality to me that I began to wish I had no reason to travel back with my owners to the UK.'

But, travel back he did and has since been working feverishly on some new articles - I guess he must have picked up some sort of virus or other but he's getting much better as the days progress and his temperature, he assures me, is falling - about life in the States and what it means for the tourist to visit here, many of the pitfalls being recorded for the unwary traveller.

'It was like a different world,' recalls Dak. 'A world of Little Debbie's and Altoids - a world where cars are held together with string and where a McDonalds hamburger has the consistency of cardboard and is tasteless - well, some things are the same the world over, aren't they?'

The series of articles has already rocketed to number one in the literary hamster publications chart and is set to outsell just about every book produced in the past (with the obvious exception of George's history's which remain unmatched) but Dak has given special permission for a free copy of the text to be included on George's site.

'Money isn't everything,' said Dak. 'I'd much rather be able to reach those who can little afford such a publication than to think about raking in the bucks.'

For those of you unversed in American language, a buck is a male deer.

Infrared Photography

Saturday 3rd June 2000

Ebony the Hamster reports on some spooky photography

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

I felt the hair on the back of my neck bristle with surprise as, displayed before me was first one image, then another, of photographs taken at night with the aid of infrared filters in one of our local forests.

'There's certainly something there,' my interviewee pointed out, 'you can see the head very clearly even though it's in partial focus. This was taken at f6 with an exposure time of one sixtieth of a second so I guess we'd expect just a little fuzziness.'

This was weird - I couldn't help but think of Ganjette and those images that had been reported from around the world of hamster faces in all sorts of places - even, I remembered, in the freshly baked pastry of a Cornish Pasty in London. That would have been preserved for posterity but, as these things go, someone had inadvertently eaten it.

But this - wow! - this was weird! What else did they have?

'Here,' said the photographer, 'get a load of this...' and he pressed into my hands another red image, this time of Mars - seems that a pasty wasn't the only foodstuff to have been imprinted with the face of an animal.

'How is it possible,' I asked, 'for a Mars Bar to bear the face of an animal?'

'Pure chance is an option,' he assured me, 'but random chaotic differences may be being influenced from worlds we have no conception of - and by beings who are trying to communicate with us on a higher level.'

I thought for a moment - a higher level? Intelligent beings? If they were so intelligent, wouldn't a few lines of text be a bit more informative? And what did we think they were saying by the reddened face of a hamster seemingly imprinted onto a night time infrared image?

'Perhaps,' he said, 'It's the ultimate answer to the ultimate question. Perhaps if we were to consider the implications of such an image, the meaning of life would become immediately apparent.'

But in what way is the face of a hamster the meaning of life? After all, is this supposed to be the image of the Supreme Being? Are earthly hamsters made in the divine image? I think not...

'We need to conduct more research,' he assured me, 'but, for now, we would greatly appreciate any interpretations your readers might have that could be messages from the other side.'

'Oh,' I said, 'you mean the other side of the Atlantic?'

'Yes, precisely...'

Julia Roberts in Cybersuit

Saturday 10th June 2000

Ebony the Hamster reports on the recent court case

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Julia Roberts, rumoured to be the highest paid actress in Hollywood, this week won a cybersuit against an American entrepreneur for registering the domain name www.juliaroberts.com.

Roberts, who's also amongst the top ten possessors of the biggest lips in Hollywood, felt that the registering of the name was an infringement of her personal rights and that, being her trademark, should only be used by herself. The court ruled that the actress had 'common law trademark rights in her name' and so awarded the use of the domain name solely to Ms Roberts and her associates.

The problem hits deep at the heart of domain names and is already raising serious questions and prompting heated debate around the globe amongst the cyber community. After all, Ms Roberts is unlikely to ever use the domain name for her own personal web site and has expressed no serious intention to do so - and the ruling leaves open the possibility that the actress may consider suing parents for naming their child 'Julia' and claim damages for taking a trademark and applying it to their own child.

It appears that the more famous one is, the more in control of other people's freewill one becomes - a trait already apparent in the political powers that have been elected.

Indeed, it seems almost incredulous that anyone who's not actively a participant of the world wide web should object to the goings on here when they have little or no first hand experience of what the community is all about.

Though we would most heartily endorse any law suit which sued an organisation for taking such a domain name and demonizing the real person on it, the fact that the person concerned wants to stop someone from making money from a name which they themselves have made money with seems hardly fair and has also been reflected in the closure of numerous fan sites throughout the world by legal action.

Amongst those who've already recaptured their own domain name are Christian Dior and the Microsoft Corporation, while there remains court cases pending by such rock stars as Tina Turner, Jethro Tull and Jimi Hendrix - the latter of which, as far as we know, is dead.

I guess it's quite something when a stiff can be given the right to prosecute a company when they're no longer a part of what's going on on planet earth. So far, we understand that the Creator hasn't sued the holders of www.god.co.uk, a uk-based search engine, but we've been receiving rumours that the Pope is considering formal proceedings.

Amazingly - to us hamsters at least - it's difficult to conceive of how a name given at birth can become a legal 'trademark' that's defensible in the open court. After all, the human media have often mentioned 'names' within their pages without the express permission of the person involved and one wonders whether these may now have to be handed over to be under the control of those people whose names they've used.

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It's also strange that a collection of black symbols on white paper (or, in this case, some electrical impulses inside a server) could ever be considered to be a trademark and we anticipate people such as Ms Roberts suing ISPs throughout the world because the code 'juliaroberts' may, by chance, appear in the code of jpegs and gifs that reside on their webspace.

Recently, scholars working on extracting a Code from a religious work, published their findings that the name 'Julia' appeared repeatedly throughout their extensive investigations. While this had attempted to be swept under the carpet and kept quiet, we understand now that this may provide an opportunity for the actress to sue publishers of the religious work for a royalty of sales.

The Rodent Weekly has long since declined the opportunity to buy its own domain name (www.rodentweekly.com) and is quite open for anyone to take it upon themselves to purchase it for themselves. While we realise that mimicry may lead to misunderstanding, we'd take it as the highest of compliments that someone out there thought that we were famous enough to warrant their particular attention.

How to bite the hand that feeds you

Saturday 17th June 2000

Maty the Hamster writes on how to train a hamster to develop an offensive tooth

So, we look 'cute', huh? Bundles of warm fur with young, bright eyes that are the end product of their weeks of endless worry over the new litter and of all those protein supplements they've been feeding to the mother - but, as most grown-hams know, the nightly errand of sharpening the hamlets' teeth will not go unfruitful when the day arrives when the teenage hamster - for the first time - decides to bite the hand that feeds them.

So many young hamlets are careless in their initial approach to a human that it seems right that we cover a few of the more important ground rules here and remember that, what older hamsters tell you, they have learnt by experience.

If at all possible, you should never bite a child's hand - not because they don't deserve it because, sometimes, they do, but because their older ones like to insist that 'they know better' and are skilled in the ancient art of 'how to handle a hamster'.

It's a spirited thing you do - and a duty that's necessary to perform - to go always for the hand of the adult human and to draw blood at every opportunity so that the younger human may realise that grown-ups aren't so wise as they like to make out they are.

Of course, young humans already know this but it's good to have contributed to their sense of well-being and security in life, a trait that they will sadly lose when they obtain hamsters for their own children in years to come and we turn our dental attention towards their pink skin.

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But, for now, let's consider briefly, how a hamster should make that pre-emptive strike on the hand. That soft bundle of fur is never more deadly than when a hand comes in to the cage and hovers near the mouth thinking that all is safe.

That, my hamster colleagues, is the time to strike.

Don't be surprised at the sudden withdrawal of the hand from your cage - or of the use of language by your victim that you've never heard before - this is all part and parcel of the victory once you've made that first, decisive bite. You're sure to immediately get much more attention by the young of the family who'll pet and fuss over you in case, somehow, their parents have hurt you.

Do play this for all it's worth - staggering about the cage is probably best achieved with a half-glazed expression on the eyes. Remember, the better you do this, the more likelihood you have of getting some tasty morsel from the young human who thinks that their parents have injured you in some way.

Running about the cage in some sort of fit of panic has also proven effective amongst European hamsters and the reports from that continent indicate that this is more likely to get oneself pampered than a feigning of injury.

And don't be afraid that, when the next adult hand comes in, you should desist from biting it - by no means. Indeed, it's good to move bedding to near an exit hole of the cage so that, when it comes in, what they think is a soundly sleeping rodent is, in fact, a coldly calculating hamster ready to pounce just as soon as the hand comes within optimum distance.

Finally, my friends-in-fur, always be picky about what you eat in those formative years. A young human who sees you fail to extract one scrap of food from their dish is the more likely to try different foods on you than one who sees a rodent devour the lot. So, eat wisely - and soon you'll have untold dietary delights entering the bars of your cage at regular intervals.

I know that many young hamsters will have their own experiences they're wanting to share with the world, so please feel free over the next few weeks to email me here at the Weekly and I'll do my best to put together your responses into a further article.

How to write a successful article

Saturday 22nd July 2000

Maty the Hamster writes on how a hamster should write for the human market

[Editor's note: It's with great pleasure that we devote some space in our weekly periodical to an up and coming young writer by the name of Maty. Her contributions have, to date, been normally joint efforts in collaboration with our staff reporters but she has had one individual letter published on the occasion of Dak's impersonation by an unknown rodent a number of months ago.]

