

An aerial photograph of a dirt road that forks into two paths, leading through a vast field of bright orange flowers. The flowers are densely packed and cover most of the ground, with some green foliage visible between the plants. The dirt road is light brown and shows tire tracks. The overall scene is bright and colorful, suggesting a sunny day in a rural or agricultural setting.

A FORK IN THE ROAD

**Christopher K.
Starr**

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Christopher K. Starr

**Caura Village, Trinidad & Tobago
2017**

to Michelle, who had the idea

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"If you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Attributed to Yogi Berra

"In addition to the lives we lead, we also live lives we don't lead."

H.L. Goodall

PREFACE

A lady whom I love and admire suggested that we should each write fantasy versions of our life stories. I immediately embraced the idea, although the approach I take here is not exactly hers. That is, the following are not fantasy but counter-factual accounts of my life.

I have long been impressed by the chance events and circumstances that determine so much of how our lives unfold. One thing happens, rather than another, and because it was this and not that one's life takes quite a different trajectory. In the following, I introduce each chapter by noting something that happened and say a few things about its long-term outcome. Then I imagine that it had not happened like that and how the Starr life might have unfolded under this alternative scenario. The stories are fantasy in that sense, but none of them seems far-fetched.

Life-changing events that seem almost inevitable are omitted. For example, my grandmother introduced me to bugs in the summer of 1954, around the time of my fifth birthday, thereby starting me on a lifetime of fervent bug watching. If she had not, I almost certainly would have taken that path, anyway, just somewhat later, as noted in my real-life memoirs, *Like a Magpie* (www.ckstarr.net/cks/Magpie.pdf).

Many of the chapter titles are ripped off from other texts or popular songs. It's just my lazy way of being clever.

To my enduring regret, I never asked Yogi Berra (1925-2015) about the consequences of not taking the fork in the road.

Chapter 1. DISORIENTED

[When I was conceived in December 1948 in what is now Pakistan, my parents were relief workers, she with the American Quakers and he with the British Quakers. In that month, they were to be transferred to China, where my father, Francis Starr, had earlier worked in relief (see his account in *Dream Dreams*). However, the Communists' victory in southern China closed the border, so that instead my parents moved to Canada, where I was born in Newmarket, Ontario. There may be no one still alive who can say with certainty where they would have gone if the border had not been closed, but it is my understanding that it was either Yunnan or Sichuan province. In the following account of that fork in the road, I assume that it was Sichuan.]

I was born in a large but rather makeshift hospital in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, on 16 August 1949, just about the time the Communists sealed their victory throughout China and drove Jiang Kai-shek's gang of bandits into exile on long-suffering Taiwan. My parent's relief organization, the American Friends' Service Committee (AFSC), was still welcome under the new government, and my father's previous wartime service with the British Quakers was recognized and appreciated. My father, Francis, worked mainly as a transport driver, delivering relief supplies throughout Sichuan and nearby parts of western China in a scramble to stave off the ever-threatening famine and epidemics. My mother, Dorothy, was a nurse in the hospital where I was born. In two years she had risen to chief of pediatric nursing, despite her quite limited Chinese.

It was a time of considerable hardship, to which I was not entirely immune. Still, my earliest memories are exciting and happy ones. My playmates were mostly middle-class and working-class Chinese children, so that I developed as fluently bilingual. Throughout life I have retained the Sichuan accent of my childhood, which the Chinese whom I have met abroad in later years find distinctly amusing. I confess that I am not above occasionally exaggerating my accent and throwing in the odd regionalism just to get a laugh.

When I was four it was feared that I might have contracted diphtheria, which was widespread in western China at the time and extremely dangerous under prevailing conditions. However, that passed after just three or four days of fever, and it was never entirely clear what the illness had been. My sister, Margaret Sushila, was born in April 1951. She, too, spent her early years in a bilingual environment, although unlike me she never became a fervent sinophile.

Sichuan is famous for its spicy food, and in later years I have often made quite a show in restaurants of ordering such dishes as *fuqi feipian* and *chuanbei liangfen*, going so far as to effect a nostalgic look and remarking that it is almost as good as what I enjoyed during my childhood. This is pure humbug. The fact of the matter

is that children usually do not like any kind of spicy food, and I was no exception. I much preferred the relatively bland cantonese cuisine. It was only in my late teens, when I was long away from Sichuan, that I decided one day to give it a try and found that I really liked it.

My father's work continued much as it had been during the war against Japan. Deliveries were regularized, relative to wartime conditions, with much less hasty improvisation, and banditry had been effectively suppressed. Still, every day on the road had its element of uncertainty and adventure, in which I occasionally partook.

My mother had misgivings about my father's judgement in some respects, but she acknowledged his fine sense of the risks of the road. Accordingly, she raised no objection when he first proposed taking me along on one of his trips, which was to Yibin toward the southern end of the province. This served as a sort of celebration of my recent recovery from the unidentified fever. We led a convoy of three old charcoal-burning trucks with medicines and surgical supplies for the local hospital and sacks of rice to the party's distribution center. The road surface and river crossings being what they were, it took us three days to cover a distance that should have taken no more than half a day.

Those three days were pure traveling joy for four-year-old me. On our second morning out we were trundling along the highway when we came up behind a line of several men pushing carts. These ambulant vendors were common in China at the time, sometimes spending weeks or even months at a time on the road. Suddenly one of them let go of his cart and dashed across the road right in front of our truck. There was no time to apply the brakes, and the skinny old man almost brushed the front bumper. I looked behind and saw that he got across safely and then, with the trucks past, calmly walked back to his cart and resumed his migration. My father explained that it was a chinese belief that each of us is born with a personal demon, of which he would very much like to be rid. What the man had done was to run across without warning in hope that the moving truck would cut the thread tying him to his demon, so that he would be free of it forever. "And did he lose his demon?" I wanted to know. According to my father, the man would never quite be sure, so that he might continue dashing across the road in an attempt to get rid of the demon that might or might not still be dogging him.

Yibin is on the south side of the Yangzi (Yangtse) River, which we had to cross. We found the bridge to cross it in indifferent repair, so that the heavy trucks could certainly not be entrusted to it. Furthermore, the river, which during some times of year was so low that one could simply drive or wade across it, was at flood. Fortunately, the authorities had provided a large raft that could accommodate the trucks, one at a time. Even so, my father preferred not to trust the raft any more than necessary, so that only the drivers went with their trucks, while the helpers and I rode across at a ford on horses provided by local peasants. That was a nice

little adventure in itself.

Over the next year and a half I made two more such trips with my father, one all the way to Chongqing in neighbouring Guizhou province. None was quite as adventurous as that first trip to Yibin, but they abounded in curious characters. I met a former palace eunuch, for example, and a former provincial warlord with a dissolute past invited us to dinner. Seated in the dining hall, I asked him what we were having, and he was so charmed by this little blond boy speaking fluent (if infantile) Chinese that he said I should just go back to the kitchen to see for myself. Which I did. And the cooks were so taken with me that they gave me the run of the place and let me try whatever I liked. One bitter, salty concoction was so dreadful to my juvenile palate that I immediately spat it out and made a terrible face, at which the kitchen staff roared in laughter. And then they gave me a bowl of noodles that were so wonderfully savoury that I gobbled down much more than I should have and so had trouble in the lowlands that night.

Meanwhile, my father was dining with the warlord. Although they had no really effective language in common, and my father was both a pacifist and a teetotaler, they seemed to get on famously, and it wasn't until long after dark that we made our reluctant farewells. The warlord said we should definitely come again, and my father said we would if we could, but the press of work made this impossible. I later heard that the warlord, by then quite an old man, had been hauled off to a re-education camp during the Cultural Revolution, where he died from the harsh treatment meted out by fanatical students. He probably had it coming.

As the new government consolidated its power and stabilized China, foreign aid organizations based in capitalist countries found that they were decreasingly less needed and less welcome, even those that were strictly non-governmental and known not to tolerate spies among their staff. Even the AFSC, which had consistently spoken out for recognition of the People's Republic of China, felt the atmosphere cooling and scaled down its operation. In addition, my parents found Sichuan a less favourable place to raise two small children.

Finally, in May 1956, it was time for us to leave the only homeland my sister and I had ever known. We took a long train ride to Shanghai, where we boarded a steamer that went first to Bombay (now Mumbai) and then to London. My sister and I did not suffer even one minute of sea-sickness and found the three-week boat trip a time of unrelieved delight. Among other things, we roamed freely about the ship, indulged by the mostly Indian and Filipino crew, ignoring any injunctions not to enter the engine room or to leave the kitchen. And it amused the crew no end that these two pale blond children chattered to each other mostly in Chinese. What they did not realize was that we were using this as a secret language to make naughty remarks about our indulgent friends.

The family stayed for a fortnight in London, which was very pleasant in the

early summer, and then boarded a second ship for Halifax, followed by another long train ride to Toronto. Our destination was Starr Elms, the farm of my paternal grandparents, Elmer & Elma Starr. They were delighted and extremely proud to have their world-traveling son once again with them after almost 10 years, and they met our mother and us two children for the first time. It was a demanding time of adjustment for all as we settled into becoming a Canadian family, although to Sushi and me these strange new surroundings were more a lark than a trial. The concept of culture shock was quite alien to us.

One day my grandmother, apparently on a whim, took me "bug collecting", and I was hooked for life. Against the expectation that I would turn my earliest experiences to professional advantage, I never seriously contemplated becoming a real expert in China or Chinese, just someone who occasionally exclaims in very strange English when he is startled. Instead, I followed the thread of that day when we first went bug collecting and became an entomologist, specializing in social insects.

I would like to say that this led to a stellar (get it?) life in science, but I'm afraid this would be far from true. In my mid-20s, while a graduate student at the University of Toronto, I felt my first stirrings of mental illness that have plagued me off and on since then. I have been through two outright delusional periods when I had to be restrained for everyone's well-being. With later advances in drugs and treatment I am able steady myself and have not had a serious episode in 30 years now, although at the cost of constant and wearying vigilance. People who know something of my early life think that this is due to being a child of two worlds, not entirely at home in either China -- especially since I have never been back, and it has changed so much from what I knew -- or North America. However, I reject this excuse. It is nobody's fault, just a chemical imbalance of the brain, possibly genetic in origin but luckily affecting no one else in my family.

As a result, I have been only marginally successful as a scientist. And of course my social life has been adversely affected, rather severely so. I am heterosexual, or at least I try to be, but when I am making a woman's acquaintance it is hard to hide the fact -- maybe it is a certain mad gleam in my eye, or it could be that I am just too desperately horny -- that at times I have been mentally ill. And women quite reasonably shy away from anyone who used to be batshit crazy, even if he is the only one they know with documentary proof (i.e. release forms from mental hospitals) of his sanity. I am a reasonably happy person, but occasionally I dream of life in Sichuan and wonder what if Still, that was far away and long ago, and let's face it, nostalgia isn't what it used to be. That was another joke.

Chapter 2. THANK GOT I'M A COUNTRY BOY

[In 1956 my family lived in a house just downhill from Starr Elms, the ancestral farm near Newmarket, Ontario. My grandfather, Elmer Starr, had largely retired from farming around that time and turned it over to my Uncle Stuart. As spring turned to summer it was announced that we would be moving to the city of Ottawa. I stayed behind for a few weeks after the bulk of the family had moved, but around my seventh birthday I made the permanent move. The circumstance was the desire of our religious group, the Society of Friends (Quakers) to consolidate an organized meeting around the existing members already there. Accordingly, we and one other family of experienced Quakers, the McClures, agreed to move there for that purpose. This was a smart organizational move that served the religious body well, but for me it was nothing less than being cast out of paradise. My childhood in and around Starr Elms was the golden age to which I look back, and Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill" resonates powerfully with me. It was years before I was able to see city life as anything but an abomination, utterly illegitimate. But what if we had not moved?]

Life in York County, Ontario continued much the same until I was 21. My mother was a nurse and administrator at the public hospital in Newmarket, rising within a few years to head of Nursing. My father worked at various construction and demolition jobs in the area and pitched in at harvest time. We still lived in the house just down the hill from my grandparents and Uncle Stuart's family, and I probably spent more time at Starr Elms than at home. At first this was just part of the idyllic existence of walking and climbing in the barns, gathering raspberries and chokecherries with Grandma, damming the creek and swimming in the resulting pool, stalking groundhogs with the .22 rifle, exploring the backwoods, and of course observing bugs.

