

# **From Biltong to Beef Jerky & Beyond**

by

Michael Klerck

**a vonPeter Publication**

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a **vonPeter**

Publication

Michael Klerck was born in 1955, in Cape Town, South Africa and soon went on to spend a significant part of his childhood on the infamous Robben Island where his parents met during the war. He began writing at an early age, and concentrated for some time on writing short stories, one of which was published by Stand Magazine, Newcastle. He qualified as a teacher at the then well-known Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College, and went on to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree through the University of South Africa where he read courses in Economics, Communication and Philosophy while majoring in Psychology and English. He spent six years teaching in the former homeland of KaNgwane near Swaziland and began lecturing in tertiary education in 1987 which saw him involved in a number of pilot teaching programmes.

He is the author of a number of textbooks for the college market, including one on Public Finance that has enjoyed one of the longest uninterrupted runs in the college market since first published in 1996.

He has also had various articles published by Men's Health, South Africa, and is the winner of the 2001 Mondi Paper Magazine Writer's Award for work in the same magazine.

He is the author of the novel ***The Key To Tantalus***, a children's fantasy book, and an adult literary novel called ***Where The Light Is***.

He lives in White Rock, near Vancouver, British Columbia.

## Foreword

As a proud citizen of both Canada and South Africa, I have come to believe that these are the two greatest countries on Earth: South Africa in its brave struggle to untangle itself from tragedy while still showing the world how to do it in so many daring and noteworthy ways, and Canada with its big heart and warm, gentle spirit so often setting an example to the rest of the world. As a result I call myself a South AfriCanadian.

There are so many positives, such potential in both, that having been raised in one and adopted by another has been at once fascinating and harrowing.

As I found myself blundering through the arduous immigration and integration process, themes of counter-balance, paradoxes and contrasts came glaringly into focus. Adopting the heritage of a new country while being acutely aware of my own allowed me to recognise some of the cultural curses in both, and how they stand in stark contrast to their potential.

I have tried to give some insights into these two great countries, and my journeying back and forth between them. I include the *Beyond* in my title because many people consider other countries for emigration, and my highlighting elements of both SA or Canada has meant that other countries' individual personalities, failings and successes also emerged; not least those of America, directly below Canada.

I am hoping this read will be more of an entertaining travelogue than anything else.

**Michael Klerck**

White Rock, February 2016

- immigration is not for sissies -

*Dedicated to my brave family, my Canadian friends, and those  
I left behind.*



**“... and then I took a long, long rest on Robben Island, when I didn't do much travelling.”** President Nelson Mandela, (at a gala dinner, in Cape Town, 27 September 1997)

## **One: from one former British Colony to yet another**

The province of British Columbia is 77.37% the size of South Africa; or to put it another way South Africa is only 22.6% larger in size, yet its population is eleven times bigger. And there are 1.5 times more South Africans than there are Canadians even though Canada is some 8.2 times larger in total area.

British Columbia is a stunningly beautiful place with the Pacific lapping its left flank and bountiful mountains gracing all of its interior.

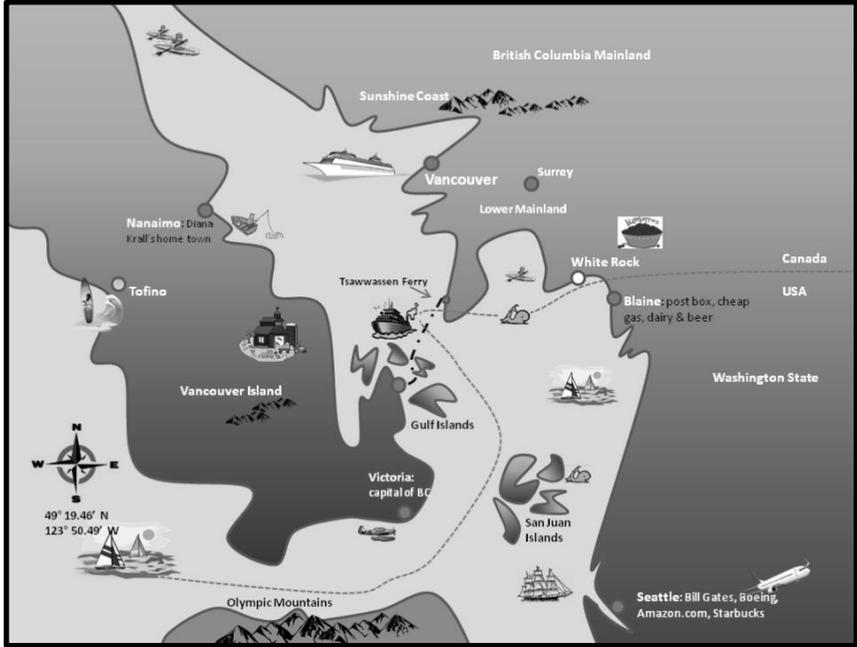
They plant 200 million trees upon, below and around these mountains every year in BC which is one of ten provinces in Canada. They then proceed to cut down approximately sixty-seven million annually with 90% of the lumber going to America. All houses and most apartment blocks are made out of wood. Be prepared to hear most of what goes on in any house or apartment.