Nothing Much To Do with George the Hamster
Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

There are many problems confronting a hamster when they choose to begin to write for the human market - not least the problem of how one can grip a pen to be able to achieve anything coherent on the paper in front of them. But, with the advent of modern technology in the form of computers and the latest in Squeak Recognition software, these initial problems have been largely left behind.

Having become proficient, therefore, and fairly confident with the methods of recording, the hamster has to turn their attention to the content of their writing. This is, indeed, difficult, for humans just don't think in the same way as, for example, a whale might. To a whale, the desire to find seas rich in plankton are necessarily high on the agenda but, to the man and woman who walk the streets of Washington DC, the most they know about plankton is that they aren't made of wood and that they live in the sea.

They really have no desire to either eat or swim in them and the literary whale must, of necessity, try to find ways of expressing themselves in the language of the reader that they seek to reach.

The problem is no different for hamsters - if you or I were to tell a fellow hamster 'The soiled bedding is stuck with currants - Kindly get the seeds and we'll have a feast' we would, naturally, be understood. But, to a human, meaninglessness would cloud their understanding and we'd be no nearer communicating with them than we were in the days before George the Hamster came along.

So, what should we write about?

Humans have their weak spots and it isn't, perhaps, surprising that hamsters need to develop articles which associate themselves with such things.

For instance, were I to attempt to get a hamster to move their butt so I could see the tv, I might try the easily understandable 'Do you want a sunflower seed applied to your posterior?' but, to a human, such a sentence would be meaningless.

Better is the phrase 'Wasn't that Pamela Anderson that I just heard on the landing?' if the human is a male, or 'Did you see that? Wasn't that George Clooney that just went past the window?' if they're female - the latter only works, incidentally, if you live in a ground floor flat.

For some reason, for which I'm blissfully ignorant, males of the human species tend to be attracted to members of the opposite sex if they're so lopsided as to almost over-balance, while females prefer the 'cute butt'. This is all so illogical as to make a hamster laugh, I know - for considerations about child-bearing in females and faithfulness in males is far from their minds.

But the hamster writer, if he or she is to communicate effectively with humankind, must be aware of the differences and so word their articles accordingly. I could go on at length with numerous observations and illustrations but this, I assure you, is the only real guiding principle - all else is observation of the human species from which one can develop information that will be used towards this end.

Care to Hamster Squeak?

Saturday 29th July 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a new book which hit the stores this week

I can't say that I've ever read those English-French dictionaries or the phrase books that seem to be so much a part of modern day overseas travel - and the claims by some modern day cassette producers that implies one can learn the language of your plane's destination by the time it touches the tarmac always leave me cold. After all, if it really was that easy, why wasn't the world fluent in everybody else's mother tongue?

No, I think you have to have a gift for it.

Especially when it comes to cross-species language barriers that present not only a problem of voice but a barrier of sound and posture that can convey just as much meaning - and sometimes more - than, in a hamster's case, a squeak or shriek.

My master, Lee, fluffed at school in French, so he tells me, though he prides himself on being able to claim that he managed to pass his oral examination by answering the one-to-one questions in pre-arranged fashion, telling the examiner that his dad was a policeman, that his mother a policewoman, their pet a police dog and that the family enjoyed nothing better than to visit police stations in their holidays.

A sincere case of fabrication if ever I've heard one but at least he couldn't be failed.

Nevertheless, where cross-human languages had always been a matter of intense frustration, cross-species barriers represent no such dilemma and, first with George, Lee has been one of the foremost in conversing with animals and insects throughout the world and to bring together man and beast in ways that had only been dreamt possible before.

A bit like a real Doctor Doolittle (but the white version), I can vouch for the fact that Lee's been working hard on a new book which saw release this week and which is already threatening to become a pet best-seller by this time next year. The title - 'Care to Hamster Squeak?' - although not the most catchy of titles, is full of glossy pictures and illustrations and comes complete with its own CD ROM which should be listened to in conjunction with the photographs.

'It was difficult to conceive a format that would be easy to use for both young and old alike,' Lee told me as he changed my fresh food over on Tuesday and refilled my water bottle. 'Our main problem was how to start with a neutral format and then build upon a stencil that would be easily appreciated and understandable. I think we've managed that with this third attempt but, even so, conceptualising people's intelligence levels was by no means easy.'

Working sometimes without food for days on end along with my colleague, this book contains all that every pet owner should ever need to convey to their hamster pet, whether they be Russian, Chinese or Syrian, though the reader is also warned that

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certain dialects (notably those amongst the Scottish population) can be extremely difficult to understand and Altavista's Babel Fish should be referred to for advice on the matter when available.

'The most difficult thing,' Lee pointed out to me, 'was trying to think of a way in which a hamster's ears could be represented and which the average hamster would recognise.'

After all, the position of both ear, eye and tongue can dramatically change the meaning conveyed and, to give just one example, the phrase 'I am most definitely having a bad fur day. Would you lick that tuft back down for me?' can be transformed into the more aggressive 'Peanuts weren't designed to do that with them. Are you a hamster or a rat, anyway?' by simply retracting the front teeth - a warning that every human should take seriously.

'We found that there were a lot of misunderstandings that were generated between hamsters and their owners in the early days - but this was all part of the learning process. We put out the project as a beta version to many selected households and got invaluable feedback that helped us to modify the project and improve it.

'The CD, too, was recorded more than sixteen times to get the exact sound needed to represent each action - there was nothing we didn't do to try and iron out all the wrinkles.'

And does Lee think this has been achieved?

'To a great extent, yes it has,' he replied, 'but we couldn't possibly cover all scenarios and situations. Readers should take the book as a starting block from which to develop their own inter-personal relationship with their hamster.'

Are there any projects in the pipeline to extend the research that's being done on other species?

'We hope to have a "Care to shriek Ant?" book available in the shops by Christmas,' Lee assured me, 'but we've run into problems with research into the languages of the domesticated cat.'

'Problems?' I enquired. 'What problems are these?'

'I guess that it's partly our fault,' he confessed, 'but our workers are predominantly rodent and, just when we achieve a breakthrough, they get eaten before they can record their observations and email them back to us.'

Although I've only read halfway through the book in question, I must vouch for its accuracy on numerous pages. If any criticism could be levelled at it, it's the price - a staggering £45.00 (about \$67) - which remains prohibitive to the more general reader. Having said that, we at the Rodent Weekly fully endorse the book and wish it every success.

Ebony found dead

Saturday 29th July 2000

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Dak the Hamster reports on the death of a Rodent Weekly writer

The morning had seemed like most other Saturday mornings, so Lee said - a bit of studying, some food and several cups of tea, while watching some cricket on the box that's probably the best cure for insomnia I've ever known.

It was during the sixth over that he noticed that the daily fresh food hadn't been eaten in Ebony's compartment, the dried food was still full and the walnut, cracked open the afternoon before, was still in its shell.

To anyone who knew Ebony as I knew him, this was unusual. The dried food could have been left, the fresh food may have been ignored - but there was no way in the world that a freshly cracked walnut would have been left - no way.

Lee woke me from a deep sleep and asked me what I knew - had I heard Ebony last night? Did I hear the rattling of the wheel? Did I know of any hits that had been put out on him by the human underworld?

There were always the rumours, but who paid attention to those? The last article which had caused just such a controversy was that one he'd written back in June about Julia Roberts, but that she would have put a hit out on Ebony? I doubt it.

I watched Lee go over to the nest compartment and peer through the hole in the bedding material like some famous naturalist discovering a new species.

'No movement - not even breathing,' he said, then shook the unit gently, less gently, then violently. Even if Ebony had been waking up, he may well have been despatched directly into a coma with all that vibration.

'I think he's dead,' Lee whispered. Have you ever wondered why humans lower their voices when they announce bad news? Do they think they might wake the deceased? That, somehow, the only way to deal with something is to whisper the problem as if it really doesn't exist? Beats me.

But, yes, Ebony was dead - and he was less than eighteen months old, too. I remember how Kath had bought him from the pet store after watching him for a week or so on her continued returns to the store and how he'd become such a close friend and colleague at the Rodent Weekly.

I guess I was a bit shocked - I had been half-expecting to die first, me being over two years old, now, and certainly not as active as I once used to be but, as fate would have it, such things never can be predicted.

I shall remember Ebony with fondness - how he used to hold the world record for stuffing the most amount of cucumber into his pouches, how he used to groom himself behind the loudspeakers of the hifi so he could listen to the music and how he always vainly tried to climb the velvet curtains from a position high above the floor, only to fall to earth with the most hollow of thuds.

Yes, Ebony was quite some unique hamster - I shall miss him.

I wonder if Lee and Kath will get a new one - Russian, female. Hint, hint.

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Squeakers to Tour

Saturday 12th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on the sensational hamster musical group

Following the surprise disbandment of 'Rancid Moggy' last week, announced in all the good music magazines across the country, there comes the press release that those most famous of rodent vocalists, the Squeakers, are to reform for a series of nation-wide performances that will take in all the civilised areas of America - and parts of Alaska and West Virginia, too.

Although originally a close-knit three-part harmony outfit, in recent weeks reports have been circulating that the band has been rehearsing with the world-renowned session musician Ham Halen on guitar in a sincere attempt to rearrange most of their all-time classics - songs such as 'Rats in White Satin' which shot to the Melody Maker top 100 list of all-time classics and, what was to receive even greater acclaim from the pages of 'Q', 'Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hamsters Band', an exploration of musical composition in the face of involvement with tea-drinking which drew initially critical condemnation from certain sections of the world press.