Soon after my 10th birthday Uncle Stuart started trying me out at various daily chores. I wasn't exactly put to work, but labour was an unquestioned part of our fundamental ethos, and I was old enough to help out. Once he sent me to find out whether a certain electric fence was turned on or not. Without further instructions, I walked around to the fence, put my hand on it and received a shock. Then I went back and reported that yes, it was on. Uncle Stuart didn't ask whether it hurt, which of course it did, and I wasn't about to let on that I would just as soon not have to do that again. The cows had to be milked every day, even Sunday. We had automatic milkers, but there was also a certain amount of hand milking. I watched Uncle Stuart and my father milking by hand, wondering how they could do it. Try as I might, I couldn't get the milk to squirt out as they did. It didn't seem to occur to them to tell me how it was done, and I was too proud to ask. It wasn't until I was 15 that I finally got the knack (just about the time I finally figured

out how to whistle).

In trying me out at the different chores, Uncle Stuart had the sense to know that the best way to get me started in real farming was to let me find something that I really liked to do. When I showed enthusiasm and reasonable facility at tending the pigs that became my regular chore. Every morning before breakfast I went down to feed and water "my" pigs, returning in the evening to see if they needed more food or water. They gradually came to recognize me (so it seemed) and squealed with delight when I appeared. I even talked to them and came to give most of them names, even though I was well aware of the destiny that awaited them. Once at the dinner table my grandfather teased me by offering me a pork chop with the remark "Would thee care for a slice of Charlene?"

As I got bigger I also helped at harvest, the busiest time of year, but the pigs remained my daily focus. My older cousin, Donald Gilbert Cope, had always expressed admiration and affection for pigs, but I was the one who got to socialize with them twice a day.

Around my 12th birthday I stopped hunting groundhogs. It had become too easy, and the farm had long since given up its horses (to Grandpa's enduring regret), so that the risk of them breaking legs by stepping in groundhog burrows was no longer a consideration. Besides, I kind of liked groundhogs. At the same time, I kept up all my other outdoor enthusiasms.

School was pleasant and interesting enough, but I had no special interest or aptitude for any of the subjects except possibly spelling. I suppose I was a bit of a pedant. My grades were neither outstandingly good nor outstandingly bad. I wasn't committed to becoming a farmer, but neither was I determined not to.

I graduated from high school at age 17 and then was out of school for two years, working full-time on the farm. Uncle Stuart had taught me all the main operations, so that I was well suited to pull my weight. When I was 18 Uncle Stuart & Aunt Carolyn went so far as to take a one-week vacation to Wasaga Beach on Lake Huron, leaving me in charge. With both Grandpa and Dad on hand to advise me in case of difficulty, it seemed like a safe thing to do, and in fact I had no need to turn to them for help during that week.

Then, after two years as an old-fashioned farmer, I decided that it wasn't enough for me, that I aspired to be a modern, scientific agriculturist. After examining the various options, I announced that I wanted to do a two-year diploma in Agricultural Extension at the University of Guelph. I was to be a Guelph aggie like my cousin Willie Starr before me. Extension was a natural choice, as I had my father's ease in interacting with people, and the prospect of moving about the county and advising farmers on new materials and techniques was alluring.

I should note that there were also episodes of political activism. I couldn't hope to match Dad's record as a relief worker in wartime China -- his personal heroic period -- but I could and did join him and my mother in their ongoing peace

activism. This included a trip to Ottawa for a mass march against the war in Vietnam. I had been to Toronto several times, but this was my first time in any other city. As I always did whenever we went to Toronto, no matter how pleasant the company, I came back happy that we didn't live there and relieved to be away from it. My lifelong view of urban life as unnatural began the first time I set foot in a city.

But let's get back to Guelph. I wouldn't by any means call myself sheltered or dependent up to then, but it was the first time I had ever resided away from the farm and my family. And I loved it. I led an almost monastic existence, living in a dormitory and eating in the student cafeteria, seldom going off campus. My week was circumscribed by classes, labs, practical field exercises in which we went out to talk to real farmers, the occasional on-campus social event, meetings of the anti-war coalition (in which I was a stalwart, but never really a leader), punctuated by visits back home every couple of months. I often flirted with classmates, but never went on any real dates. And it never occurred to me that anything was missing.

Until one day I met Sushila. She was a new student, one year behind me in the same programme, and we had two of the same classes. We became acquainted as bench-mates in Organic Chemistry lab, and I should note that the first thing I noticed as she sat down beside me was her perfume. It Far Away from Avon, a delicate scent of lilacs with just a soupçon of one-night-stand. Mixed with her own natural smell as a spicy-eating vegetarian, it was absolutely distinctive.

I was hellishly amused to find that my bench-mate's full name was Sushila Margaret Kapoor. What's so funny about that? I explained to her that my own sister was Margaret Sushila Starr, named after Sushila Nayyar, Gandhi's personal physician and later India's Minister of Health, a friend of our parents. Sushila and I soon became fast friends -- after all, nothing propinks like propinquity -- and as we warmed to each other I stopped calling her Sushi, the name by which my sister was known. As my sister had never been known as Margaret, I called my girlfriend -- as she soon was -- Margie. We completed our diplomas, were lucky to get employment as extension agents in the scenic area around Lake Huron, and blissfully worked as a team. Once a new administrator, much impressed by Margie's easy rapport with the farmers and command of the job, had the idea of promoting her to district supervisor. His colleagues took him aside and explained that he should leave things as they were.

Aside from their names, there was little resemblance between my sister and Margie. While the first was of average size with dark-blond hair, Margie was petite (although with a dynamite figure) and dark (of half-dravidian heritage) with jet-black hair. At least, her hair was black when we met and for more than 20 years afterward. In her mid-40s a little white crept in and gradually multiplied until her head was covered by a silver-grey halo. She was beautiful at 20 and

downright magnificent at 45.

It was at that age that she first started experiencing back pains. At first we thought she had simply strained herself, but before long it was plain that something was seriously amiss. It was pancreatic cancer, and it came on fast and relentless. Within three months she was gone.

I have never recovered. Now, being 10 years retired and a widower for 30 years, I still have Margie's picture on my mantle at home and am keenly aware of it when her birthday arrives. One day I will stop missing her. The coroner will attest to it. Until then, whenever I catch a whiff of Far Away a powerful wave of emotion floods over me, and Margie is with me again.

Chapter 3. HOME ON THE RANGE

[For high school I attended a quaker boarding school in Ohio known informally as Olney. Two foreign languages were taught: German and Spanish. I believe Latin was also an option in my first year there, but it got few takers and was soon dropped, as in a great many other schools. Greek had already long since disappeared from the curriculum in most schools everywhere. I had the good fortune to start German as an elective in my first year and to continue it during the next two years. At that time my school had an exchange programme with another boarding school in Gaienhofen-am-Bodensee on the southern edge of Germany and right on the north shore of the lovely Lake of Constance (Bodensee). Each year one exchange student went each way. For the 1965-66 school year I won the scholarship and so was off to Germany for a year, arriving on my 16th birthday. I learned later that some faculty members were so skeptical of me that they had actively approached my classmate Jay Smith to put in for it, the implication being that if he did so he would be chosen. However, Jay had just recently come back from a time in Africa and was inclined to stay put. As a result, I was in Germany for a year at an early enough age that I came out speaking almost without accent. On returning to Ohio, I saw little sense in studying German further, so I went for a final year of Spanish, a language whose sounds I had long admired. That gave me a good foundation, so that in later years I was able to develop a fair fluency in that language as well, another very useful tool in my bag of tricks. So, thank you very much, Jay. This is the story of what difference it might have made if you had said yes to the scheming faculty members.]

I returned to Olney in 1965 and graduated on time the next year. Every senior (final-year student) was required to do a graduation essay, a sort of small thesis on a topic of her/his choice. Mine was on the controversy around pesticides that had been triggered by Rachel Carson's recent book *Silent Spring*. I tried to be even-handed and included in my research an extensive interview with a local fruit farmer who regarded the use of pesticides as critical to American prosperity, but I was pretty much in the anti-pesticide camp from the outset. Ever the procrastinator, I didn't submit the finished essay until the very day before Commencement.

Then it was home to Ottawa, where I started at Carleton University shortly after my 17th birthday. It was not a promising beginning. I was at least a year younger than most of my classmates, and it showed. I was socially rather inept, and I had a rather offhand approach to studies. I attended all classes, but some weeks I spent more time talking politics in the lounges than hitting the books in the library, with predictable results. In the first year I failed all my courses except English Literature, which I aced. The reason for this last, I suppose, was that it was the one course that gave some scope for showing off in class.

I was allowed back to repeat the first year, but only after a rather severe meeting with the Dean of Students, who apparently decided that I was basically a good kid, even if something of a jack-off. In that second first year, I did German, following my three years of that language at Olney, continuing it the next year. The result was that I have remained throughout life a not-bad speaker and reader of German, although I have never been to Germany and so don't really know how I would function immersed in the language.

And so I graduated in 1972 with a solidly mediocre degree but ambitions for graduate school. But where? There was no one at Carleton under whom I wanted to do a graduate degree, and besides, I was ready for a move. I really wanted to go to Ohio State with its formidable Entomology Department, but they were politely dismissive of my application. In the end it was Washington State on the far side of the continent. WSU was a second-tier graduate school, but I was able to study under Prof Roger Akre, whose research programme centered around the accumulation of data on colony parameters of social wasps. Let us frankly admit that this was quite pedestrian, for the most part. At the same time, it had the valuable effect of introducing a life-long tendency toward large, robust data-sets. I have always considered this a critical part of my scientific training. I completed my PhD with a respectable thesis on the colony parameters and development of two closely related *Dolichovespula* species.

Then it was job-hunting time. After a lot of applications and a couple of phone interviews, I finally joined the staff of Agriculture Canada's research station in Lethbridge, Alberta. Located near the Rocky Mountains, it has a relatively mild climate, often with chinook winds in the winter. The surrounding area is pleasant and scenic, a fine place for a drive or nature walk. Lethbridge at that time had a population of about 50,000, so calling it a city was something of a stretch, but the local administration lost no opportunity to make that stretch. There was a great deal of promotion of arts and multi-culturalism, with two art museums and even a symphony orchestra, but I found its pretensions in that direction rather amusing. Still, I was there to be a naturalist and scientist, not a culture vulture.

And I was only too happy to be a political oddball in a stronghold of the Progressive Conservative Party (and later of the even more reactionary Reform Party). The populace is mostly white, but with about 4% Indian and 2% Métis. Not surprisingly, these minorities suffered a great deal of subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination, exacerbated by a high level of alcoholism and often abject poverty. As a long-standing stalwart of radical causes, I was quickly drawn into the battles against this discrimination. And that was how I met Rita Yellowhorn.

Rita was of the Peigan (now Piikani) tribe, a part of the Blackfoot Confederation that had once dominated much of the region. As a lawyer specializing in civil rights, she found it more convenient to live in the city, although her clients were mainly from the nearby reservation. A great deal of her work

was necessarily pro-bono, so that Rita was by no means well-to-do, and she positively did not give a damn. She lived to fight the good fight and was never happier than when she had taken some big company or a branch of the government into court and made the bastards pay for their sins. Part of her arrangement with her pro-bono clients was that she got a piece of any sizeable settlement, although she often couldn't be bothered to collect it if the client was truly needy. Money was not much of a motivator for Rita, and she was often so careless about it that in time I came to manage our collective economy.

Damn, she was magnificent when she was standing up for the oppressed, and the bad guys came to fear her. Once in a bar I overheard a couple of company attorneys gabbing about an upcoming case. One of them was proposing to file a rather dodgy motion, but the other warned him "Bobby, if you try any of that crap Rita is going to have your balls on a skewer." That brought Bobby up short. I eased on over, told Bobby that he had better listen to his friend and added "I know what I'm talking about. I'm Rita's husband." That got a big laugh, and for the rest of the evening the drinks were all on them as they tried to pump me for her weaknesses. I was having none of it and finally told them "Boys, you're barking up the wrong tree. Rita doesn't have weaknesses. I advise you to settle." Which they did, although I have no idea whether I had anything to do with it.

But that is getting ahead of the story. Early in my time in Lethbridge I went to a meeting of the main local civil-rights group, where I saw and heard Rita for the first time. She rose to brief the group on an important case that would come to trial the next week. She insisted that while she was fighting in court they should absolutely continue their loud public demonstrations, emphasizing the need to use every tactic at their disposal.

I was absolutely dumbstruck. Did I mention that she was magnificent? Not only did I admire the power and focus of her presentation (with which I completely agreed) but she was beautiful. A statuesque stone fox with long, wavy hair, standing up for what was right. I fell in love with her on the spot. And aside from her appearance there was her voice, at once penetrating and melodious, rather like Neil Diamond. Every time I heard her it sent a bit of a shiver through me. This led to an amusing interlude later when I met her mother, who had the same voice and noticed how startled I was when I first heard her speak. I told her that she sounded just like Rita, figuring that no further explanation was needed.