For all the negative press about it being the murder capital of the world, Johannesburg has its own tree story.

It is in fact the world's largest man-made forested city: this means that it has more trees planted by its inhabitants than any other city in the world. And while we're talking about flora, I am not prepared to allow Johannesburg to upstage Cape Town in any way.

Few know that the Western Cape province of South Africa is one of only six floral kingdoms on the entire planet. Imagine dividing

the whole world up into six regions, from a plant point of view, and then showing that the famous Table Mountain for instance has more species of flowers than the entire British Isles: that's England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales put together.



There seem to be very few similarities between Canada and South Africa at first glance - I suppose if I scratched around a little I might find a few more, such as the fact that Cape Town and Vancouver both have winter rain. And that Cape Town and Vancouver are regularly placed in the Top Five most beautiful cities in the world. For good reason.

Although I am in love with San Francisco, another city in the Top Five, I don't think it trounces Cape Town, and although Vancouver is also surrounded by mountains and nestles against the sea like Cape Town, it is also unlike Cape Town because it does not have two oceans. Neither does it have any waves. Or sharks. Or penguins. I often feel quite sorry for visitors, particularly the Chinese

who arrive in Vancouver looking for penguins: I do refer them to Cape Town, though.

We have seals all the way up to Alaska which in fact starts on the eastern border of BC itself.

Talking of seals, I am often bewildered by the interest in Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco - the city itself is so special that frankly I would encourage people to spend precious moments downtown rather than waste time watching onlookers who come from afar to gawk at the smelly seals which are, in my view, the only attraction of any curiosity on the Pier. If you are familiar with the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront in Cape Town you will be forgiven for being disillusioned with San Francisco's own attraction; then again I suppose I am biased.

But back to Vancouver: just to make sure you're as confused as I was while Vancouver Island has nothing to do with Vancouver the city, it does house the capital of BC which is not Vancouver, but Victoria. And it positions itself just off the mainland of Vancouver metropole, due West. See map, if you wish.

Using a South African analogy, the island is about the same size as a slice of land from Cape Town to Keurboomstrand, just a little way from Plettenberg Bay, with an average width of land from the coast, inland to Oudtshoorn.

That's a big island, almost the size of Taiwan.

Although the fifth largest island in the world is also Canadian - the little-known Baffin Island - Vancouver Island is the 43rd largest in the world, with Great Britain being only 6.7 times larger.

I love Vancouver, but on my list Cape Town still comes first.

It is a difficult place to leave, Cape Town.

South Africans who need to move somewhere a lot more familiar should rather emigrate to Australia where the houses are made of brick and mortar; you will also drive on the *right* side of the road and the light-switches allow you to flick them up to turn them *off*, instead of *on* in North America. This is very confusing, and if you want to show symptoms of early dementia emigrate to Canada and spend the first three years trying to remember which way is on and which is off.

Talking of light switches should you decide to move here you will probably end up buying or building a home that will have a good number of light switches that will do absolutely nothing when flicked up or down. In our 5,400 sq ft home (that's over 500 sq metres and the largest house I had ever set foot in), I counted nine switches that even after seven years I am none the wiser about.

I had ordered a handmade Valve Audio amplifier from a South African manufacturer just before we left Cape. It arrived, as promised, the day before the removal company's pantechicon backed up in our driveway to load all our belongings, so I included this precious purchase without opening the box.

We moved into our new home a month after we had arrived which meant that in this time we had house hunted, signed an offer to purchase and received title. Buying a house, unlike almost everything else in Canada, such as a divorce, takes place over a much shorter period of time than in SA. Imagine: we landed January 19th. We signed an offer for a house January 24th. We move in February 12th.

On moving day it started snowing just as another pantechicon arrived to offload our belongings for our new home in South Surrey, about 40 minutes south of Vancouver itself.

Amongst the many many boxes (two of which contained cheap Tupperware - yes, I know: stupid) was the amplifier.

Now if you knew me, you'd know that I am fastidious, and picky to a fault. When I move, by the time the rest of the family comes home, every carpet is laid, every bed made, the kitchen is unpacked and all the pictures are hung. That's me. I am a miracle, and a nightmare.

I had specially organised for Shaw (read Telkom for SA) to send someone so that by the time the family arrived home that evening we would have television, an internet connection and a telephone (okay; same day service here so something else that does happen quickly).

He was a short Chinese technician who busied himself inside cupboards, along skirting boards (baseboards) and with many plugs,

boxes, extenders, relays, routers, Ethernet cables and other paraphernalia.

All while I set about busily hanging more than thirty pictures thinking how lucky it was that the walls were all made out of wood and board, so the picture hooks went in quickly. Yes, wood and board; entire houses are literally stapled together, with a staplegun - no kidding. Which reminds me; *Staples* is also a large office furniture and equipment store that is worth visiting for electronic goods.