'Ham Halen,' lead singer Gobb Beltup told us, 'has added a musical complexity that has inspired us to rethink our position on many of our previous releases. We were initially a bluegrass foursome who went under the name of "Acoustic Rodents" (we're touring under that name this time, too) before reforming about ten years ago when Mandy left to give birth when we achieved fame through successive charted albums and singles.'

And you're hitting the road again to relive good times and to bring pleasure to your fans?

'Er, no,' Gobb answered. 'Actually, we're skint. Our owners ran into serious financial difficulties a few months ago and we hit on this plan of being able to support them into new forms of employment by hitting the road again for a few months. We've already sold out Madison Square Garden for three nights in August and we may have to extend our time there to accommodate all the ticket sales.'

You mean *the* Madison Square Garden?

'Not exactly. Not when you put it like that,' Gobb shuffled in his seat uneasily and looked sheepishly around the room. 'We're playing in conjunction with the next title fight there. We'll be playing underneath the stage while the bout goes on and we anticipate the boxers will provide the percussion sounds that we so desperately need. Of course, we'll have to limit each song to just three minutes, but this is a discipline which should help us focus our attention on cutting out the dead wood from the songs and playing just the easy bits. It should be very arty.'

I hear you're doing a rendition of the 1812 overture. Is that right?

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'Yes, we hope to - just the loud bit at the end. After all, there's not much you can get into a hundred and eighty seconds with a guitar, banjo and an accordion. We've had to introduce a lyric harmony as well to supplement the music where Tchaikovsky messed up. But that seems to be working out well and we're looking forward to it.'

Since the Squeakers' last toured there's been a great change in the style and direction of modern day music. From increasing emphasis on synthesised music followed by a return to bands which actually had some expertise on musical instruments, and from songs which repeated one phrase hundreds of times to, er, well, that hasn't changed - the Squeakers are caught somewhat in a culture that shouldn't be over-friendly to their style and arrangements.

'Quite the contrary,' Gobb told me. 'The vast majority of people who appreciate good music are drawn towards our dexterity in performing the classics. Admittedly, once they've been drawn towards us and heard us, they tend not to buy any more of our albums, but, initially, we pull many of those who sit on the edge of popular musical styles.'

The band can be contacted through the normal channels and, as this goes to print, we understand that a fourth concert at Madison Square Garden has been arranged. Tickets will go on sale next weekend.

Ode

Saturday 12th August 2000

Dak the Hamster replies to his master's trouble with some hamster owners

My name is Dak, a ham I am, and over two years I have breathed.
A Russian rodent - proudest stock - and what I write you must believe.
They feed me well and give me drink and of each substance have no lack.
I've spent my days in expansive digs - I do inhabit Rotastak.

Now some would tell you that it ain't cool to put us in this plastic cage,
But in the UK where I live, these often simply are the rage,
And little boys and smaller girls will buy them from the stores that sell,
Thinking that they'll give us room to burrow, feed, walk, play and smell.

Now Rotastak, it ain't too great, if only stacked in one big pile,
Cos Russians aren't too great to climb and tend to plummet from the sky.
Evolution hasn't given the skin extensions that act like wings,
But give us a million years to change and then you'll see what genetics brings.

Now, my owner - name of Lee - knows that I can't climb a cherry,
And so has modified the cage and made me ramps and bridges many.

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I instead of six inch vertical drops the most I need to climb is nowt,
Because he puts in angled bends which eases climbing in and out.

Some infer that hams are thick and we can't cope with owt that's round,
But in the wild we make no cubes, living in spheroids beneath the ground.
Others say that Rotastak is heat retaining and that we faint
From heat exhaustion to the point of death - a truthful statement? No, it ain't.

I move nest often - repeatedly - to where the temperature's the best,
And if it's warm when I retire, behind the wheel is where I'll nest.
Or do you think we can't assess the difference between cold and hot?
You give us little credit, friend, if you think we know not what.

And so my ode comes to an end and I must say one final word -
To all those hams in tanks and cages who live all cramped liked captured birds,
Who have no tubes through which to tunnel and drafty, wired titchy squares,
When I have room to swing a cat - if I had the strength to dare.

So, dear owner, please leave Lee be - he cares for hamsters one and all,
And never let a word be said against this guy who's over tall.
The life I live is full throughout and every want is fully dealt.
Go write it on my headstone, please, that ham utopia was where I dwelt.

[Editor's note - Dak will be following up this ode next week with a short but pithy article about hamster cage layout and the extent to which hamster owners should give suitable accommodation to their rodent pets.]

Put your hamster in the freezer

Saturday 12th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on the Pirelli Conspiracy

What?

Lee said what?

He said you should put your hamster in the deep freeze?

More to the point - was I in for the same fate?

It's a strange thing when one goes flicking through someone else's emails - as I was now doing - for you just tend to come up with all sorts of trashy statements that mean little or nothing unless read in the context in which they were written. But this certainly seemed bizarre to say the least.

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I reread the accusation, rubbed my eyes for clarity, and reread it. No, I was right the first time - Lee was being accused of telling someone to put their hamster in the deep freeze. You think I'm kidding, right? You read it for yourself.

'If any of you put your Russian Dwarves or Winter Whites in a deep freeze or subject them to cold, just to recreate a wild simulation, you'll be faced with a dead hamster. A recent post about habitat suggested this was an ideal situation for Russian Dwarves and Winter Whites.'

I squeaked down to Lee and asked him to come up and explain. As he sat across from me, I read the accusation which had appeared on the hamster mailing list from one of the moderators, a Susan, er, Pirelli? What was that surname? I really must get my eyes tested.

Was there any truth in the accusation? Was that what he'd actually said?

No, Lee reassured me, that wasn't what he'd said.

What had he said, then?

He grabbed the mouse button and accessed the article, scrolling down to the appropriate place.

'Here,' he gestured. 'I was talking about wild conditions in Mongolia and how your kind survive in the wild. And I made the statement that, if we were to attempt to create wild conditions for Russian hamsters, it would be - well, you read it.'

He pointed out the sentence and I read it aloud emphasising the italicised words (added by myself), 'Indeed, winter in the UK without central heating is about the best condition for a Russian *if we're to simulate the wild*.'

I looked at the sentence again - then at Lee.

'You're joking, aren't you?' I squeaked. 'This has been taken to say that you're advocating keeping hamsters in the deep freeze?'

Lee lifted his hands up in bewilderment. 'What you need to learn about humans, Dak, is that they will attempt to destroy anyone they don't like. They will twist whatever is said to make one out to be the worst demonized individual around simply because they take exception to what you say.'

The word 'conspiracy' sprang to mind - yes, the Pirelli conspiracy (I really must get my eyesight tested - was that first letter a 'P'?).

'And you left the mailing list because of this? Why didn't you stop to defend yourself?' I asked.

'Actually, Susan told me that if I didn't leave she would unsubscribe me herself - that was for something else I'd written, by the way, something which she again took the wrong way. No, no - I was constructively thrown off by the moderators of the Group...'

'...and now they're out to blacken your name by defamation of character!' I concluded.

I could hear the mind of Ms Pirelli (no, no - that definitely wasn't the letter 'P') working overtime.

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

'This writing style suggests a CIA operative. He could be out to sabotage the hamster political aspirations. Maybe collecting intelligence on hamster owners, pondering how to ban you - then contrives a situation in order to spread disinformation.'

This was like something out of a Hollywood film but - hey! - maybe the hamster mailing list was where they were getting their inspiration from?

I stared once more at the name that signed at the bottom of the accusation. Rats! My eyes! That 'P' was an 'M'!

Lee walked from the room, whispering dryly, 'Rodent-on-a-stick anyone? Two flavours - Syrian and Russian. Watch that fur, it can get in-between the teeth something rotten...'

You're trying to make me wild!

Saturday 19th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on cage layout and the average hamster

I was passing by some other hamsters just the other day and my head was drawn to the type of accommodation they were living in - being one who's only experienced the delights of Rotastak (with all their incompatibility problems), it always makes me inquisitive to see if there's anything I've been missing in other hamsters' compartments.

The rodent greeted me with a nose in the air and a faint squeak which I could hear above the rustle of paper which was emanating from the human owner sat somewhere in another room.

I looked around the compartment with a fair amount of bewilderment and wondered just how it was possible to keep this hamster occupied for more than thirty seconds.

Though there was the necessary wheel in the corner - an object which many owners think is necessary simply for exercise but which is actually there to simulate hunting in our wild habitat - and the separate nest compartment which had been stuffed with some safe form of bedding, I couldn't see much else to interest me.

One ramp, some wood shavings on the floor and a second level to walk on - and off - and on again - and off. Yeah, rippingly exciting, huh?

You see, when I get up from sleep - and I currently have four nests on the go and a further one under construction (until that great two-weekly event when all the bedding seems to disappear in the space of an hour or two) - yes, when I get up from sleep, I have choices. Lots of them.

Do I go out the compartment to my right, descend the ramp, another right, left and then across a man-made bridge suspended across a red plastic gorge to my food dish?

Or do I first go down a different ramp, round a tunnel, into a pod and up one of two short tubes onto the higher level to reach it?