Even so, I didn't even make a move to speak with Rita at that first or several subsequent meetings. After all, I was at best a peripheral figure in the civil-rights movement of which she was the undisputed star, so why would she have any interest in me? I assumed that if she had never even noticed me she had no idea who I was.

Until one day she needed an entomologist, and I found out she knew perfectly well who I was. The case in question had to do with a native woman being abused

by some yahoos, who had tethered her above a mound of stinging ants. Rita wanted information on the pugnacity of the ants and the health effects of their stings. With an effort, I kept my composure and was somehow able to give cogent answers as she sat right there in my office and looked me in the eye. I had the impression that she was even smiling a bit more than the situation required and that her glance lingered on this pale scientist just a fraction longer than expected, although I quickly told myself that this was wishful thinking.

It evidently was not wishful thinking. I was called to court as an expert witness, but I never had to testify, as opposing counsel got nervous and settled. Then Rita offered to take me and the client out to celebrate. As it happened, the client had to leave the celebration after half an hour, so it was just Rita & me. And that was when I found out that she reciprocated my feelings, unreservedly. I never did figure it out, as I she was so plainly out of my league, but neither was I about to question it. We are now well on in years. Rita's hair is silver-gray, her voice is weaker than it once was, and she moves somewhat slower, but to me she will always be the Magnificent One standing up in court to put the fear of God in the Philistines.

In time she took me home to meet her parents, a clear indication of serious intent. They did not approve. They liked me fine as a person and were unfailingly civil, but her father especially disliked the idea of his only daughter marrying a white man. While he and his wife tried to reason with Rita, one of her uncles took me aside to make the point that, although none of them had anything against me personally, it would be bad for them if she married outside the tribe. I have no idea where any of them got the idea that Rita could be moved once she had made up her mind -- certainly, it would never have occurred to me to think that -- and I was not about to give in, so the parents and tribal elders finally resigned themselves to me and came to devise reasons why I wasn't such an outsider, after all. In later years, Mr Yellowhorn even took a certain pride in introducing me as "my son-in-law the scientist with a PhD".

But life is not all politics and romance. I also had to work for a living. Among the foci at the Lethbridge research station was the health of agro-ecosystems. How did agriculture impact on the surrounding habitats and vice-versa? One of my long-term projects had to do with the effects of native bees on crop pollination, what later came to be known as ecosystem services. The non-native honey bee remained the foremost pollinator, and southern Alberta had a flourishing beekeeping sector, but there was much interest in fostering wild populations of leafcutter and bumble bees as supplementary pollinators. I had some success in devising simple, cheap nesting structures to increase wild bee numbers and boost pollination and seed set in several crops. This remained largely a curiosity until the appearance of colony-collapse disorder in honey bees in many parts of Europe and North America. My techniques saved canadian agriculture many millions of

dollars, but that was so long after the original research that my contribution went almost unnoticed.

While I was at it I took the opportunity to work out the nesting cycle of several species of bees, effectively getting paid to indulge my interest in basic natural history.

My other main research thrust was on spiders in agro-ecosystems. Spiders are hugely diverse, abundant predators in virtually all land habitats on Earth. They consume an almost unimaginable quantity of bugs, including pests. Does it not stand to reason, then, that we should be able to turn these premier consumers of land arthropods into a valuable force for biological control? Many people had advanced this as a self-evident proposition, and I set out to make it happen.

It all seemed very promising at first, and I was able to measure the very impressive mass of bugs -- including some important pests -- eaten by spiders in our experimental plots. However, in 15 years I never succeeded in finding any workable way to manipulate spider populations to agricultural ends. And, although some very smart people have addressed this same problem, none of them has had any greater success than I did.

As with the bees, I had great fun working out the life histories and behaviour of some of the spiders that abounded in the fields and grasslands around Lethbridge. One accomplishment of the french entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915) -- my personal hero since childhood -- was to get up close and personal with his bugs, and my most admired biology teachers had impressed upon me the fundamental importance of "a sense of the organism". That is, a real zoologist should get inside his animals' lives. To that end, I had an entire room with shelves and shelves holding little labeled cages with a multitude of different kinds of spiders. There were larger cages for some of the orb-web builders, but my main attention was devoted to wandering spiders and others that required little space. Even so, collectively they took up considerable space,, as I had to keep these predators isolated from each other except for observations of mating.

In this way, I got to know the little darlings personally. Over the years I kept more than 120 different species, many of which I reared from egg to adulthood. It was my idea of a good time.

While the winters are fairly mild in southwestern Alberta, they are also long. Rita & I tended to devote this season to work -- neither of us had any interest in skiing -- but when spring swept across the land at last we experienced a kind of intoxication and had to go wandering. We took special delight in going into the mountains. The elements of the advancing spring tend to arrive earlier both further south and at lower elevation, so that as we drove or hiked higher up a mountain we effectively went back in time. This was not exactly scientific research, just examining the rhythms of time and seasonality. We I could never get enough of it.

We were not out for adventure on these excursions, but adventure is bound to come to anyone who does not stay safely at home the whole time (and sometimes even to one who does). We were well aware that spring is when the brown bears (grizzly bears) come out of hibernation lean and hungry, the females with their newborn cubs, so we kept alert. Even so, we were once so careless as to get between a mother and her two cubs as they foraged for blueberries and we were looking at squirrels up in the trees. We heard the roar and skedaddled, laughing hysterically as she came after us. However, Rita and I made so much noise and ran in divergent directions, so that the mother bear was too bewildered to keep up the chase. And the cubs were too busy snarfing down the berries to pay us any mind.

Now in the twilight of our lives, Rita & I have had a very satisfying 40+ years together. We are of course physically much weaker than when we first met, subject to the usual ailments of the elderly. Against this, we have a lifetime of memories together. It is pointless to ask whether we would rather we were young again, looking forward instead of backward on all this.

It is for this reason that I regard senile dementia with such horror. To be sure, we both have our "senior moments", but we treat them as a joke. What I fear is the possible onset of any real failure of the faculties. It is a damn disgrace that so many seniors, just when they reach an age to bask in the glow of a lifetime of memories, have it all snatched away from them. It is the one thing I fear, far more than death.

Chapter 4. IF I WERE A CARPENTER

[Sometime in 1970, after completing two years of a Biology degree at Carleton University in Ottawa, I wasn't sure that I wanted to continue. In fact, I thought I probably did not. So, what direction should I take? I sat out the 1970-71 school year, mulling over this question, and reached the conclusion that what I really wanted was to be a carpenter. The carpentry trade, including the recruitment and training of apprentices, was regulated by the provincial government, so I went around to the appropriate office to talk about possibilities. There I was well received, because the Province of Ontario at that time was interested in developing a more educated class of carpenters, and two years of university gave me a bit of preference. However, the word then came along that they were not taking on new apprentices at that time, and I wasn't about to just sit around and wait, so I did a bit of wandering and returned to Carleton for the 1971-72 school year. I figured that if I couldn't be a carpenter I might as well be a scientist. But what if they had been taking new apprentices at that particular fork in the road?]

In September 1970 I was very happy to become an apprentice carpenter in a medium-sized construction company active throughout eastern Canada. I was based in Ottawa and coming along well when, three months into the job they asked me if I would be willing to re-locate to Québec City. I immediately said yes. I had been there just once and found it an attractive place. Furthermore, unlike in Montreal, where many people live and get by for years without ever learning to speak French, in Québec City one must speak the local languages. I was eager to improve on the French I had learned up then. I moved there and got to work in the new setting, assiduously monitoring progress in my vocabulary and usage. I have never been much of a francophile, but it was great fun becoming more of a francophone. I even took some pains to adopt a Québec accent, trying hard not to sound anything like a Frenchman, and I was happy to stay there until I completed journeyman status in 1974.

I enjoyed consistent employment and was happy to move around among jobs until 1977, when I joined experienced carpenter Patrick Chartrand as one of his two assistants. He was my sister Lucie's fiancé, so this was keeping it in the family.

Still, I found that I was working more than I wanted and earning more than I needed -- after all, I had no dependents or interest in owning a bigger house or a new truck -- and I really disliked outdoor work during the cold months. Accordingly, I made a deal with Patrick. I would work just seven months of the year, six days a week, while from November through March I was free to do as I pleased.

And what pleased me was to travel to interesting places to immerse myself in

the local life up close and personal. Among these places were Costa Rica (where my parents commonly over-wintered after retirement), Borneo (where I got lost in the forest for three days, emerging at a dayak village both exhausted and exhilarated), Mexico (culturally the most fascinating country I know), France (where I visited the home of my boyhood hero Jean-Henri Fabre and was surprised to find that the image of the French as snooty and rude did not at all match my experience), Cuba (where it was so cool to be addressed as "comrade"), Gabon (chosen for reasons I could never recall later, although pleasant enough at the time), Wales (where I loved the way they spoke English but couldn't stand the weather), Socotra (the most otherworldly place I ever set foot) and even Saskatchewan (yes, Saskatchewan; don't laugh until you've tried it).

During this wandering phase of almost 20 years, my social life was quite acceptable, but in no case did it lead to anything resembling a committed relationship. Then, one day in 1995, having just returned tanned and scruffy from knocking about the Andes, I popped in on the Chartrands on some forgotten and presumably minor mission to find that Patrick & Lucie had a most interesting house guest.

You probably see where this is going.

That guest was Selena da Costa, a Canadian born in India and mostly raised in Southeast Asia. She had worked as a broadcaster and print journalist throughout my time as a carpenter, aided by her fluency not just in English but also in Hindi and

Gujarati and passable use of Bengali and Tamil. Tired of globetrotting and reporting and ready to settle down, Selena had just joined the University of Ottawa as a professor with a joint appointment in Journalism and International Affairs. She was staying with the Chartrands while she looked for a place of her own, and they were happy to have her. I was even happier to meet her. She was shapely, vibrant and knew an infinitude of interesting stuff. I have forever after been puzzled and somewhat abashed that Selena took to me with such enthusiasm and immediacy, but I was never in doubt as to why I took to her. For the first time in my life I understood the Italian concept of being hit by a thunderbolt (*fulmine*). As a young man I had once been asked on a first (and, as it turned out, last) date what I looked for in a woman, to which my offhand, inebriated answer was "Beauty, brains and a heart full of soul." Glib as it was, I reflected right away that I probably could not improve on that recipe, so that it became a sort of personal motto or mantra. And Selena was plainly brim-full of beauty, brains and a heart full of soul.

We talked about places we had been, sharing impressions and loudly and laughingly disagreeing as often as we agreed. By the time I left the Chartrand household -- after midnight, if truth be told, the hosts having long since retired for the night -- there was an unspoken understanding between us, so that the usual

messy, halting and doubt-laden initial phase was entirely absent from our courtship. It was as if we had quite simply found what we had long been looking for. In fact, that is literally the fact of the matter as far as I was concerned. The very next day I assisted Selena in her house hunting, and it didn't need to be said that we were really looking for a place that would suit us both. Together.

As we were getting up one morning, after living together in unwedded bliss for six or seven months, Selena impulsively said "You know, I think we should get married." Still sleepy, I said "Sure. Why not? As long as it is to each other." With that, Selena, laughing uproariously, whacked me hard with a pillow, which woke me up in a hurry. And with that we were engaged.

It was not a long engagement. We went down to City Hall that same day to register our intentions, and 10 days later we stood before a magistrate and these intentions were duly solemnized. It would be a huge understatement to suggest that getting married was a low-key affair. Leaving City Hall, we celebrated, first, by stepping into a jewellery store and picking out cool matching rings, and second, by stopping at a bar to toast our union. But that was about it. In fact, we all but forgot that our relationship had entered a new phase. We didn't invite anyone to the wedding -- the magistrate had to call a couple of secretaries into his office, because we hadn't thought to bring witnesses -- and didn't think to mention it to our families. And our rings were not plain gold bands. The kinfolk only found out about it some weeks later when Patrick happened to hear me refer to "my wife". That got his attention, and after that the news was broadcast.

Being with Selena made a difference in the seasons of my life, as I was not about to be away from her for five months or even five days of the year. In fact, we have never spent even one night apart except for those occasions when Selena had to travel for work without me. Well into our retirement years we continued to travel to new places just for fun, but not nearly as much as earlier. We never went to the Himalayas, never rode horses in the Pampa, never ran before the bulls in Pamplona, and we remained childless. Having been past 40 when we met, this last option never came up in discussions of what we hoped to do.

We both lived to an advanced age. When it became apparent that I would be the first to go, I was very disappointed. It is not that I selfishly wanted to live longer, just the opposite. I had hoped to spare Selena the solitude of a childless widow. But you can't always get what you want, even if what you have is so very close to absolutely everything. At least, when I went she was able to see it coming, so I spared her the shock of not knowing what was to be.

Chapter 5. THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

[After graduating from Carleton in 1973, my wife & I went southwest for graduate study at the University of Kansas. Annie had never lived outside of Canada, so that to the end of her days she still spoke like a Canadian, even though she lived the rest of her life in the USA. I, in contrast, had only quite shallow Canadian roots. On arriving in Kansas, I decided that there was no good reason to sound like a foreigner, so I dropped my Canadian accent and adopted that of a Yankee, just like that. In 1976, as I was getting ready to complete my MA in Entomology at Kansas, I considered where I should go for my PhD. Both I and my department at Kansas thought it would be better if I went elsewhere, if you see what I mean. After sorting the options and communicating with potential major professors, the search narrowed to just two: the University of Toronto and the University of Georgia. It was far from obvious which I should prefer, so I did something quite sensible. I drew a line down a sheet of paper and wrote factors in favour of Toronto in one column and in favour of Georgia in the other. With that in front of me, it seemed that Georgia was my preferred choice, so I went there, finishing my PhD in 1981. Among other things, this choice led to my first tropical sojourn, 10 weeks in Costa Rica in early 1979. But what if instead I had taken the path that led to Toronto?]

By that time Annie was a PhD student at Kansas, so she stayed behind while I moved to Toronto. We told ourselves that we would re-unite as soon as we could, but I think we both knew that that would not happen. We had had five good years together, but that stage of our lives was over.

After three years away from Canada, it felt rather odd to be back. I couldn't be bothered to deliberately resume the old Canadian accent, although elements of it crept back into my speech. In later years people often had difficulty placing my accent, and many just figured I was from New England.

I did, however, make a conscious decision to accommodate to my new surroundings in another way. I determined to make friends with the climate. I had long disliked cold weather and regarded the northern winter as a season of exile from real life. That was going to have to change.

It was all part of taking a long view. I wasn't there to spend three years in Toronto and then head south again. Rather, I wanted to look northward. At Carleton there had been a certain arctic focus, but I had paid it little mind at the time. Now I was to give it my full attention.

Looking for a worthy thesis problem, I wondered what difference the shortened productive season of the far north might make in the social organization of social insects with an annual colony cycle. If the colony could only be active for about two months of the year, for example, it couldn't grow as large as in a more southern

environment with a four- or five-month season. Would smaller colonies necessarily be on a lower, simpler social scale?

The species I chose to study were two social wasps, *Vespula acadica* and *V. austriaca*, and my study site was a truly otherworldly place. Old Crow is an Inuit community of a little more than 200 people, situated on the Porcupine River in the Yukon Territory. It is north of the Arctic Circle, close to the polar limits of my two wasp species. It is also not very far from the Arctic Ocean, but that does not mean that one could make a quick drive up the sea. In fact, Old Crow is not reachable by car at all, so that I had to fly in to the tiny local airstrip. Although I was to make the flight in and out several times, I experienced the same thrill each time as on that first arrival. Even today, the sound of a small plane starting up brings a rush of memory.

I got there shortly before the summer solstice, when the queens were just becoming active, and above the Arctic Circle there were several days without nights before the sun once again dipped below the horizon for a short time around midnight. I established a campground outside of the village and got to work. The long days of recording wasp behaviour and colony growth were punctuated by the occasional sight of herds of caribou ambling past, a good excuse to just sit and watch for a while. And a pack of wolves was resident in the vicinity. I wouldn't say that I ever became friends with the wolves, but we developed a mutual tolerance. Years later I met Farley Mowat and asked him if he had really been as intimate with wolves as related in *Never Cry Wolf*, and he earnestly insisted that his account was entirely truthful.

The same species of wasps had been studied in some detail much further south in Washington state, so that I had a good base of comparison. The upshot of those two very happy summers in the field was that colonies were much smaller at maturity than in Washington, as expected, but that it made remarkably little difference in their social organization, as if this was hard-wired into the species. It was a rather ho-hum result, but a solid piece of work that has stood the test of time.

Back in Toronto I was busy writing up my thesis and job hunting at the same time. I cast my net fairly widely, as I wasn't absolutely determined to remain in Canada, although it was my definite preference. And I got lucky. The University of Ottawa, Carleton's cross-town sports rival, was looking for an entomologist and, after the usual round of application forms and interviews, I got the job.

Ottawa U is Canada's only major bilingual tertiary institution, with teaching in both English and French. Although many faculty members teach in only one language, it is preferred -- and in some departments required -- that faculty function in both for administrative purposes. I was a decidedly mediocre French speaker at that time, but fluent in German and not bad in Spanish, so the university was evidently confident that I could get up to speed quickly enough.

Which I did, although with a persistently strong accent that made me cringe when I first heard in in a recording. I have since had several occasions to lecture in French, and I could never shake the suspicion that the students found my accent quite hard to take.

So, my life continued within the usual academic grind, but what about the social aspect? It is not right that a specialist in social insects should be a solitary creature, and I was not. Still, it was almost three years before anyone really compelling entered the picture. It came about in a most accidental way.

In any profession whose practitioners work long hours, romantic attachments tend to arise mainly in the workplace. That had not happened to me, and it was not to happen. I was on a weekend excursion up the Québec's Gatineau Valley to survey colonies of my beloved social wasps when I stopped at a roadside eatery on the far side of Kazabazua. It was run by a haitian lady who had come to Canada to marry a Québec man. Their family business thrived out there in nowhere in particular, and they were very happy together for the six more years that he lived. When I met Yanick, she had been in mourning for four years and was ready to give it up and return to a normal life, if you see what I mean.

She had a very refined manner of speech and gestures, although she had never advanced beyond primary school and so spoke French with a fine ungrammaticality that I found downright captivating. I suppose you could say that we were about equally compromised in that language, although in quite different ways. My own French was much more orderly in a stilted way, while hers was beautifully erratic and full of surprises. Besides, it sounded so very musical. We had many uproarious times trying to trip each other up in the one language that we had in common. On the other hand, her two small children were already speaking standard French with a true Québec accent.

Early on in our courtship, I moved from Ottawa to live with Yanick in her house south of Kazabazua. I say we lived together, but it wasn't quite all that that implied. I would not say that Yanick was traditional or even conservative, but she was very reserved in some odd ways. In particular, it was understood that there was to be no sex until we were married. This didn't especially bother me, as we had a committed understanding, and she was plainly worth waiting for. Besides, a long wait was not foreseen. On our wedding night, when I saw her naked for the first time, I was so entranced that it was some time before I could bring myself to speak. By that time we were rolling around in each other's arms, so that neither of us was in much of a state to be eloquent.

That left me with a 65 km commute to work, although along an easy, uncomplicated route. And I arranged my schedule during most semesters so that my teaching was all on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with few administrative duties to take me into the city on other days. Yanick seldom took a day off from managing the eatery until we had been together for nine years, when she turned

it over to her younger son, Toussaint, a precocious teenager with little taste for school.

And then she turned to gardening with a focus and enthusiasm that I have seldom seen in anyone else. I have no idea where that came from, as she had never shown more than casual interest on the several occasions that we visited gardening friends. However, once she was retired from working the seeds of this passion germinated and flourished, if you will pardon the expression. Her attention was not to vegetables or even ordinary flowers but to native wildflowers and other herbaceous plants. She had an unparalleled collection of lady's-slipper orchids, including one peculiar orange one that she found in the nearby woods and managed to propagate at home. A visiting friend pointed out to Yanick that several of her plants would certainly win prizes at garden shows, but she completely failed to see the point of such prizes, and I was unable to enlighten her.

Although Yanick kept in touch with her kinfolk back in Haiti, she had little urge to go there for even a short visit. She was occasionally homesick, to be sure, but I managed to take the edge off with my attentions. We arranged for her widowed mother to visit us for a fortnight, and various of her younger relatives came to see us, two of them remaining as immigrants in the strange, cold land. And although I was curious about my wife's birthplace, it was an idle curiosity that never prompted me to go there. In fact, I have hardly set foot in any tropical latitude. My parents spent part of each winter in Costa Rica for about the last 20 years of their lives, and one winter Yanick & I went to stay with them for a fortnight, but other than that we had little interest in warm regions for some reason. We never even went to Florida or California.

I admit to boundless enthusiasm for Yanick, and she showed equal enthusiasm for me. We were together for more than 40 years until I died at the satisfied age of 86. Even so, we remained forever mysterious to each other.

Chapter 6. WITH A GENETICIST ON BLUE HIGHWAYS

[It was probably in 1980 that, as a graduate student at the University of Georgia, I attended a party where a drunken Genetics graduate student told a joke, the punch line of which was "Oh yes, we have known for a long time that abscess makes the fart go 'Honda'." You may know it (and it's very easy to google). A week or two later, as I was working late at night, this same student -- I believe her name was Katherine -- appeared in the lab, looked at me rather wistfully and asked "Why don't you take me away from all this?" I have no reason to think it was me in particular that she wanted, just someone to whisk her away from a life that had become tedious and unsatisfying. I pride myself on being one who rises to the occasion, but this time I did not. I had no wife or other serious commitment, and I had a Volkswagen van named Waddell and a gas-company credit card, plus a bit of money saved, and here was a lady proffering the opportunity to do the heroic thing, something I had always figured a guy like me should do. And I completely dropped the ball. I told her it was an attractive proposition, but I couldn't right now, and made some feeble excuse that wouldn't have fooled a drugged idiot. Katherine sighed, plainly disappointed in me and probably in the male sex as a whole, and walked out of the lab and my life. I have ever since reproached myself for falling short that night and have wondered how things might have turned out if I had risen to the occasion. The following is one possibility.]

I quickly wrapped up what I was doing, and we went first to her place and then to mine, allowing ourselves just 45 minutes in each to pack our traveling cases. We feared that if we took longer we would lose our nerve and call it off. And then, a little past midnight, we hit the road. It would have made no sense to head east - - we would soon have reached the ocean -- and going south or north wouldn't have been much better, but a westward trajectory offered limitless possibilities. We had a real Kerouac feeling about this.

The first thing was to put a lot of distance behind us, so as to keep our momentum. That meant driving the interstate highways, turning northwest in Atlanta and continuing in that general direction all the way to East St Louis. There we turned west on I-70, a highway that I knew well from years past. We didn't drive fast, but neither did we stop except when we felt like it. For three days we just headed west, taking our time. Sooner or later we would have to stop, but where?

That decision was made for us when we realized that we were almost broke and would have to get jobs of some kind. As it happened, after almost 1200 miles on I-70, we were then at Grand Junction, Colorado, deep in the Rocky Mountains and almost at the border with Utah.

But let's take a look at Katherine & me. The fact was that I had seldom noticed

her before the day she came into the lab, really only on the occasion she told the fart-goes-Honda joke. Now, among the things I had packed was a two-person tent and a fairly large sleeping bag. Our second night out, as we were in the prairies, was an unseasonably chilly one, so I asked Katherine if she would prefer to crawl into the sleeping bag with me. (I wasn't about to offer her exclusive use of it; I'm not that chivalrous.) She said "Okay, but don't get any ideas." I promised to behave myself, which was easier than I would have admitted for the simple reason that I didn't desire her, or at least not especially. She wasn't by any means bad looking, but neither was she a living doll, and during the two days we had been on the road together I had never thought of her in that way.

As it turned out, Katherine was the one with the ideas. In the middle of the night I awoke to find her murmuring wordlessly as she snuggled close to me. She must have been doing it for at least a couple of minutes, because I had a raging hard-on. I put my arm around her, snuggled back and then, as she eased into wakefulness, asked her quietly "Katherine, are you sure this is what you want?" while nibbling her earlobe. "Shut up and take me!" she snarled, and I was only too happy to be a gentleman and oblige her. In that night we discovered a grand sexual compatibility that never faded, so that we made love almost every night.

But back to Grand Junction. It was a fair-sized town of about 28,000 people in a sparsely-populated region. It is at an altitude of about 1400 m and lies at the confluence of the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers, hence the name. Despite its overall aridity, this is a major fruit-growing area, and it was the harvest season, so that Katherine & I were able to get strenuous but well-paid work for the next six weeks.

At the same time, we were looking for more permanent employment, as we saw no reason to move on down the line right after the fruit season. Mesa State College (now Colorado Mesa University), a small liberal-arts college, had no Biology department. However, biology still had to be taught, so we found part-time employment. While I taught ecology, Katherine taught genetics, which together made up most of the biological curriculum. We were just as happy that it was part-time, because we hadn't come to stay, had very modest expenses -- for two months after we got there, we never even bothered to look for an apartment but just lived out of my van -- and neither of us was at all interested in anything resembling a career.