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Recorded, translated and compiled by Lee H and Kath Smith

Or should I exit right, continue straight, down a hole in the floor and through nest number three to emerge into a totally different pod, run through it to the end where a two foot tube will take me to that same food dish?

And which food dish should I actually head for? One of the two with dried food, the one with fresh fruit and veg or the one that has morsels from the master's table? And I've always got to be on the alert for hidden treasures stashed away under piles of shavings cos they frequently appear there mysteriously overnight.

Choices - my life is full of choices. The poor wretch of a hamster in this cage seemed to have one or two but hardly had to use his brain to decide. I can imagine him sitting in his nest during the waking moments before full consciousness and contemplating, 'Now, should I go to my food dish by using the ramp? Should I use the ramp and go to my food dish? Or should I, by going to the food dish, inadvertently choose to use the ramp?'

What sort of life has this hamster got, anyway? It always amazes me - and perhaps it's because I'm allowed semi-wild conditions that I think this way - that owners could ever contemplate something less than extensive for their pets. They let cats out in the garden to wander free, dogs are given regular exercise on a daily basis - and we get a wheel!

Like, that's sufficient?

'Happy is the hamster,' so the rodent proverb goes, 'who can spend all day exploring and has little time for repetitive activities.'

I know that it doesn't ring with the same kind of poetry as most human proverbs do, but translating from the hamster tongue isn't always easy and the symmetry can't always be maintained.

So, what's my point?

Well, it's an appeal, really.

Give a hamster space and he'll live like a hamster - give him a small, square compartment and he'll live like a pet, just an ordinary domesticated (can we ever be that?) pet.

Sure - a wheel, food and bedding is all we really need but expand the possibilities and you expand the range of activities. Multiply a hamster's choices and you increase the range of behaviour.

My human friend - don't settle for one or two bits of equipment for your pet. Give him more, build him an empire!

Something for Nuffin

Saturday 19th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on some strange products

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We get a lot of visitors here at the Rodent Weekly - some more eccentric than others. When Nuffin arrived at the offices, I immediately knew I'd hit it off with him - you know how it is? You may never have laid eyes on that hamster before, but you kinda get a feeling about them that's justified by everything they do and say.

We'd done the guided tour and he'd seen all that there was - the pens and paper where new reporters practised their shortpaw, the planning boards where we arranged our days around the breaking stories and the tea and coffee point which none of us used but which the local landlord insisted had to remain there - and now he was getting fidgety to see more.

Being new in town, we headed for the malls which are a luxury where he comes from - though I can't actually remember where it was he said he was from. Anyway, we hopped on board a trolley as one was taken from the parking lot and gazed out over the foodstuffs as we were pushed gently around the aisles.

It was the chilled and frozen stuff which really caught my young colleague's attention for there, amongst the ice creams and chilled cream and cheeses, were the most bizarre products one would ever have imagined.

To be honest, I've never been overly impressed with human food stores and I don't spend much time in them as a general rule but I had to admit that what was now greeting both our eyes was absurd to say the least for there, on shelves in the refrigerators, were products with no fat.

That's right! Ice cream with no fat, butter with no fat, cream with no fat. And, even though there were certain items missing from them, they actually cost more! I could understand - as did my colleague, Nuffin - that to add something must invariably raise the price, but to take something out? You got less than the product was and they wanted to charge you more?

Weird - positively spooky.

The manufacturers also seem to have realised the precariousness of their position for they seldom labelled their products as anything other than 'not' the type of food it was being sold as. So, for Ice Cream, we found substitutes called 'Too good to be real' and 'Simply Imitational', both of which belied the fact that what they were representing wasn't reality at all.

The butters and fat spreads were just the same. Here we discovered the products 'I can believe it's a cheap substitute' and, perhaps more poignant, the supermarket's own product called 'I can't believe we can get away with this'.

Nuffin hung his head over the bars of the trolley and began giggling. 'What's the point in selling half a product, announcing it to the public that it isn't the real thing, putting a price on it that's greater than the real thing and then expect people to buy it?'

But buying it, people were - in their droves. Time and time again, we saw men and women look closely at each of the products and opt for the more expensive one that had

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less in - amazing though that sounds. A bit like selling the sunflower seeds as just the shells but with nothing inside.

Humans always amaze me but the last word has to go to Nuffin. After we'd exited into the bright sunshine of day, he turned to me and squeaked, 'Why is it that humans think less is better and price denotes quality?'

Nuff said.

Lies Resume

Saturday 19th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on the continuing saga of the Pirelli Conspiracy

'Dak!' the voice was urgent and insistent as I shifted uneasily on the pile of bedding in my nest compartment. 'Dak! Get your pen! I've got a story!'

I recognised the voice immediately but I'd never before heard Lee this excited - what was up with him? Had he received some blinding flash of revelation that I hadn't been party to? He'd better not have forgotten my cherry in all this excitement, that was one of the simple delights I was beginning to require in my old age.

I poked my nose from the bedding and gave a short sniff. 'Okay, okay. I'm coming. Wait a minute.'

I rustled the material to retain as much warmth as I could for my return and then exited into the writing area, a small floor where the wood shavings had been cleared and where there was a keyboard installed through one of the cage bars.

'Right,' I began, 'what you got?'

'This was all a cover up!' Lee spoke excitedly. 'A cover up to turn hamster owners' gazes away from the real culprit.'

This was getting serious. The Pirelli Conspiracy went deeper than I last reported it to be? What evidence was there?

Lee turned to an old posting from the main instigator of the conspiracy and told me he was about to read it aloud.

'Listen. Shortly before I got blacklisted, this is what she wrote.'

He cleared his throat and spoke with an air of suspicion that made the hair on each paw stand erect through the goosebumps.

""This list..." - that's the hamster mailing list, by the way - "...was formed quite a while ago as a result of a flame war".'

He paused and looked at me. I scratched my head and raised my paws in bewilderment. What on earth was he on about?

'Don't you see? People were setting fire to hamsters and throwing them at one another and, because of that, the members and moderators of the mailing list had to leave to start their own! Why, which self-respecting owner would give people like that

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the time of day? So they were banned and exiled away from normal people like you and me.'

Well, I wasn't a person - and had no desire ever to be equated as one - but I let the matter rest for the matter at hand.

'And, whenever they read of someone wanting to give hamsters the best out of life, they naturally close ranks and attack them - it's a well-known psychological trait.'

This was compelling - it was true - but just one phrase of one posting? Was this enough evidence to warn the world of the mailing list? Hey! What was I saying?! How many pieces of evidence had that Pirelli person needed to expel Lee?

'And there's more!' Lee's eyes began to sparkle. 'Listen! In the same post the moderator talks about not using capitals because it inflames people and then writes - look, Dak! Look!'

He held up the print off and I could hardly believe my eyes - were they? My goodness! They were! Capitals! She'd actually written 'BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER'.

'Like, that's shouting!' I squeaked. 'That's dictatorial! That's, that's hypocritical!'

I sat contemplating the problem. Obviously this conspiracy was deeper than I had first imagined and might even stretch to the darkest corridors of the Government departments who don't want a hamster in the White House.

What if, by assuming a friendly face towards hamsters, the entire group were, in reality, out to undermine the Campaign? What if, taken in by the fresh fruit and veg of our masters, we were really being suckered into thinking they were concerned about hamster issues?

This was difficult, but I boldly felt my paws press against the keyboard and type the header 'Do you really know your owner?'

I began, 'Truth has begun to emerge that what was considered to be an isolated expulsion of my master from the hamster mailing list is, in effect, a much more sinister counterplot to undermine the Hamster for President Campaign...'

Dak in fake presence shock

Saturday 26th August 2000

Maty the Hamster reports on some strange goings-on

It had seemed quiet - too quiet - this past week. Despite my repeated attempts to wake my colleague-in-fur when I passed by his burrow units of a night time - having chosen to visit my media colleague - there seemed to be absolutely no way that I could get him to shift from his comatose state.

This was nothing, in itself, so new. Dak is well-known for drifting off into a deep slumber after a difficult cracking open of a sunflower seed or when the grape skin becomes just too much for him to nibble through.

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What was unusual, however, was that Dak hadn't moved from the position in his tube for a full five days and I was starting to get just a little worried in case he'd kicked the food dish, so to speak, and was, even now, hopping from cloud to cloud with a golden harp in his paw.

Okay, okay, so I don't believe in clouds and harps but it seemed like a good idea for some poetic input.

Banging on the plastic tube brought no joy, either. Sniffing at the cracks where one joined another simply made my nose itchy as the hairs brushed against the plastic. It seemed like I'd have to call in reinforcements and so set about climbing the stairs to where I knew Lee and Kath were soundly asleep.

It took a while to wake them but they were soon on their way downstairs and into the living room, examining the tube as I stared at their efforts. I heard Lee mutter something under his breath and then deeply sigh as he opened the tube to pull the stiff little body from where it lay.

I began to find a tear come to my eye and squeaked quietly 'Is he...is he...?'

'Stuffed!' completed Lee. 'Well and truly stuffed!'

This came as quite a shock - how was it possible that a hamster lying dead in such a position could actually have been stuffed without him first being removed? This was incredible and I sat amazed at the wonders of modern human science that could stuff a dead hamster even when the tubes hadn't been opened, neither the body taken away for a few days taxidermy.

'This isn't Dak,' added Lee. 'This is a cheap hamster key-ring! Is this some sort of joke?'