We stayed there for two years, living a settled yet unsettled life, deliberately not planning very far ahead, careful not to get pregnant. We continued picking fruit in the late summer, happy to reacquaint ourselves with the mexican seasonal labourers who came back every year -- we were even members of the United Farm Workers union, so that many in the area saw us as trouble makers on that score alone -- and then to return to teaching in the fall. Then, one day about halfway through our third fruit-picking season we just suddenly stopped in mid-pick, looked

at each other and realized that we had the very same thought: It was time to move on. Although Katherine & I were not really soul-mates and had never pretended to be in love with each other, we had a strong compatibility and were accustomed to reading each other's thoughts, so that this moment did not shock or even surprise us. We finished the day's work, then went to our foreman to tell him we were quitting and get paid off, said *Adiós* to such of our co-workers as were around, and went home to pack. The next morning we stopped by the college to clean out our cubby-holes and inform our department head that we were moving out, and we hit the road.

With no particular plan -- and happy not to have one -- we got back onto I-70 and headed west, all the way to Cove Fort, Utah. Cove Fort is just that, an old fort, with no permanent population. It is where I-70 ends and meets north-south-tending I-15.

So, where should we go from there? We had almost mindlessly been following good old I-70, but now a decision was forced upon us. I-15 goes all the way down into Mexico and up into Canada. Which way should we turn? It was there that we made two decisions. First of all, we would tend north, not south. And second, we would not get onto I-15, not even for a little way. In another of those two-people-with-one-thought moments, we realized that we had had enough of the interstate system, and in fact from that day we have seldom ventured onto any of Mr Eisenhower's highways. Even if we were going a long way, it was blue highways and even smaller roads for Katherine & me. It became a central part of our code of the road.

And so we headed northwest. I have long since forgotten what blue highways we took, and we often weren't even aware at the time which road we were following. We can reconstruct our approximate route by noting that we passed through Eureka and Paradise Valley in Nevada, and Basque, Bend and the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon.

And then there were the ghost towns, some with evocative names that Stephen Vincent Benet would surely have celebrated. Names like Osceola, Treasure City, Palisade, Ruby Hill, Gold Acres, Dun Glen, Seven Troughs, Star City, Unionville and Daveytown, all in Nevada. We had never given ghost towns any thought before, but from the moment we got out and walked in one of them we were hooked. After that we made a game of fantasizing about every such town into whose dusty, deserted streets we wandered. Taking turns, one of would point to a spot, and the other would make up a story -- complete with names and characterizations of the principals -- about what had happened there. In the best of these that I can recall, Katherine related the sad tale of a gruff poodle named Hogarth, a senile, half-deaf former silver miner known simply as Slim, and a one-eyed hooker with a touch of dropsy named Georgina and why they were all perpetually thirsty. I laughed too hard to put together a cogent plot when it was my turn to invent.

After wandering in this fashion for three weeks, slowly depleting our savings, I had a flash of insight, the closest thing to a plan since we left Georgia. We were headed in the general direction of Mount Hood, Oregon, where my Uncle Bud & Aunt Mary Schlick lived, so why not pop in on them?

I didn't mention this plan to Katherine. We tended to take turns driving, and when it was my turn I steered toward the northwest. As we came into Mount Hood, she certainly noticed that we were getting onto smaller and smaller roads, and I was looking around for landmarks, but she said nothing. In time, we pulled up in front of a tall wooden house in a woodlot. The kinfolk -- consisting of the elder Schlicks and my cousins Kitty and Joe -- were almost overjoyed to see us. We arrived with the intention of staying at most a day and a half and then heading out, but Aunt Mary wouldn't hear of it. No, we absolutely must stay at least a week (two weeks would be twice as good) and tell us everything about how we met and our life since leaving Georgia. Which we did.

And then we were on the road again. I won't pretend that we had a plan or even a definite destination, but we did have a direction: north. We crossed into British Columbia, where Katherine commented on the slight cultural differences that I hardly even noticed.

And were there ghost towns? Oh my yes. According to Wikipedia, British Columbia has about 170 ghost towns, although we only visited six or seven of them. It was in just such a place, Quesnel Forks, that Katherine made a rather startling discovery. She could whistle.

Katherine has four brothers, two older and two younger than her. During their childhood, the brothers built a tree house in a massive oak in the back yard, which served as the center of their leisure activities. And they wouldn't let Katherine into it. Much later, all but one of the brothers outgrew this misogynist attitude, but by then she had already suffered years of unfair discrimination. Of course, the little demons didn't come right out and say that she was excluded because she was a girl. No, they made it a requirement that only those who could whistle -- which all of them could do, but Katherine could not -- were allowed into the club. Try as she might, she was never able to meet this criterion and so never saw the inside of the mysterious tree house until it was sundered along with the oak by a massive thunderbolt a half dozen years later.

And then, some 20 years later, she was wandering about Quesnel Forks, casually eating cherries from a bag after we had both told our stories. She took delight in spitting out the seeds, ever so ladylike, trying both for distance and a graceful arc. Okay, maybe it wasn't very ladylike, but what did we care about that? And then, as she spat out one seed with exceptional force in an attempt to hit a sassy ground squirrel, she heard a peculiar sound, a musically sibilant sort of sound. It took a moment, but then Katherine realized that it was she and not the insolent squirrel who had made that sound.

So, that was the trick, spitting it out. She spent the rest of the week whistling, first one note at a time, then a series of two or three or four notes, and at last the entire theme from *The Godfather*. I heard that theme several times a day for the next fortnight, until she switched to "God Save the Queen". This was her idea of a joke, and within a month she had moved on to passages from *Rigoletto*. Truth to tell, I never got tired of any of these tunes, although I had to insist that she desist during our, uh, times of exceptional closeness. When she got back to Georgia for Thanksgiving one of these years, Katherine was really going to show those brothers.

In fact, she never did. In later times we attended three or four family Thanksgivings with the brothers all in attendance, and Katherine never once let on that she could whistle. In a way, it made her feel even more superior, having this little secret from everyone but me. It is rather delicious, actually, having possession of this one thing known only to the two of us, as petty as it is. It has now been more than 30 years since she spat out that first whistle, and still we keep the secret.

Chapter 7. A LIFE APART

[In 1980 I was on the home stretch of my PhD at the University of Georgia and had started job hunting. My old Kansas classmate Denis Brothers, a professor at the University of Natal (now of KwaZulu-Natal) in South Africa, was going on sabbatical during the next year and needed a replacement. He suggested that I should fill in for him and put me in contact with his department head, who was satisfied and made application for my work permit. In time the answer came back. The Bureau of State Security (BOSS, the secret police) had blocked my work permit. My department head at Natal queried it through his member of parliament, a member of the ruling National Party, but even he couldn't get an answer as to why I should be deemed an undesirable. I kept quiet about it, pretending puzzlement, but I knew perfectly well what had happened. They had found out that I was a member of the Young Socialist Alliance, the trotskyst youth, and therefore an enemy of capitalism and apartheid. But how did they find out? I was pretty sure BOSS had no significant spying capability in the USA, and it seemed most likely that the FBI (which knew perfectly well who and what I was) had ratted on me. At that time the american government was holding hands with the apartheid regime, and I suppose BOSS routinely used the FBI to vet suspects. But what if my work permit had gone through? How would I have fared during that time in South Africa?]

Arriving in Pietermaritzburg, I went to my university housing and stashed my stuff. Then, before I had even checked in at my faculty or met the department head, I took a bus to Ixopo, about 85 km north of the city. Under the disapproving look of the bus conductor, I deliberately passed the white section of the bus and proceeded to sit with the "natives". This wasn't intended as a show of solidarity. Rather, I wanted something from them. When the conductor came to inform the white foreigner that he was entitled to sit in one of the more comfortable seats up front, I politely told him that I wanted to learn the name of the place where we were going and declined to elaborate.

Alan Paton's monumental *Cry, the Beloved Country* opens with "There is a lovely road which runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing." The "x" in the name is a click sound, characteristic of Zulu and many related languages of southern Africa, and I wanted them teach me to pronounce it. Truth to tell, I would have been happy to master any of the several click sounds, but for now I just wanted to say "Ixopo" like a native.

And when I got there, I took great delight in naming the place in conversation at every opportunity. I stayed only about half an hour, had a beer and then, having accomplished what I had said I would do first on arrival, I took a bus back to Pietermaritzburg.

The year in South Africa was an exciting and satisfying time. My teaching went well, although I didn't see that it led to anything especially durable in the curriculum. My research yielded some solid results, but nothing very striking. What most impressed me, as I thought it would, was the experience of living under apartheid. I took care never directly to transgress the boundaries within the racial police state, but I did take delight in identifying where these boundaries lay and edging close to them.

Some of these boundaries had to do with political expression -- South Africa had a vigorous underground Communist Party, although I am not aware that I ever met any of the comrades -- but the real nucleus was of course in race relations. I never had any serious cross-racial romantic involvement during my time there, just a couple of indecisive flirtations that provided a frisson on both sides. In fact, the situation was so tense that my social life never amounted to anything significant the whole time.

I should confess that I never really got apartheid, that is, I was never able to make sense of why such a system existed. I knew what its basic principles were, but I could never understand the "why" of it. I can sort of understand racism -- in the basic sense of conceiving how a not-too-bright person might consider one ethnicity inherently better than another -- but who thought up the cornball notion that there was something to be gained by a social separation of the two? In practice, this means that the dominant ethnicity removes the Other from its midst, but what for? Was there some kind of comfort in being consistently surrounded by people who resemble oneself? If so, it didn't work out that way, as every white South African was in daily contact with many examples of the Other.

My own most meaningful contacts with people who did not look like me came about because of music. South Africa has long had a powerful, distinctive musical trend within what can loosely be termed jazz, and I ate it up with avidity. The music scene that most attracted me was not exactly underground, but it took place in clubs and other small venues in events seldom advertised in newspapers or on the radio. Rather, the word got around, and the hip people came. I early let some of my neighbours' house servants know to alert me if they heard of musical events that would interest me. Because these were out of the mainstream, the police tended to ignore them, which meant that apartheid was not enforced. Still, there were few white people in attendance, so that on those occasions I was very much the Other.

I did once attend -- in the sense that I came upon it and did not walk away but stood on the sidewalk to watch -- a demonstration that was called in response to an especially brutal police crackdown on a peaceful march the week before. However, I kept out of direct involvement in politics, reasoning that a foreigner without roots in or real knowledge of the society could do no real good and might instead compromise those who were trying to bring about change. Or perhaps it

was just cowardice.

The landscapes in much of South Africa are truly magnificent. It is a beautiful country, despite the shocking social ugliness. In some of my wanderings I was happy to see elephants and rhinos and baboons, but my real attention was to the little creatures that tourists on safari tend to overlook. There were, for example, the ants that live in and defend the abundant acacia trees.

And termites. A prominent part of the landscape in much of Africa is the scattering of *Macrotermes* mounds. These termites build very durable, structured nests that can rise to two or three times the height of a person. I took a special delight in wandering among the mounds of the commonest local species, *M. natalensis*. These and their inner life were described by one of South Africa's national poets, Eugène N. Marais (1871-1936) in *Die Siel van die Mier*. Although Marais's book is available in several translations, I had taught myself to read it in the original, just for fun. It is curious that none of my departmental colleagues had any appetite for the Afrikaans language, which they associated with apartheid and crude, reactionary bastards.

And then there were the academics. Every time I entered a classroom and saw nothing but white students in front of me, I felt a twinge of bewilderment. It all seemed quite unnatural, which I suppose it was. In time I managed to mask the feeling of shock, and I never commented on it. Almost all of the students were at least uncomfortable with apartheid, some of them militantly enough to have been arrested several times, so that if I had opened class with something like "Damn, you're all so white?" the response would probably have been a laugh and "Look who's talking." or "Yeah, aint it a bitch?" However, a comment like that would almost certainly have gotten back to the authorities in one way or another, causing my department head some embarrassment, so I kept it to myself.

My best teaching was in a final-year course of my own design on social insects. The high point of this was a field exercise in which we analyzed a mature *Macrotermes* colony and its nest. I would select an especially large active nest in the upland savannas outside of Pietermaritzburg, we would take external measurements, and then I would carefully open it with a small bulldozer, followed by internal measurements and the collection of samples of termites, fungus comb and inquilines (other creatures inhabiting the mound).

Although I had not consciously set out to fly under BOSS's radar, it worked out that way, and as far as I could tell I was quite unknown to them. This worked to my advantage. About halfway through the school year my department head informed me that they were due an additional lecturer and would be pleased to extend my contract for two years. I accepted this with enthusiasm, so that I ended up spending not one year but three in South Africa. Why only three years? I would have been happy to stay longer, possibly even for life or at least long enough to see the end of apartheid, but there came a time when I did come to

official attention. It came about when I got into an argument with a truly reactionary chemist at a university social function. Not only was this chemist a near-fascist in things like political economy but also in racial matters. He was, of all things, an American. I should note that liberal Americans visiting South Africa in those days tended to experience a distinct uneasiness on noting that they felt so much at home in a land that they imagined was so very different from their own in social matters. In contrast, Dr Aresenault, a Cayjun from north of New Orleans, was delighted to find himself in a country where the boot of the police state was firmly placed on black necks and he could regard himself as mainstream in his views. He had even modified his speech patterns to sound like an Afrikaner, such was his identity with the system. In a liberal university like ours he was very much an anomaly, although not in the wider society.