Well, obviously it was - but the laugh was on me, too. And, if this wasn't Dak, where on earth was he?!

'Look!' said Lee, 'Look at this white ring.'

Yep, sure enough, there was a hoop sticking out from Dak's bum - I remember thinking to myself that he must have eaten something really awful if that had come out. No, no, what was I saying? This wasn't Dak at all!

Lee pulled the hoop til it extended a full three feet from the body and let it go. The toy wobbled around the floor like some half-dazed rodent squeaking, 'Pleasure to meet you, Maty. Pleasure to me...'

Just then I heard the loud, squeaky laughter from across the other side of the room and, out from behind the leg of the chair, slid Dak, full of life, holding his sides with mirth.

'Gotcha!' he shouted.

I turned and ran full speed, shouting as I neared the leg, 'And just wait til I get hold of you...'

Lies Continue

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Saturday 26th August 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on the continuing saga of the Pirelli Conspiracy

The conspiracy was beginning to deepen - with every investigation, every reading of another Pirelli posting, there was an ever increasing suspicion that all was not what it seemed. The self-confessed care for us hamsters was beginning to pale into insignificance before the inadvertent statements made when the mind must have been tired, when the true nature of the beast shone through.

I've already discussed the facts of why my master Lee was labelled a person who puts hamsters in deep freezers (an accusation, I hasten to add, which my investigations have proven to be unwarranted) and how Lee first directed me towards the underlying currents which seemed to be eddying throughout this entire incident.

What I didn't expect to find was more - I thought that a quick reeky of the situation might show my initial suspicions to be unfounded, but I stood aghast at the depths to which the Pirelli conspiracy was beginning to dive.

It was all a matter of double standards - and of silent hands joining with others behind the scenes and via private emails to conspire against my master. I guess that the facts of the matter will never fully come to light, but it was nagging at my own consciousness that there was more than one owner who was joining forces in some sort of coalition.

Indeed, I was beginning to grow suspicious that the character of Susan Pirelli was, in fact, not one person at all but a label put on some association of hamster owners who were using the email account to make it seem as if there was.

What first led me to the conclusions were the contradictions in the posts. I wondered why the statement in another posting that 'I sent them a love note and offered to help them "correct" their information' wasn't applied to Lee's posting if it had been thought to have advocated freezing habitats. The label 'double standard' was written all over it.

And, besides, in that posting which accused my owner of advising owners to put their hamsters in the freezer was the statement that 'While discussion [sic] are nice, let's leave care facts to the experts' a statement which puts down just about every small child who observes something unique about their hamster and who's excited enough to want to share it.

But this wasn't all - it raised up the conglomerate postings of the Pirelli coalition to unequalled heights of authority which could never be challenged - in short, advice which condemned the Hamster Presidential Campaign couldn't be contradicted when the Pirelli voice assented.

But there was worse yet to come.

Rather than come out with a definitive statement against the Campaign, there were postings which negated the right of every hamster to breed and so continue the line of

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the Presidential Candidate to provide it with successors from the direct bloodstock of Ganjette.

For, in another, separate, posting, I read with horror the Pirelli voice stating proudly that she/he/they (I'm really not sure which personal pronoun to use anymore) neuter their animals and that 'I'd be glad to have [neutering] done on the animals I intend to keep for pets'.

This was all getting very disturbing - but the conspiracy was obviously beginning to take shape amongst those involved and the Pirelli label was what the alliance was taking to forward its views.

Postings were being printed off thick and fast by now and being left on my desk for my frequent visits into the office. Here, in another, was an attempt to put pet shop owners out of business by asserting that hamster breeders should have '...banned [sic] together and refused to sell their babies for less than \$20 to the pet stores' creating a shortage of animals to buy.

In this way, hamsters could obviously be sold directly to the owners, securing a good price for each rodent sold and making sure that each one distributed was neutered before it ever left for its new master.

And there was the underlying implication that little or nothing needed to be done for a hamster when an ethereal hamster afterlife was being proposed with such suggestive subliminal questions as 'Wonder if he does this in hammie heaven?' and the more worrying 'We...miss them when they are gone and look forward to seeing them again [in Heaven?]'.

Here was a theoretical spiritual plane that was being proposed that had no evidence with which to support it - except, of course that these facts were being asserted, as I've previously mentioned, by '...the experts'. If the hamster will be happier when it's dead and buried (and, believe me, I'd rather be alive and well looked after than pushing up the daisies in someone's backyard!), why bother caring for it?

There was conspiracy here - conspiracy upon conspiracy. I called up my email program, addressed a letter to the GFO and began writing.

'The Rodent Weekly is beginning to grow worried that the Pirelli Conspiracy will attempt to subvert you from both caring for your hamsters and allowing a successor to be bred when Diddley Squat IV passes on. We must urge you to be on your guard against such subversive attempts which, even now, are probably being conceived in the minds of those who are masquerading as hamster owners - some of them you may even know personally...'

Homo Paranoidus

Saturday 2nd September 2000

Dak and Maty the Hamsters report more on the Pirelli Conspiracy

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Homo Paranoidus

Pronunciation: par-rot-annoyed.

Etymology: from the Latin 'Homo' meaning 'human being' or 'man' and the Greek 'Parrot' which got frequently annoyed when owners used to plot behind its back.

Meaning: a male of the anglicised variety who continues to look over their shoulder at those who may or may not be plotting against them. Employs such justificatory statements like 'just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean that someone isn't out to get you' which perpetuate the aura of being victimised. Label attached to anyone who has a nervous twitch when talked about in public or who is unjustifiably accused of putting their hamster in the freezer.

So runs the Chambers Dictionary definition.

It was long thought that Homo Paranoidus was extinct but recent scientific research has revealed a plot which was covered up by CIA, FBI and Interpol to quieten down a sighting of the said species in South Yorkshire near Sheffield.

This small band, recently discovered to be living in tribal groupings since the dawn of civilisation, have been kept secret due to the sinister goings on which propel them to write strange poems about people who cross them and to imagine all sorts of supposed references to activities in their opponents that are only loosely justifiable.

The other week, Maty and I were privileged to be taken, blindfolded, to a small cave where a group of these primitives sat around a camp fire chanting mystical incantations such as 'We don't want no frozen hamsters' to a well known Pink Floyd tune (proving just how primitive their music is and where that rock group may have received inspiration from) and 'Warm your hamster by the fire'.

In the niche of a cave wall, there lay dolls - made from clay and straw - with long hair, which bore the label 'Lies Resume' about their neck. It's supposed by some to be a label which bears similarities to a person who offended their tribe in times past and whose transgression has never been adequately forgiven and put right by the said offender.

Through an interpreter, we spoke with the leader of the group, a wild-eyed brute of a humanoid with a full set of whiskers, who spoke in a hushed whisper and told us of misunderstanding and of hamster mailing lists which plotted through private emails to eradicate caring owners from the group.

We heard how the tribe had first come together when a couple with similar experiences met up and spoke of the opposition they'd received at the hands of this 'Lies Resume'.

Indeed, in Homo Paranoidus culture, they seem to speak of all bad things coming from this character which they label as 'Lies Resume' - a female deity who does nothing good. Ultimately, they believe that an intervention will come through a chosen one who they call Wimberman who will put to right everything that this female personage has

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done wrong. And for this they wait, chanting the truth as was delivered to them by the ancients.

The advent of Wimberman, so they say, will be through great signs and wonders - and by the use of email. They also believe that kidney beans will be revealed as part of the redemptive plan even though they have no working concept of such a food product. But that they know of their existence is certain proof, some experts say, that there has been a direct intervention by an alien encounter which has imparted to them a truth which they continue to propagate until the coming intervention of the man of promise.

It's difficult to know just where truth ends and supposition begins with this culture but Maty and I were both struck with their friendliness, their forthrightness and their vast supply of sunflower seeds for visiting hamsters who remain amongst their most sacred of creatures, revered throughout the tribe as being animals of outstanding intellect and IQ.

They recounted tales of better days when innocence hadn't been lost and of when they believed that private emails were sent for friendship and not to glean information about them which could be twisted and distorted. They related to us of the early days, of ancient times and sacred places, when they trusted everyone, when 'Lies Resume' hadn't been made known to them and when Wimberman was just a small twinkle in their conceptual mind.

It was, above all, a learning experience for us both - a voyage of discovery which caused us to understand how Homo Paranoidus evolved from Homo Erectus and Homo Sapien. Indeed, in the broad scheme of things, this evolved sub-species may one day become the dominant force throughout the civilised world - and not just the predominantly typical American Internet user.

One day, we will go back and learn more - but, for now, we were content to learn the little we were able.

Nuff said...

Saturday 9th September 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on the muesli pouring ceremony

That's the problem with my owners - well, Lee, anyway. He tends to look on things from a positive perspective when a realistic one would be more appropriate and he's negative when being positive is the preferred option. He's also too realistic when a situation is negative - in fact, he's really mixed up.

Take the putting of the muesli into the container which occurred tonight. Lee is renowned for missing the opening where the lid should be - a trait which was first diagnosed in his father and which seems to have been genetically transferred to him at conception.

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You can always tell when Lee has attempted to put the 1.5kg bag into the 2kg container because there's dust and oats on the table and the floor - sometimes more piles than at other, more sensible, times.