In any event, when he recognized me as a fellow American -- Canadian, actually, but we'll let the slight distinction pass -- he said something to the effect of "Isn't it a pleasure to live in a country where the niggers know their place?" Before I could check myself, I erupted into a tirade of abuse at such stupidity. I told him that, as a lifelong, card-carrying lover of black people (true, although I had let my NAACP membership lapse when I left Georgia), I was pleased to inform him that a) nobody liked him (true), b) he smelled bad (not especially true), c) his dick was small (insufficient information), and d) he should positively fuck right off (devoutly to be wished), before turning on my heel and walking to the other side of the room. He of course reported this conversation (if you can call it that) to BOSS, and the university was instructed under no circumstances to renew my contract.

Chapter 8. DOWN THERE ON A VISIT

[Also in 1980 the International Congress of Entomology was to take place in Kyoto, Japan. I had come into a modest inheritance and so planned to attend. Having never before set foot in Asia, I wasn't about to just attend the meeting and then turn around and come home, but spending an extra period in Japan was not an attractive prospect. It is an expensive place, and its bugs are relatively well known, so I thought about going somewhere else after the meeting. When I mentioned this to Roy Snelling (1934-2008) he immediately said "Why don't you go to the Philippines? You can see stenogastrine wasps there.) I immediately embraced the idea. Stenogastrines (hover wasps) are a distinctive group of primitively social wasps restricted to South Asia, and I had long wanted to see them in person. I arranged, then, to visit Taiwan for a few days after the Kyoto meeting, exploring with my classmate Jung-tai Chao, and then to continue on to Manila. To show how ill-prepared I was for the Philippines, as the plane was descending I turned to my seatmate and asked "By the way, what language do we speak here?" He said I could get by in English, which suited me fine. From Manila I proceeded to the University of the Philippines at Los Baños (UPLB), where I had arranged to meet Victor Gapud, curator of the national insect collection. It was there that I happened to meet Dely Gapasin from the Visayas State College of Agriculture (ViSCA) at Baybay, Leyte. "Why don't you visit Leyte?" she asked. Once again showing my lack of preparation, I asked "And where is Leyte?", so she got a map and showed me. As it happened, Dely and her crew were returning to ViSCA the next day, so they got me a plane ticket and off we went. Arriving there, she arranged a little tour of the campus and the Department of Plant Protection (DPP) for me. It was a most attractive place, so when I got back to the University of Georgia (UGa) I wrote Dely a letter, outlining some suggestions for improvement of the college as a whole and the DPP in particular. Not too subtly, my suggestions amounted to a description of myself. ViSCA took the point and offered me a job, which I assumed the next year. One wonders what might have happened if Dely had not been in the UPLB insect museum on that particular day.]

I had a wonderful time in the Philippines, even though I never got very far from Manila the whole time. I had little desire to go further afield, as there was plenty to hold my attention there. I especially delighted in going up Mt Makiling, a dormant volcano above UPLB, where I explored the forest and streams to my heart's content. It was quite a thrill to see real live stenogastrines, as well as the *Polyrhachis* ants that weave their nests from larval silk. For the rest of my life I have wanted to get back to Southeast Asia, but somehow it never came together.

I returned to Georgia and busied myself to complete my PhD while making job applications. As it happened, I didn't even have to leave the state, as I was hired

as a researcher at UGa's field station at Tifton in southern Georgia. However, it did mean a major change in environment. Athens has a strong, diverse cultural scene. Among other things, it was a major center for punk rock and home to REM and the B-52s, among other notable bands, and attracted some other musicians of international reputation. It had a strong civil-rights and anti-apartheid tendency among the students, and there was plenty of literary activity. And it had the overall cosmopolitan feel that one expects around a major university. Tifton, in contrast, was almost breath-takingly provincial and lacking in diversity. As an example, during my first two weeks there I was asked by several friendly colleagues and neighbours whether I had yet found a church home. I always answered "No", rather than "Not yet", to which the polite rejoinder was something like "Well then, let me invite you to the United Methodist Church on 12th Street next Sunday. You can go with my family if you like. We'd love to have you." And when I just as politely declined the kind invitation without attempting any explanation, the dear soul's puzzlement was unmistakable. To this day, there are probably folks in south Georgia who at least occasionally pray that I will be moved to step into the light.

While I certainly bear Tifton and the UGa field station no ill will, I might as well admit that I took that job because it was all I had. The job market at the time was decidedly depressed, and I heard of several old classmates who finally gave up looking for employment fit for an entomologist with a PhD and went into real estate or something equally wretched.

And while we are in the confessional let me say that the nature of the work didn't match my expectations. I was a specialist in the behavioural ecology of bugs with a main focus on social insects, yet my employers wanted me to concentrate on monitoring populations of certain pest species and their natural enemies under different conditions of weather and seasonality. It was useful enough research, I suppose, but remote from the observation of real live bugs living their real bug lives that had brought me into entomology. If there was a way to make it interesting, I never found it. As a result, I was determined to move along at the end of my initial two-year contract. That determination paid off, not because of any direct job search but because I was ready when the possibility presented itself.

Moses Udechukwu was Professor of Entomology at Enugu State University of Science & Technology (ESUT) in Nigeria. He had recently been pressed by his struggling university's governing council to assume the post of rector after the previous rector had been summarily dismissed less than six months into his three-year term. The previous rector had departed amid a storm of accusations of financial and sexual improprieties that left the university with grievous financial damage and the risk of worse if any of the threatened lawsuits came to pass. Moses was a competent administrator with a reputation for inflexible honesty,

which was just what the university needed at that point. He was also rather vain and power-hungry, and positively yearned to be rector. Still, he played it coy. Although incorruptible, he was determined to get what he could from the university's desperate situation.

So, what did he want, aside from the bigger salary, bigger house and all the pomp and glory that he could eat? As rector, he reasoned, it would behoove him to be familiar with the norms and standards of leading institutions abroad, so it made sense to send him on a grand tour of at least a few universities in Britain and North America. The brass had no choice but to give in and let Moses have his junket. He happened to be at UGa toward the end of this tour, when it occurred to him that, because ESUT had an important Faculty of Agriculture, he really should visit an agricultural field station before he went back. And I happened to be the only readily available entomologist to give Moses a tour of the station on the day he came to Tifton.

Truth to tell, we mostly just went through the motions of inspecting labs and field plots, because as soon as we were introduced I mentioned my enthusiasm for nigerian literature. Moses -- a failed novelist, although he preferred the euphemism "unpublished" -- had a real passion for modern african literature and knew Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe personally. When I told him that I had once received a letter from Soyinka in response to my own fan letter, he positively beamed. And after I admitted to having sympathized with the biafran side in the 1967-1970 civil war -- Moses was an Igbo -- we might as well have been blood brothers.

And that was how I came to work at ESUT. The business of finding an entomologist to replace Moses went through the usual search process, of course, but it was all for appearances. Moses had made it plain to the brass that I was to be the guy, and that was all there was to it. It was probably the only corrupt thing he ever did, and it was all for someone else.

I got to Nigeria in late 1983, soon after the National Party had won a landslide victory in an election characterized by widespread violence and fraud. On 31 December the government fell to a military coup, followed by another two years later, neither of which made any real difference in my life. I hardly noticed that we were under a military dictatorship during those years. I was assigned to take over supervision of three of Moses's graduate students, but I had no classroom teaching in the first semester, so here was a grand opportunity to explore West Africa.

Nigeria is well known as a dangerous place with plenty of banditry and ethnic strife, and my guardian rector wasn't about to let bad things happen to me. Accordingly, I was assigned a university Land Rover with an armed driver.

The next fortnight was a golden age of daily marvels. We went north through the length of Nigeria and into Niger, then west to Burkina Faso -- I had long grooved

on the name Ouagadougou, although the city turned out to be nothing much -- and then back down to the coast through Benin before returning to Nigeria. As in much of the world, the environment has been fairly thoroughly trashed in West Africa, so that only a naive person goes there expecting a lot of scenes from a nature movie. Even so, there were features enough to make me get up each day in a state of great anticipation, especially as we kept moving into new zones. Genuine baobab trees, for example, looking like nothing so much as baobab trees. On the university campus I had encountered the multi-nest colonies of weaver ants (*Oecophylla*). Getting further up-country I saw my first fungus-growing termite (*Macrotermes*) mounds, which became more abundant and taller as we entered drier habitat. Wandering in a dry forest, I even came upon a raiding column of driver ants (*Dorylus*), flowing over the surface in a relentless, glistening, black stream.

There were also the bigger animals. I didn't see wild elephants or baboons until years later, but the pied crows were everywhere, and several times I saw hornbills flying high overhead. As we stopped for refreshment on the approach to Niamey, right by the side of the road, I spotted a huge tree with what seemed at a distance to be a rich crop of some peculiar fruit. Then two of the "fruits" took flight, and I realized that they were fruit bats, probably a thousand of them. And then there were the village weaverbirds -- somewhere in Burkina Faso, I believe -- building and squabbling in a dense colony of tree-filling nests. I never got tired of watching the little yellow rascals.

It was also in northern Burkina Faso that I first heard african drumming up close and personal. A village was marking the passing of a chief whose rank was such as to call for observance every night for a fortnight, and that meant a great deal of drumming far into the night. I was happy to wake up and go over to watch the proceedings on the night we were there, and what struck me was that the drummers were young, mostly teenagers or not much older. In other words, this was a central folk art whose survival was not in danger. And the next morning, before we set out, I heard the assembly call at the nearby primary school, which was not a bugle call or national anthem but genuine drumming. That was just about the coolest sound I ever heard, and to the end of my days any hint of african drums evoked that grand tour of orientation of my first weeks in Nigeria.

Having had a fine introduction to the region, in the new semester I got to work in earnest. In addition to my assigned teaching in General Entomology that first year, I was asked to develop a graduate course on a topic of my preference. This had to be social insects, a broad subject to which all biology students could relate. As far as I know, it was the first social insects course (aside from many beekeeping short courses and workshops) in Africa.

But man does not live by scenery and bugs alone. There is also woman. At this point I would like to share an important lesson from my personal experience.

Women come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, as well as a variety of racial types. I have my own preferences, of course, but these shift over time, and the lesson is in how they shift.

If I am in a place with a predominant racial type for any length of time, my standards of womanly beauty move toward that particular type. As an example, the first time I went to Japan I arrived with a view of Japanese women as little doll-like creatures, lovely but not to be taken seriously. After all, there was nothing there to hug. Before my nine-day visit was over, I found myself looking at them as real women and wishing I could hug some of them. In other words, I had come to see them through the eyes of Japanese men. I don't know if other red-blooded guys similarly adapt their standards of beauty to local conditions, but it has been a real blessing. Imagine the torment of the opposite tendency, if one's heart only responds to what is not there.

You now think you see where this is going, but you are only partly right. In a very short time after arriving in Nigeria I had warmed up in a big way to women with flat noses, large lips, tightly curly black hair, and very dark skin. Oh yes, and big bottoms, absolutely. Occasionally as I watched -- and I did watch -- one of the sisters walking down the street, I would be absolutely convinced from the movement that her ass had a mind of its own and might very well keep right on going straight when she turned a corner. That never happened, but I swear that there were moments of hesitation when that big lovely ass was considering going its own way.

Along with a growing appreciation of African women, I was increasingly finding other racial types unappealing. Especially white women. Goodness gracious, they were so pale, and some of them had such a great long beak for a nose and hardly any lips, not to mention the insubstantial butt. What could be even the least bit attractive about that?

Okay, after this build-up you must at least suspect what is coming, so let's get to the point. I met Berenice. She was white, with all those features that I have just called unattractive, yet to me she was beautiful. It was lust at first sight. I'm not trying to make a joke or sound crass there, and before very long I came to truly love Berenice Iseult Holloway, but that wasn't my first response. It was much longer before she reciprocated either my lust or my tender devotion, because -- let's face it -- this business of accommodating to local standards of beauty can work on both sides, and she had been in Africa long enough ... well, you get the point. In fact, if Berenice had not been on the rebound from an ugly divorce (with a very dark gentleman) she might never have given me a second glance.