Kath wasn't pleased tonight and, to be honest, I must admit that it was probably the least amount of muesli he'd ever gotten into the container but, with a certain degree of forthrightness, Kath's observations (which I thoroughly agreed with) were dismissed with the statement 'Why look at the 25% which ended up on the floor? Why not praise me for the 75% I managed to get in?'

But such spillages have their positive side for, when they've gone to bed, they'll naturally let us Hoover the floor and see what tasty morsels we can glean. Nuffin, staying as a guest with us as he has been for some time, was delighted.

'I've been picking these rusks and flakes up bit by bit,' he squeaked. Then wandering off into some poetic treatise, continued, 'Line upon line, here a little, there a little...'

He was immediately interrupted by his brother who poked his head round the corner and asserted, 'We're doing it all wholemeal.'

My head popped up in surprise, trying to make sense of the statement that had just assaulted my hearing. I retorted, 'Don't you mean piecemeal?'

Without a moment's hesitation, Nuffin squeaked back, 'No, no. Piecemeal is what we'd be doing if we were hoovering up something which wasn't very good for us. This muesli is really nutritious so the label "wholemeal" means it's done much healthier.'

The logic baffled me, I must admit (and not for the first time), but I set about taking my share of the windfall, stuffing as much as I could into both pouches until I looked like the front end of the submarine from off 'Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea'.

Muesli is quite a nutritious food for a hamster - all those cereals and dried grapes - but I always wish they'd get that tropical version with the coconut and dried mango. Mmmm. Truly marvellous.

Nevertheless, it was quite some party, I seem to recall, at the old water bottle that night - one man's loss is another hamster's gain.

Hamaholics Anonymous

Saturday 23rd September 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a self-confession group of hamster owners

There's a certain truth behind the assertion in the human world that a pet owner can become almost identical in looks to the pet which they own. Even truth in the statement by psychoanalysts around the world that a prospective pet owner may choose a pet based upon the characteristics which they can see and identify in it as being something which are their own.

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But how much could we say that the pet owner actually becomes like the pet they own? I mean, while characteristics may be inherent within the animal that's bought, just how much could it be said that, for instance, the dog's tendency to lift it's leg beside a tree to relieve itself will be copied by the owner who eventually buys it?

These are difficult questions to answer and ones which the scientific world are still struggling to come to terms with. However, lately there's been what can only be described as a plague of groups appearing all over both America and the UK who meet together weekly and try to give one another support as they struggle to come to terms with their inner rodent.

I am, of course, referring to Hamaholics Anonymous, a branch of which I attended just the other week in a small suburb of Chevy Chase just round the corner from where the GFO lives. Whether the GFO was actually present or not is difficult to determine for most of the attendees prefer to wear draped hoods about their heads and put on strange voices for fear that their identity will be discovered.

As I sat at the back taking notes, a young lady rose to her feet with her head bowed - but covered - and began with the stammering admission, 'Hello, my name is Martha and I'm a ham-aholic...'

It had happened gradually, of course, as most addictions do, but it was one which was, nevertheless, tragic.

She had been a successful lawyer in LA and had given in to her daughter's request for a pet rodent about two years' previously. However, on days' off when her daughter was in Summer Camp, she tried, albeit hesitantly, one of the hamster's sunflower seeds - then, a yoghurt drop - and a hamster hoop - until, within a very short space of time, she was dragging her mattress around the floor to find the most comfortable position to sleep at night and pouching her evening meals to eat later in bed.

This story was typical, however, and is by no means strange.

Many of the hamaholics had also felt compelled to join the mailing list known to me from Lee's encounter and to take on a hamster identity as they contributed observations and articles to the group's readership, pretending to be not just their own dear pet but other, fictitious ones, with names that were as strange as they were distressing.

To one, they were 'Maty' or 'Yarash' (Gosh! Those names sounded familiar - now who was it I'd read as using them just the other day?), to another Fluffy Bernadette the hamster psychologist and, what was more alarming to me, was that there were a few Daks in the room that seemed to have associated themselves with me!

I didn't blame them, it was just that I found it disturbing.

The evening was growing late and I could see the humans become fidgety, an increasing amount of squeaking going on as the night had worn on. Two brown clad hamaholics were fighting in one of the corners over a Vitacraft stick - a wild berry one, of course - while a husband and wife shared a hamster hoop between themselves in the time-honoured manner of Russians of both grabbing it by the teeth and pulling.

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A thin metal tube that projected from a water dispenser in the middle of the room was now being drunk from by an increasing number of attendees before they went in search of the most inconvenient place to pee over the floor and relieve themselves there.

Having returned to the relative tranquillity of the Rodent Weekly Offices, I punched in 'hamaholics' in Altavista and was immediately greeted by a string of newsgroup references and web pages that expressed the liberation that had come from denying the inner rodent no longer and of going public with the obsession.

One GFO - and it smacked of the GFO I knew from her last visit here - had been recorded as saying on the mailing list that 'We encourage, rather than eliminate, the addiction' something which sent a chill down my back and caused my toes to curl.

Was there no end to this obsession? Was there no way to prevent innocent humans from being sucked into this cult? And what next? Would there be some mass suicidal exodus to a supposed 'Great Hamster Wheel in the Sky' as a meteor approached in some not too distant future?

I gave my head a long groom as I contemplated the problem - this was bigger than I'd thought...

Fluffy Bernadette squeaks her mind

Saturday 7th October 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a response to the Hamaholics Anonymous of America

I knew this wasn't going to be easy, judging by the previous two articles I'd contributed and I could see that there was going to be a lot of misunderstanding but, seeing as all the other correspondents were away on 'other business' it was down to me to get some sort of response to the report that was published two weeks' ago about the Hamaholics Anonymous who met in a suburb of Chevy Chase.

'It's a very primeval thing,' Fluffy Bernadette, the hamster psychiatrist of the rich and famous, began as we sat across from the place where they met in a small rodent café that doubled as a local burger joint during the day.

'These humans may feel that they're regressing into some sort of evolutionary expression which satisfies their inner cravings to belong.'

That was all very well and good, I noted, but what on earth did it mean?

'Humans must have descended from some sort of common rodent ancestor,' she explained, 'and it's this inner memory, this testimony of some hidden psychic awareness, that's expressing itself through them.'

Then what about those humans that thought they were Superman?

Fluffy Bernadette glanced at me knowingly and assured me that these things were still under the most extensive of researches even amongst the human scientific world.

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'We're led to believe,' she continued, 'that at some point in earth's history, a race of super creatures must have infiltrated the earth, bred and then returned in their space crafts to their home planet, leaving behind the consciousness that there was a greater existence to be lived.'

'So,' I searched my mind for a better example, 'what about those people who think they're teapots? Have they descended from some common ancestor who's trying to express themselves through them?'

'I just knew you'd spout off about that one,' she exclaimed, 'but we're now coming to realise that these eccentricities are prime examples of the inner workings of the psyche. Perhaps those people were a piece of ceramic material before they evolved - I don't know.'

We seemed to be straying too far off the subject, so I switched tack and returned to the reason that I'd asked for the interview. There were certainly strange goings on in that little room across the road and I was wanting to try and come to terms with what made these hamaholics tick - or, should I say, squeak. I guess that, if they'd thought that they were grandfather clocks, I'd want to know what made them tick.

'Let me take just one example that I observed the last time I attended,' I squeaked. Fluffy Bernadette motioned with her hand and took on a serious expression which expressed both concern and worry. I do hope she wasn't thinking that this was *my* problem as she had done with me previously, but I just had to bring it up seeing as it had been on my mind ever since that last meeting.

'Why is it,' I continued, 'these humans wee in the most bewildering of places on the floor?'

She nodded serenely and groomed a ruffled piece of fur that was raised on her forehead.

'And just how long,' she answered, 'have you been having these problems?'

Diary of a Male Model

Saturday 21st October 2000

Dak the Hamster shadows one of the leading male models for a day

9am - Here I am at the door of one of the most famous hamster models the world has ever known, Ginger McFurball, a small apartment situated on the outskirts of town away from the prying eyes of photographers and the attentions of his ardent human fan club. You may have seen Ginger in numerous commercials throughout the land - that cartoon hamster on the cereal advert was modelled after him and the hamster in the J&B Whiskey Ad that spells out in building blocks 'I'm a human trapped inside a hamster's body' was not only something for which he modelled but which he had the inspiration for.

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'They had some idea about fleas and cats,' he tells me over a brief but substantial breakfast, 'but I said "It's a no-brainer" and they had to agree.'

Today, nothing quite so demanding is on the schedule and we're driven off to a rendezvous with a photographer about three blocks away.

10.30am - The photographer hasn't turned up but we look around the studio, playing with the materials that Ginger is being asked to pose in. That's the great thing about being a male model, I guess. Variety - from one day to the next, one might be advertising such an array of products and having to jet off to numerous sun-drenched destinations that it keeps the day interesting.

10.43am - Finally, the photographer arrives complaining about wrong apertures and zoom lenses that had inadvertently been taken out his bag by his children. He points to the new Rotastak equipment on the floor and asks Ginger to balance himself on one of the red levels as if he's enjoying it.

'How's this?' he squeaks.

'Perfect...hold it!' the camera clicks and the flash blinds me for a few brief moments as another pet endorsement is finished. There really is a pile of money to be made in these photo shoots, so McFurball tells me - why, a hamster with the right persona can demand a six figure sum and the advertisers will rush in to pay it in advance.

11.50am - We talk over lunch about the Hamster Presidential Campaign and the place male models such as Ginger could play in a Hamster Administration. The thought has never crossed his mind, it appears, and, besides, advertising like the humans expect is hardly the way forward, he feels. After all, advertisements project an image which may be imaginary and the observer is never too sure whether what they imagine they see is reality or fantasy.

'People flock to attain a respectable image,' he tells me, 'and it's this that men and women strive for. They don't often want to face up to who they really are and advertising gives them the product with an image they want. Acquire the product and they think they acquire the image along with it.'

1.25pm - This time, we're at a recording studio with some East Side band or other. They need realistic hamster sounds for one of their new songs on a forthcoming concept album about growing up - this song's about a runaway hamster.

Ginger sits patiently with phones over each ear, waiting for the part of the song where the sounds have to be dubbed in and snapping his fingers to the beat of the music. Suddenly, a realisation comes over his face and he squeaks loudly into the black microphone which stands before him. The controllers behind the glass put the thumbs up and he removes the phones from his ears.

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4.10pm - We're back at his apartment going through a catalogue of photos from around the world. My eyes are drawn to a small snap attached with a paper clip to a news item about Corn flakes.

'Yes, it was quite a story when it first broke,' Ginger tells me, 'but, apparently, they first thought of using a hamster as the symbol before the chicken came along and steam-rolled them into it - some sort of blackmail, so I'm assured, but I don't think the full truth has come out.'

Now that would have been interesting - and, perhaps, maybe the Presidential Campaign would have taken off a whole lot sooner had the hamster been used.

'Chickens appear on many food items,' Ginger continued. 'On egg boxes, stock cubes and even on those oven ready meat products. They really seem to have cornered the market in advertising - why, they've even made a film about escaping chickens which was only possible because there's so many thespian fowls in the theatre to choose from.'

'Perhaps, one day,' he muses, 'they might make a film about us.'

A Grand Day Out

Saturday 21st October 2000

Dak the Hamster reports on a day trip to somewhere

It was going to be a special trip, Lee said. A chance to experience the sights and sounds of a totally different area and a uniquely strange building. If I'd've known that by such a description he'd meant he was taking me to the vets, I wouldn't have groomed myself with such abandon that morning as I did.

I love car journeys and the unpredictable swerve and gyrations that roundabouts give to the hamster who's stuck in some soft bedding and, in my own way, I guess I must have experienced the delights of some of the greatest rides of human Adventure Parks available. But, when we arrived, my heart naturally sank when, outside the door, the words 'Springfield Veterinary Hospital' loomed large.

'Hey! What's with the trickery?!' I objected through the bars, only to be met with the assurance:

'You're not well - you need, er, seeing to.'

'Do you think I could make that decision in future?' I squeaked indignantly. 'Just because I have a growth on the side of my face the size of a walnut doesn't mean I'm ill, you know!'

The waiting room was half full of nervous animals and calm owners. Across from me, a cat shuddered in a small box, mewing occasionally whenever it began to think of the opening door and the prying hands which were soon to be thrust within its compartment.

'How long it take you to put him in there?' I heard Lee ask. 'You should've bought a hamster - they come ready packaged!' and he pointed to my cage.

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But I like vets - I may be unique in that, but I really do. Especially when what they suspect to be a frequently handled and petted rodent suddenly takes on the guise of a rabid and fighting beast from the Pit as Lee casually remarks 'Dak's wild, by the way' as they extend a hand to try and pick me up, recoiling quickly and reaching for the thick rubber gloves.

As vets go, this one was okay and he needed to lift me up only the once - apparently, it was likely to be an infection and all that was needed was some antibiotic treatment over the next week in my water bottle. But when he took a syringe and attached a needle that was fully six inches long into a medicine bottle to extract the fluid, I squealed with horror and asked candidly, 'Where's he intending to put that?'

But my fears were soon allayed when the contents were sealed and placed into a small plastic bag which we received at the reception area after Lee had handed over a piece of blue paper.

Lee suffers from not knowing the meaning to receptionists' questions and it was none more apparent than this morning. Whenever they ask him what's the name, he panics and usually opts for the wrong response.

So, his answer 'Dak' is normally met by 'Is that Mr Dak or is Dak your first name?' and to 'Lee Smith' they usually respond 'Oh, you've given your hamster a surname as well!'

Poor Lee - he always gets it wrong.

We arrived home safely a few minutes later by which time I was soundly asleep in my nest despite the bumpy ride and the shouts which emanated from the driver seat somewhere far above me. That first taste of fresh water, though, was a real shock.

Yeuck! Can't they make that sort of medicine taste like cucumber or chicken sauce or something?

Dak Dead

Saturday 28th October 2000

Nuffin the Hamster reminisces on the sad demise of Dak the Hamster

I remember my first tentative efforts at putting paw to word processor and attempting to express what I felt deep within all those months ago. Of course, by then, Dak was already famous and his articles were what every hamster strove to emulate.

Yes, I can remember that first article I saw in the Rodent Weekly that my owners used to get and the beaming grin on the face of the 'reporter-of-the-moment' as he detailed what we as hamsters could expect from the Ganjette Presidential Campaign.

My own efforts always seemed so futile by comparison that I have very little which still survives from those early days for I regularly screwed up the ode or article and discarded it in the ever expanding waste paper bin.

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It was just such one of these scraps of doggerel that eventually found its way into the possession of Dak at the Rodent Weekly - sent there by my owners - who noticed a budding writer. How he was ever able to perceive that undeveloped talent even at that early stage I have no idea. Especially when the verse he read was my 'Diatribes to the Pet Shop owner on the corner' which ran to eight volumes.

But, being summoned to the offices, I met Dak early one morning after a supper had been set before us all. He was as gracious as I'd always imagined him to be and took large amounts of time to show me writing techniques, how to hold a pen and how, even when you couldn't read what you'd written in shortpaw, it was fairly easy to make up whatever you wanted the interviewee to have said because they rarely read the articles anyhow.

These tiny snippets of wisdom will never leave me and I feel indebted to have once been regarded as his assistant and 'junior'.

Dak died on Tuesday 24th October as most will be aware who access the daily RW bulletins and I was given the almost unenviable task of going through his possessions. But, even though I was filled with immediate apprehension, I uncovered a wealth of new material which, as far as I'm aware, never saw the light of day in the final pages of the RW.

Here was a secret Dak the Hamster that very few people had ever discovered - a hamster who was defiant in his quest to write the truth where possible and to make up stories only at the very last resort. Here was a hamster who cared for his fellow rodents with a kindness that even I hadn't realised was possible.

Therefore, with the permission of the editor, I've chosen one such article which, to date, has never seen the light of day and will run it in next week's RW. Entitled 'Headline News', it seems to be rather poignant seeing as it deals with the Hamster Presidential Campaign and it will, I assure you, reveal to everyone a Dak that no one knew.

Before I close, I must add my condolences to his two owners - Lee and Kath - who looked after the great Dak through his last moments when his health got the better of him. May they have many more hamsters like Dak - and may the rodent world take care to appreciate the commitment of both these humans to self-financing workers here at the RW.

Headline News

Saturday 4th November 2000

The late Dak the Hamster reports on recently received email

[Editorial Note - As Nuffin noted last week, this article is one of those undiscovered articles of the late, great Dak the Hamster and appears here as a memorial to him. We can't be sure just when this article was written but we think, judging by a conversation

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we had with the GFO, that it was compiled sometime in August 2000. We trust that our readership will appreciate it.]

There was a squeaking voice and a small flag indicated that I'd received mail. I double-clicked on my inbox and read the author - the GFO? The GFO had actually sent me a message? I accessed the mail and read the content.

She'd been delighted, she said, to meet me back in November - had really enjoyed the visit on her short stay with Lee and Kath before embarking on her covert mission to Central Africa. This past few weeks, however, she'd noticed that Diddley Squat IV had put on weight - but he was in as good a health as he ever had been.

I booted up my notebook and typed in the headline 'Diddley Squat fattens himself on Campaign profits while Third World suffers hunger'.

I clicked on my email address book and highlighted the GFO's name. This should cause some quick reply! I watched it disappear into cyberspace and sat back to await developments.

Twelve minutes! Wow! She was slipping. I was half expecting it to be just a matter of seconds.

No, she assured me, that's not what she'd meant. She put it down to middle-aged spread and not to over-indulgence. It was all a misunderstanding, she said, and even now she was addressing the problem.

My notebook sat idly by my side so I typed in 'Diddley Squat nearing old age says GFO - seeking quick fix for recapture of youth'.

The email software silently sent the message and my inbox flashed almost instantaneously with another message, this time in capitals and telling me in no uncertain terms that I'd misunderstood deliberately and - hey! - what sort of hamster had I developed into? Wasn't I supposed to be on the side of the Presidential Campaign?

I thought carefully and returned the headline 'Respected hamster journalist blackmailed by leading human campaigner' and offered the alternative 'Rodent writer appalled at depths of sleaze and corruption in Hamster Presidential Campaign'.

Well, the GFO must have complained to a higher authority cos, the next thing I knew, the phone rang. It was Lee, my human owner.

What was I doing? What did I think I was playing at? Did I realise that the GFO had a weak heart?

Mmmm. Perhaps I should reconsider? I selected the text with the Ctrl-A command and hit the delete button, but hovered over the confirmation command with hesitancy. Could be interesting if I did print it, could be very interesting.