Naturally, there was more to her than just outer beauty. She was a professor of folklore, fluent in three West African languages and a recognized expert on African folktales with a more impressive publication record than the rest of the Department of African Literature put together. By the sheer sweetness of her

nature and a fine sense of the pitfalls of academic politics, she was able to avoid the crippling jealousy that one might expect from her less successful and mostly older male colleagues. They seemed not even to mind her accent, which was annoyingly and almost preposterously English. I might as well confess that I, myself, never did get used to this last part of her makeup and couldn't quite shake the suspicion that she talked that way as some absurd private joke.

Within a few months Berenice & I were very happily living together. We were in on-campus housing and so able to walk to work and to have lunch together most days. New staff who hadn't heard how we met just assumed that we had come to Nigeria together.

We were never formally married. With one marriage behind me, I wouldn't have minded one way or the other, but Berenice regarded her own two marriages as unqualified failures, and she wasn't about to risk being burned again.

Our relationship lasted all of six years. We were very happy with each other the entire time, and it ended quite simply because I ended. Berenice was an indefatigable researcher, recording folktales from many peoples at a great rate, and we often made trips into the field together. On this particular occasion, though, her duties kept her behind. On a trip into Central Africa, with my heart torn between eagerness to get into new habitat and a yearning to get back to my beautiful un-wife, I watched in horror as the engine of our little single-propeller plane caught fire and stopped. Neither the pilot nor I felt a thing when we plunged to the savanna below. We were both just past our fortieth birthdays.

Chapter 9. COMING TO STAY

[As outlined in Chapter 6, in 1981 I returned to the Philippines to take up a faculty position at the Visayas State College of Agriculture (ViSCA). At the first meeting with my new department head, I was told that during the first year I would be teaching Insect Ecology and Industrial Entomology. Keeping my composure, I asked "And what is industrial entomology?" It turned out to be just what it sounds like, the industrial use of insects, as in beekeeping, silkworm production and the lac industry. The course did not yet exist, so it was up to me to design it, and I decided right away that I would make beekeeping the centerpiece of the subject. I had little experience in beekeeping, but to my good fortune a short course in it was about to be offered shortly before the start of the semester at the Los Baños Campus of the University of the Philippines (UPLB). I quickly arranged to go there and take the course. One of my classmates at UPLB was David M. General, an entomologist and farmer who taught at a college in southern Luzon. Together we planned a picnic on nearby Mt Makiling for the day after our course ended, and Dave made the smooth move of inviting his hometown neighbour Mercedes (Merci) Miguel, then a UPLB student. He also invited Merci's older sister, Maria Theresa (Maite) Miguel, who worked in Manila. Both sisters were pleased to join us, and it soon became apparent that there was some powerful chemistry between Maite and me. I had assumed all along that my initial two-year contract with ViSCA would be renewed at least a couple of times, but it was not. When it was close to ending it became apparent that I was, in fact, fired, so that I faced the prospect of leaving the Philippines. However, around that time Maite & I were married, and she put her energy and contacts to work looking for a new job for me. She was successful, so that I remained in the Philippines for almost four more years before we pulled out for North America. During that period our daughter SuperNova Yerakina was born, to be followed three years later by Francis Andrew in the USA. But what if Maite had not been at the Makiling Day picnic in 1981, so that when I was booted out of ViSCA two years later I had to leave the Philippines?]

Having lost my job at ViSCA and with nothing new in sight, I left the Philippines in mid-1983. Returning to Canada, I resumed job hunting, supporting myself with various part-time jobs while I looked for something suitable.

My persistence paid off as, after five months, I found that the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSC) in São Paulo state, Brazil was looking for an experienced specialist in social insects to build a research group around this growing subject area. I put in the effort to make a strong application, which was successful. At 33 and not much more than two years past the PhD, it was a stretch to call me "experienced", but they liked the fact that I had worked in another major tropical area, and my letters of reference were strong. Besides, as I learned much

later, five others had already turned down the job -- the salary was rather slim for a scientific team leader -- and UFSC was getting a bit desperate.

Arriving at my new posting, I found that my contract specified that I should be ready to teach in Portuguese by the start of the second semester. That was a bit of a surprise, but I kept my cool and undertook a crash programme to meet that goal. It helped that I already spoke Spanish passably well, although even after almost 20 years in Brazil I was never able to lose my marked foreign accent and intonation.

Those were a very happy two decades, as I explored the insect life of southern and central Brazil and mentored students and younger colleagues with a special focus on various groups of social insects. Despite its aspirations, UFSC did not become Brazil's foremost center for insect sociobiology, but it developed a very respectable reputation, and I am proud to have been the academic parent of so many leading entomologists.

My social life remained rather dull and frustrating for almost two years until one day, by purest chance, I ran into a colleague whom I knew slightly. Edilberto Soares was a professor of Mathematics, a field whose practitioners are notoriously socially awkward. Edilberto haltingly told me that he and his wife were having a little dinner party that very evening and wondered if, by the remotest chance, I was available. It didn't take a genius to see -- and Edilberto wouldn't have known how to conceal it -- what was really going on. One of their guests had had to cancel, so that they needed one more, and under the circumstances anyone of the right sex and approximately the right age would do. I found it all very amusing, but why not? I had no other pressing engagement that evening and didn't feel like working, so I stifled a snicker and told Edilberto that I would be delighted. His relief was palpable, even if I -- a foreign bug watcher -- was far from an ideal candidate in his eyes.

On arrival I saw more exactly what it was about. They needed me to sit beside Edilberto's widowed sister, Miranda. And once again, dear reader, you see where this is going.

The chemistry between Miranda and me was breathtaking obvious to me and, as I later learned, to her. Sitting in the presence of six sophisticated adults, we tried to play it cool, but some of the others were soon sharing knowing glances and discreet smiles. I casually asked Miranda if she spoke any other languages well, thinking that we might have one in common that the others did not. She said she spoke English with facility, but I knew that at least some of the others also did. What else? Well, she was not bad in French. We tried switching to that language, but neither of us had ever wooed in French, and besides, how could we be sure none of these other sophisticates was not at least as fluent as we?

I happened to mention that her perfume reminded me of a particularly gaudy flower whose scent had hung heavy in the night air the other evening, to which

Miranda regretted that she had not been to the city's botanic garden in more than two years. That was not too subtle, and under the cloak of a shared interest in plants we agreed to stroll the botanic garden the following Saturday.

It would be reckless to call it love at first sight, but it was already plain during that first stroll that there was an understanding between us. We were both so certain of this that we could have tied the knot the following Monday, but the courtship phase was just too delicious to let it go, so we strung it out for another year and a half. Then Miranda's 91-year-old aunt, the imperious head of the family, put her foot down and said there was absolutely to be a wedding before she died and we were to get on with it. So we did, just three weeks later.

Early in our marriage we learned that we were unable to have children, which bothered us very little. Between both sides of the family, we already had 16 nieces and nephews, with three more to come later, so that we were very happy to be Uncle & Auntie. Every few years we were happy to visit North America -- where the kinfolk and especially my little brother thought Miranda, with her dark skin and exotic accent, was just too precious -- but we agreed early on that we would reside permanently in Latin America.

After 15 years at UFSC, I accepted a professorship at the Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU) in Minas Gerais state. We were ready to make a change, and the fact that Miranda was able to find a very promising job there was certainly a major factor in our decision. Even so, UFU and Uberlândia did not live up to expectations. For one thing, Miranda's work was plagued by persistent discord with two co-workers who happened to be the company owner's niece and her neurotic husband. In addition, the city turned out to be rather dull culturally and in some other ways, and I wasn't able to build a successful research group. After persevering for more than four years, I announced to the university's relief that we were moving again.

This time it was to Panama, where I taught at the University of Panama until retirement and Miranda worked in a much more compatible graphic-design company. In contrast to Brazil, where the muted but persistent anti-foreign tendency (disguised as national pride) was occasionally rather irksome, the Panamanians found these two professionals with their odd accents and even odder outlook rather fascinating. Our social life was richer than ever before, so that within six months of arrival we were receiving so many invitations to dinner parties, birthday parties, weekend parties, weddings, even baptisms that we had to institute a strict rule limiting acceptance to one per week.

And there we remained to the end of our days. When we first moved here, the company for which Miranda worked was a new one, just two and a half years old, with growing but still modest income. One part of her employment package included a 6% share in the company in lieu of a higher salary. That worked out well. At the time of our retirement a dozen years later the company's value and

that of Miranda's 6% had grown by a factor of 20. Together with her astute financial management throughout our marriage, this allowed us a very comfortable retirement. We were pleased to give our nieces and nephews frequent breaks from their family responsibilities by hosting their children for a day or even longer. It required an effort on our part not to spoil the kids too much.

We traveled throughout Latin America and to a lesser extent abroad, having made a list during the busy working decades of places we long wanted to visit. And so we have lived happily ever after.

Of course, that does not mean living forever. We both continued in good health well into retirement. And then, while I quietly watched television one evening, an undetected aneurism in my 85-year-old aorta broke, and in seconds I was gone. Neither of us saw that coming. Miranda lived on to 98. Having buried two husbands, she had no thought of remarrying, but with an abundance of family all around here she certainly did not live in seclusion. And on occasion she, herself, was able to play the imperious head of the family and tell some dithering niece or nephew or grand-niece or grand-nephew to "get on with it and get married, already."

Chapter 10. AN ARCHIPELAGO BRIEFLY GLIMPSED

[In early 1990, after having for years gotten away with an array of temporary post-docs, my luck finally ran out and I found myself unemployed for real. I sent my wife and kids to visit relatives in the Philippines and moved north to stay with my brother and his wife in Ottawa while I continued job hunting. I was welcome as an unpaid visiting researcher in the Canadian National Collection of Arthropods (CNC), a unit of Agriculture Canada, so that I spent a happy time working on bugs while my savings gradually dwindled. It had been many years since I had worked at a job that was just a job, but finally it could no longer be avoided, so I went to work at United Parcel Service, loading delivery trucks every weekday morning from 04:00-08:00. In fact, it was quite a satisfactory job, as it kept me solvent while leaving enough time to work in the CNC each day. It just meant that I had to be in bed at 19:00 every night, so that I socialized hardly at all. The job hunting finally bore fruit. With the help of my old classmate Jung-tai Chao, I had applied for a one-year fellowship at Taiwan's National Museum of Natural Science, and against expectation it scored. A week after receiving notice of my fellowship, I received a most curious telegram from the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Trinidad, offering me a tenure-track position as Senior Lecturer in Entomology. Evidently, I had applied for just such an advertised position, but UWI's recruitment process moves so slowly that by that time I had all but forgotten about it. I got on the phone right away to the head of personnel and told her that it was a very attractive proposition, but I had already agreed to go to Taiwan for a year. In fact, I hadn't yet inked the contract for that fellowship, but I had agreed in principle, and besides, I am a lifelong sinophile. I wasn't about to give up my year in Taiwan for something as paltry as economic security for me and my three dependents. And then I made my bold move. "However, if UWI would be willing to wait a year I am prepared to commit myself right now." Even as I was saying that I thought "Whaaatttt???! In the present employment situation he is offered a very good job and asks them to wait a year. Can you believe the balls on the guy?" And to my astonishment UWI agreed, so in September 1991 I packed up the family and we headed for Trinidad, where I have been ever since. Things would certainly have been very different if UWI had very reasonably decided not to wait a year for me.]

I had a fine, fruitful year in Taiwan. My father had suggested that I would find it disappointingly westernized, but it was in fact still a very Chinese place. I made a daily exercise of improving my rudimentary Chinese, so that I soon reached survival level and then a bit beyond. What especially tickled me was that I utilized my Chinese name wherever feasible, including on my national-park permits and my savings account at the post office. And no one ever questioned that I was in truth

石達愷。 No one ever asked to see a birth certificate or passport, as they evidently just took it for granted that human beings had chinese names.

Returning to Ottawa at the end of my fellowship year, it was back to job hunting. Rather, it was a continuation of job hunting, as I had been looking throughout the year, even utilizing a family visit to the Philippines to scout for prospects there, all in vain.

In Ottawa it looked like I might soon be back loading trucks for UPS for a while, when I saw an ad for an academic position at the American University in Cairo, one of two foreign-accredited English-language tertiary schools in Egypt. They were looking for someone to teach and do research in terrestrial ecology. It would be a stretch to call myself an ecologist, but I was close enough and they wisely preferred someone with a varied background to interact with their diverse student body. After a phone interview with some rather oddball questions -- was it their way of testing me? -- I had the job.

The salary was rather modest, but this was offset by such things as university-provided housing and a generous travel allowance. We could even afford a full-time housekeeper, although the house didn't really need that much attention, so that she had an easy time of it. And for the first time my wife could effectively be on vacation most of the time. While I was at work, she went exploring with the children. The Sphinx, the pyramids, the various bazaars, even a two-day jaunt to Alexandria and the Mediterranean. In all the time we lived in Egypt she never got past bare survival level in Arabic -- I did somewhat better, although never so that I could teach in it -- while the children were soon chattering away with native fluency.