No.

I confirmed the deletion and lifted up the front page of the New York Times. Why even try and write misleading headlines when the humans seemed to have cornered the market in them?

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I opened a new file and typed the headline 'Diddley Squat matures on Campaign Trail' ...

New Arrivals

Saturday 11th November 2000

Lee reports on choosing a new hamster

In the old days, choosing a hamster wasn't that difficult.

Having prepared the compartment beforehand, we'd get in the car bound for a selected pet shop and choose a bright-eyed rodent that was both inquisitive and alert, who had a good coat of fur and who seemed playful.

That all changed with George, however.

Now we have to make sure we can communicate - not only that, but that the new hamsters are literate. After all, our commitment to support the Rodent Weekly by adequately maintaining at least one reporter means that, to prevent me from having to type what's being dictated, they have to be able to work through the night on their own.

We were thankful, however, that pet store owners are careful to send their young hamlets to Rodent College or, if they live too far away from such institutions, encourage their new borns to begin correspondence courses to obtain the appropriate degree.

This made choosing a pair of hamsters much, much easier but, in the end, we decided to opt for one with just such a qualification hung within the cage and another who was willing to be taught by his fellow rodent when obligations at the Rodent Weekly gave time for instruction.

Being sixteen weeks old as they were (their birthday was 'forgotten' by the pet shop owner and the hamlets' own remembrance had to do with diurnal revolutions of Saturn eclipsing the equinox of Neptune which made no sense to us at all) meant that they'd already been attending a suitable college and had been using the pet shop owners' computer throughout the night.

Well, when I say 'computer', I actually mean the till which they mistakenly thought was a Windows 98 rebootable Pentium III super computer. It was only when we brought them home and the real keyboard 'confused' the literate one that we began to realise that we had a whole lot of training to do.

It was all very well to get the hamsters to charge and ring up amounts for transactions, but a list of prices on doggie products hardly constituted a RW article, did it?

Both hamsters were slippery customers - not literally, you understand - for they wriggled and squirmed whenever the owner went near them to place them into the box and she recoiled in pain when a large chunk was taken out of her finger by the more, shall we say, spirited of the two.

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I could understand their confusion, however, for she'd just been handling some peanuts and was obviously mistaken for a piece of food. I've never understood why women who handle rodents put on flowery-scented perfume for this very same reason, either.

Throughout the entire journey home, however, the rodents remained silent and we began to wonder whether, perhaps, these were mute hamsters, deceptively sold to us by a clever owner who'd been unable to dispose of them to anyone else. After all, who would, these days, buy two hamsters that they couldn't communicate with?

The introductory first half hour was also worrying, the small one boxing any finger which came near to it while the larger and brightly coloured one sniffed them nonchalantly as if to say 'So what?'

But it wasn't until I'd been out that afternoon and gone upstairs to send and retrieve my email that I found a letter in my outbox addressed to the GFO in Washington which read 'Helpz! Som big and beaded hooman hass hamnapt me an my brotter frum a pet shop in the villidge. I found yer eemull adress on thiss cumpoter and thort ewe mite bee abul to help uz. Pleaz ring the polliss. =H='

(This last signature, incidentally, is the normal, approved way for literary hamsters to denote their species when emailing a human, the equal signs corresponding to their whiskers.)

It was obvious to me that one of these two had been upstairs, switched the computer on and prepared a desperate email to someone they considered to be a friend (if they only knew!).

Confronted by a hard copy print out of the email, both hamsters pretended to test whether it was food by pulling on the extended sheet and it wasn't until much later when the reply came from the GFO that all wasn't as they supposed and that they'd managed to be bought by two very caring owners that they squeaked.

It was unavoidable, they told me, but necessary.

They'd been warned by their mother to test any human that bought them, to see if they were reliable. Now that they were sure, they could safely chat on a one-to-one basis and would hold conversations with us in the future - only, it had been an arduous day and they really needed some shut eye.

And so began the epic saga of our next two pets.

Er, oh dear, I almost forgot - what shall we call them?

Naming Names

Saturday 17th November 2000

Lee reports on naming a new hamster

One of our previous hamsters, Ebony, wrote an article at the beginning of the year in which he instructed us humans to pay particular attention to what name we might

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burden our pet hamsters with and it was something that I clipped out of the hard copy and kept for just such a time as last week when both my wife and I came around to naming our two new arrivals.

The first twenty-four hours had gone smoothly enough with both hamsters sleeping together as would be expected from rodent brothers - but we simply weren't prepared for what was to transpire over the next few days. Like most human teenagers, one of them wanted his own room. Call it independence if you like, but it was a source of much worry for both my wife and I who constantly watched them to see if the split was amicable or a declaration of war.

What worried me most was the pugilist tendencies of the browner one who'd box just about any and everything which was placed in front of him - even sunflower seeds offered as a mark of truce. It just appeared to me that, if the brighter coloured was approaching him, he might resort to just such a manoeuvre, end the familial link and cause us to have to split them.

We needn't have worried because the compound is so big that they live in that, up to now, there hasn't been a problem even though they each have chosen to run their own nest sites and to share the food, greeting one another as they encounter the other during their waking hours.

Meeting one another head to head in a tube is another matter entirely, however, and neither really wants to give ground. Watching two hamsters try to push themselves past the other is a sight which tends to bring tears to one's eyes just thinking about it.

So, what about the names?

I took charge of the boxer and was quick to come up with 'Rab' meaning 'Boss' or 'Master' simply because it seemed as if he was trying to be in control of everything. It changed to Harab as the prefix added denoted the definite article 'the' but I soon changed it back because, when pronounced, it sounded more like I was saying 'Arab' and that would have certainly caused me some difficulties.

Kath considered the bright one for almost a full day, walking round the house muttering 'Ah! He's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful' in a voice which reminded me of the Bernard Matthews' adverts of yesteryear. Surprise, surprise when she named him 'Beautiful' in Hebrew, calling him, proudly, 'Yafa'.

So, there we had it - Rab and Yafa.

To date, communication has been sporadic, even though chatting is not a problem. Both Rab and Yafa are intent on developing an old work of mine to make it more accessible to rodents across the civilised world - and to parts of West Virginia, too - and they've been discussing the matter intensely. They hope to begin work on such a project sometime in December and I, personally, will be looking forward to reading the manuscript as it gets put together.

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[Editorial Note - We must, once more, thank both Lee and Kath for their commitment to providing the RW with literate hamsters who they've supported selflessly as they've sought to bring to the rodent reader the concerns of hamsters, mice and the like.

Their two new hamsters, Rab and Yafa, feel that a literary career might be best taken in a totally different direction and intend working on, very soon, a rework of Lee's compilation entitled 'From Russia with Nuts' that has, so far, never seen the light of day.

We wish them every success in their endeavours.]

Thanksgiving

Saturday 25th November 2000

Nuffin the Hamster reports on the festive meal

Florida (THURSDAY) - It was going to be an interesting Thanksgiving, I seem to have remarked to myself as Yafa, Rab and myself gathered round a small portion of turkey roast this Thursday to 'be thankful'. Rab was all for diving in and immersing himself in the fowl (or should that be 'foul'?) gravy which settled on the side of the dish but Yafa raised a paw, motioning his intention to say a few squeaks before we began.

'Thanksgiving,' he began, 'should be a time for giving thanks. Before we eat our festive meal, we should at least think of a couple of things that we can be thankful for so that our meal might have some basis.'

I nodded my agreement as Rab insisted, 'Okay, Yafa, you start.'

Yafa lifted up his head, allowing his thought processes to kick in fully, before stating with an air of solemnity. 'I'm thankful that we have a fine upstanding President over us.'

I looked at Yafa in disbelief, then at Rab whose lower jaw was already heading groundward.

'What?!' I squeaked, 'What you say?'

Yafa allowed a smile to pervade his serious demeanour as Rab creased up in hysterics and rolled about on the floor.

'Yeah!' Rab giggled. 'And I'm thankful for the fine upstanding future President - even though we have no way of knowing who he'll be, when he'll be elected or if anyone'll follow him.'

'I was only giving an example of what we might want to say,' objected Yafa, 'I wasn't necessarily meaning that I was being sincere in my thanks. Now come on - think of something sensible!'

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'I have one,' I interjected as Rab tried to control himself. 'How about - I'm thankful because we have such unbiased judges who leave their political allegiances aside and only pronounce decisions by what's written in the legislature?'

Rab giggled again and fell over - boy, oh boy, what was in that punch we had an hour ago? - as Yafa tried to draw matters to a more serious note.

'Look! We'll never get round to the meal if you continue to jest. C'mon! Get serious!'

I stifled another giggle, slapped Rab to sober up and insisted, 'Yafa - you give thanks - my mind isn't working too well at the moment.'

Yafa thought long and hard as our laughter subsided and then pronounced, 'Yes, yes. I have something to be thankful for. I'm thankful for numeracy amongst Floridians, thankful for common sense, for accurate representations by our media, for...'

Rab, by this time, was squealing, 'No more, no more! You're killing me!' with eyes full of tears of laughter and paws raised to cover his ears.

My face was contorted in convulsions of trying to remain serious while my muscles were in spasm.

Yafa looked at the both of us and threw his paws up into the air, 'Stuff giving thanks,' he squeaked, 'let's just eat...'