When Nova was ready to start school a year after arrival another foreign professor recommended the International School, but I was having none of it. Our children would go to a real egyptian school, where at least during school hours they would be immersed in the local culture. That worked out well. Many years later Francis -- ever the more polemical of the two -- was accosted by a muslim street preacher somewhere in Europe. The preacher had volubility working for him, but not much else. Like many of his kind he didn't really know his stuff, while Francis had made a study of the *Quran*. To the preacher's consternation, he was out-disputed in flawless Arabic by this chinese-looking man. I wasn't there, but I practically fell off my chair laughing when I heard about it.

Even a city with Cairo's over-rich history is still a city. I was able to bring some of my research on ants into the laboratory, keeping the colonies in artificial observation nests, but I also took every opportunity to get out into the countryside. This mostly meant the vast desert to the west and occasionally southward up the Nile. Already at that time there were fairly good roads to reach the southern uplands, but I always took the boat. All in all, it was usually more practical that

way, and what is more romantic than a boat ride on the Nile?

There was an additional attraction in those field trips. My wife & I were getting quite sick of each other. At first the allure of strange new places was enough to keep her happy, but she could hardly speak any Arabic and so was dependent on the company of Egyptian friends or more knowledgeable ex-patriates in her exploring. There came a time when she was often out of the house for most of the day. I suspected (and secretly hoped) that she was having an affair, but it turned out that she had simply discovered a congenial Filipino family that provided a new comfort zone.

After about four years of immersion in our separate worlds the situation was so obviously untenable that we came to an agreement. My wife would move to Canada to establish immigrant status with the help of relatives there, while Nova & Francis remained behind to finish the school year. After that, they would join her in Canada, returning to Egypt and me for some of the longer vacation periods. And with that we made a relatively clean break. I missed the children terribly during most of every year after that, but it was the best that could be done.

In the meantime, I took them on one of my up-the-Nile trips, which to them was the greatest adventure imaginable, even better than when they rode a camel to one of the pyramids. I could just imagine them during their first school year in Canada telling their classmates all about it and then turning to argue with each other in Arabic about this or that detail.

I did, in fact, visit Trinidad, the scene of the abortive job offer. Just once. In early 1999 I was set to attend a conference on tropical biodiversity in Puerto Rico. I noticed that an interesting conference on a similar theme was to take place in Venezuela just three weeks later and wangled the funding to attend both. Then I figured it would make little sense to fly all the way back to Egypt for the interlude. Much better to spend that time doing field work -- or just taking nature walks -- in Puerto Rico and/or Venezuela before going home.

As it happened, one of the smaller Caribbean airlines had an island-hopping flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico down to Trinidad with six stops in between. Oh yes, that was definitely for me. It was such a gas to go down that island chain in a small, low-flying plane, getting a good look at a great many wonderful little islands and actually landing on some of them. It even surpassed my best Nile excursion.

I overnights in Trinidad and then took a boat across to Venezuela, followed by land travel to my conference.

Will I ever visit that island arc for real? Maybe, but somehow I doubt it.

Chapter 11. A LIFETIME IN THE FAR EAST

[As my one-year fellowship in Taiwan's National Museum of Natural History was coming to an end in 1991, the director suggested that I might like to think of joining the regular staff. That was a very attractive proposition, and under normal circumstances I would have jumped at it. However, the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Trinidad had waited a year for me after we reached an agreement, and I couldn't very well go back on it. Although I was by no means dissatisfied with UWI and Trinidad, I was still open to the possibility of returning permanently to Taiwan. Accordingly, when my initial three-year contract was entering its final year I contacted the museum and indicated that I was open to discussing possibilities. However, the law in Taiwan had changed in the interim, so that it would have been difficult for the museum to hire a foreigner as a curator. I don't know that I would have returned to Taiwan for the long term if the law had allowed it, but the scenario is worth contemplating.]

My three years in Trinidad were both pleasant and fruitful, and I contemplated making it our home for life. That is, I thought about being an immigrant and not just an expatriate. That didn't happen, because I failed to get tenure in my third year. Having the necessary total of six years' university teaching experience by then, I was eligible to be considered, and I figured the university should be ready to make that commitment, but the faculty said no, not yet. Now, unlike in north-american academia, UWI does not have an upward-or-outward policy in this respect. That is, a lecturer who does not make tenure within a given period (usually seven years) is not automatically let go, so that there was nothing to stop me from just applying again next year and, if necessary, the year after. But I got into a snit and re-opened discussions with the science museum in Taiwan, which was happy to welcome me back for the long term. And even if the move back to Taiwan arose from a fit of pique, I have never found reason to regret it. There is probably a fundamental life lesson in that, although I couldn't tell you what it is.

The first thing was to get Nova into school and Francis into pre-school, while I got my research programme up and running again. However, I had no thought of limiting myself to the relatively narrow, straight-forward faunistic projects of my fellowship year in the museum. I had larger ambitions that embraced all of East Asia.

One of the pioneer naturalists for Taiwan was Tadao Kano (1906-?1945), the discoverer of several of the insect species that I had studied during the fellowship. Kano went on to explore other islands and mainland areas. The date and manner of his untimely death are unknown, as he simply fell out of contact in 1945 as a soldier in Borneo.

Kano was of course much appreciated in his native Japan, as well as in Taiwan.

Led by the brothers Sôichi & Seiki Yamane, I and a few other Japanese and Taiwanese colleagues founded the Tadao Kano Society for East Asian Exploration. You can think of us as a miniature National Geographic Society, although with a much more entomological emphasis. Members of the society made many small exploratory trips throughout the region, but the activity that came to give us widespread public recognition was our annual expedition of up to 20 scientists of various nationalities and specialties. We would pick a place of interest and study it intensively, yielding a multi-author annual report that has become the international standard for such undertakings. In the 30 years of its existence to date, the Kano Society has gone to a novel location each year with one exception. Our very first expedition was to Mt Kinabalu in Borneo, the highest peak between the Himalayas and New Guinea. It is the world center of diversity of pitcher plants (*Nepenthes*), among other unique features. Twenty years later, with a fair amount of turnover in our membership, many of the younger colleagues had never been to Kinabalu. This, together with the many new research techniques that could be brought to bear, justified a return visit, my fourth to that wonderful mountain. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

The society's rise in international recognition opened new doors to us. The government of Indonesia, for example, eased its normally very restrictive policies on collection and export of specimens. That of Burma, which had previously denied us entry altogether, practically welcomed us. In addition, China became much more open in general, and we had a very productive expedition to Yunnan with several Chinese colleagues joining us for the first time. We have yet to be allowed into North Korea, but we continue to hope and press. I have missed only one annual expedition, but I am now past 70 years old and will in time have to pass on all but the easy ones. The problem is of course that the Kano Society does not do easy expeditions.

With the annual expeditions and many smaller field trips, I came to spend almost as much time outside of Taiwan as at home. This almost certainly delayed the inevitable rift with my wife, something that had long been developing. To put it quite simply, we had grown apart and were becoming quite fed up with each other. I won't go into specifics or try to say who was at fault for what, just note that the homefront was not a happy place to be.

One day, while I was off in the Ryukyus, my wife decamped with the children to her parents in the Philippines. I was furious. This sort of reckless unilateral action was nothing short of criminal. Besides, I was convinced that I could provide a much better single-parent home if it came to that and that Taiwan was a much better place for the two to grow up. I reasoned, pleaded and shouted over the telephone, all to no avail, so I had to go the legal route. The fact was that, at my wife's suggestion we had obtained Canadian citizenship for Nova and American for USA-born Francis. Neither was a citizen of the Philippines, and the two north-

american governments were not about to let their nationals be kidnapped to a (to the children) foreign country.

It quickly became a consular matter, and within months Nova & Francis were back home in Taiwan. Until they came of age they went to the Philippines on vacation each year, always with strict guarantees of their return. After many years they both emigrated to Canada, where their fluency in Chinese counts as a very marketable skill.

As for me, I am staying right here in the Far East. I have never remarried, which is not to say that I am a recluse.

Chapter 12. WHO WAS THAT STONE FOX WITH THE CONE ON HER HEAD?

[I spent December 1994 in Argentina, returning in the first week of January to find that Maite had cleared out and taken the children to Canada. It didn't bother me very much that she & I had parted company, but I was devastated that Nova & Francis had been taken away. Less than a month later, I was walking on campus when I came upon two women, one middle-aged and the other her daughter, who seemed in some doubt as to where they were going. The daughter was hellishly cute, although I had to wonder about her hairdo, the center-piece of which was a coiled cone rising from the top of her head. I asked if I could be of assistance. Yes, they were looking for the School of Continuing Studies to see if the daughter could do a particular course. It was the noon hour, when I was pretty sure the office would be closed, so I suggested that they come with me to have some lunch, which they were happy to do. So, we sat there in the cafeteria, eating and shooting the breeze, although the mother and I did almost all the talking. I could hardly get a word out of the daughter, beyond learning that her first name was Karen. She mostly just giggled and looked shy. I don't recall how I maintained contact after delivering them to Continuing Studies, but somehow I did, and once I got Karen away from parental influence some days later we found that we had major chemistry. In time she became the third Mrs Starr. One wonders what would have transpired if I hadn't quite met them on that day in January 1995.]

Walking across campus, still grieving for the loss of the children, I noticed two women standing and looking as if unsure which way to go next. One of them was young, the other about my age. I was on the point of approaching to ask if I could be of assistance when the middle-aged woman pointed in one direction as if she suddenly knew the way, and off they walked. As they did so I noticed that the younger woman was damn cute, except that her hair-do didn't suit her at all.

I proceeded to an on-campus cafeteria, when I had a submarine sandwich. Good stuff. Walking back to the lab I reflected on the younger woman -- with barely a thought for the other, presumably her mother -- and the idea that winding her hair into that cone on the top of her head was definitely a mistake. I still think of her about once a year, wondering what became of her and whether she still carries that preposterous cone.

For more than two years life continued as before, a daily round of normal academic activities, then home to an empty house in the evening. It was punctuated by occasional social events, including a few dates that went nowhere.

Then, at the biennial regional social-insects conference, I met Remedios. These meetings are most commonly held in Venezuela or Colombia, although years later we hosted it in Trinidad. That year, 1997, it was in Guanare, Venezuela. Remedios worked at the University of the Valley (Universidad del Valle) in Cali,

Colombia. She specialized in termites, while my main expertise is in social wasps. Each of us, then, was an expert in the group that the other knew least. We spent a lot of time together during that four-day conference, including a one-day field trip. Impelled by almost breath-taking interpersonal chemistry and under the pretext of teaching each other specialized scientific lessons ... oh, whom am I kidding? We knew perfectly well what was going on and, to judge by some of the knowing glances that I caught, so did many of the colleagues. Still, they were cool about it and, except for a couple of clueless graduate students, left us by ourselves during coffee breaks.

There was little doubt where things were going. Remedios was in her early 40s, recently divorced, childless, and a lot of fun. She had no particular attachment to her job or the city of Cali, so when the question arose of where we should live together she readily agreed to move to Trinidad, where one of the international agricultural organizations just happened to be looking for a termite specialist. When my kids visited from Toronto they were always cordial to Remedios and glad for the chance to practise speaking Spanish, but I wouldn't say any real bond ever developed between them.

A physical description is perhaps in order. Remedios was a statuesque mulata, not exactly pretty but, to me, decidedly beautiful. She was relatively slim-hipped for her height and build, but with a most marvelous pair of tits that I never got tired of watching when she walked. In later times, whenever I asked what she wanted for her birthday, the invariable answer was "Actually, I'd really like a nicer ass." And I always said I would see what I could do. I don't know if she somehow thought I could do something about it, but I have always suspected that my perennial failure to deliver contributed to the breakdown of our four-year relationship.

That and her mounting mental problems. One of my long-time rules is never to sleep with anyone whose troubles are worse than my own, and with Remedios I was in flagrant breach of this rule. While I was sympathetic to her troubles and tried hard to be supportive, the worsening pace of screams and tears finally became too much. If I had stuck around there would have been two lunatics in the house instead of one, or so I rationalized. It was not courageous of me, I know, but I took a one-year leave of absence and went back to the Philippines, where I did a bit of field research and a great deal of writing. I communicated hardly at all with anyone in Trinidad while I was gone.

When I returned at the end of the year, Remedios had cleared out. We never again communicated directly, but I later heard that her brother had come over and taken her back to Colombia, where she ended her days hopelessly delusional in a mental hospital. She had been estranged from her family during the time we were together, so that I never met any of them. I sometimes wonder if they blame me for how things turned out.