Back to the amplifier. The off-loaders arrived in the lounge with it in its box. Like many baby-boomers of my generation I am hi-fi crazy. I had been dreaming of this amp for some time, and it had taken me years to save the money for its purchase.

I took the box out of the man's hands and cradled it in my arms like one would a newborn. The lounge was already complete, with most pictures already hung, even though they hadn't finished off-loading yet. I carefully yet almost impatiently opened the box and surveyed the new amplifier that my friend had specially designed for my new 110-volt world. She was beautiful.

I placed her on top of the small oak hi-fi cabinet which had started its life as the medicine cabinet in the nurses' station in the Royal Naval Hospital in Simon's Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

My mother and stepfather, a naval officer, had both had an eye for good furniture, collector's pieces and history. The amp looked quite at home on top of this particular cabinet that had followed me around most of my life. I plugged her in, making sure I read, again, the 110V signage at the back. Sure enough, it was there. In Canada there are no switches for appliances on any wall. If you plug a vacuum into the wall, you control it with the appliance's switch only. So if its in, its on.

The CD player's power plug was already plugged into its own socket and working. I inserted the amp's plug above it.

I switched the amp on.

Nothing happened.

When someone as anal as I, who organises the lives of others so carefully and meticulously, has something go wrong or not func-

tion, a little universe inside stops working and I turn into the novel of that other African, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

I was by this time already starting to bend under the general strain of emigration and, not least, my own determination to finish the house so the family could sit down to a meal that evening as if we were still at home in Wynberg, Cape Town, so I really didn't want anything to go wrong. Music must go with a meal, after all.

Upstairs I had another team assembling our new beds; the team comprised people who happened to be what locals call East-Indians. Durban Indians are Hindu, Canadian East Indian men wear turbans and are Sikhs - very different. None of this matters, but when the leader of the team came downstairs to say, with his head bobbing from one side to the other, and in a lilting tone so that it sounded like a beautiful piece of music my amp should have started playing, and said: "Hello. We have finished assembling the beds, and I thought you might like to have these ..," and angled his hand so that a number of nuts and washers slid downwards into mine, I listened without registering. I simply put them into my pocket, said *thank you very much* and continued to look mournfully in the direction of my brand new, hand-made valve amplifier.

Still no light. My CD player, bought in anticipation of this moment, and now proudly positioned on top of the amp itself, worked. But not the amp. The thought of having no music; of having to ship the amp backwards and forwards to be repaired left me feeling very unsettled.

The bed construction team left after my inspection, with some beds minus the screws and washers that were now in my pocket. I wondered, as I walked down the stairs, back into the lounge, who would fall out of bed first - the kids or us.

The short Chinese technician responded to an offer of tea and we both sat on my *riempie bankie* - a bench made out of wood and with slatted gut that formed a base to sit on. Whenever I was to sit on the bankie I would always be grateful that, unlike Australia which we had also considered moving to, Canada had not expected us to cut the leather riempies off because they were made from animal gut. Had they done so, I would have had nothing to sit on.

I was thinking more about the hapless amp itself than the safety that the animal gut provided below my buttocks on the bankie.

He said, "You're not looking very happy; I know it is stressful moving, but this is a beautiful home you have here." He sounded like a father who was telling his son to be grateful. He was right, of course.

I felt better. "Thank you. But I am quite desperate - I have a brand new amplifier and it doesn't work. And I can't send it all the way back to South Africa." My response tailored off into a little whine, so I stopped.

He looked at the amp, got up, and walked around the lounge perimeter.

Now and then he flicked a switch upwards: this took some time, not only because he was being meticulous and turned to see what the amp was doing, but also because the lounge itself had no fewer than ten wall switches.

I wondered why he was switching the lights off. Some of them went on, some of them went off. I decided I was confused. To be perfectly honest I remained, as I have indicated elsewhere, somewhat confused for a long time.

He continued to flick more and more switches. By this time he was at the opposite side of the room. What on earth was he doing trying to turn the amp on from there, I wondered.

Click! I spun around. The small LED-light on the face of the amp lit up brightly. I exclaimed loudly, knocking my tea over. I ran across to him and could not decide whether to smash my hand against the bank of multiple switches on the wall, or pick the short technician up in my arms.

"What the hell did you do?" I asked.

"Oh, it's just a lamp switch."

I looked at him dubiously.

"In most rooms, one of the wall plug positions is for a lamp, and it's the only plug on the wall that is controlled by a switch."

I immediately put some music on and we sat side by side on the bankie after I had replenished my tea mug. I was smiling.

There were two more switches above the main bank of wide light switches (up for on, down for off). One was a *finger flip-switch* (for want of a better description), rather than the wider, flatter switches that were ubiquitously positioned on every wall. I stared at it. My new friend saw my gaze. "That's for the fire," he said.

"Fire?"

"Yeah. It probably turns on the gas at the fireplace here..." He pointed to the glass panel next to him, on his right. I shook my head.

It was the beginning of a long journey discovering so many switches, machines - like the hot water cylinder situated in the basement, three stories down and heated by gas - control panels, sliding controls, thermostats, and many other contraptions that took an age to decipher, learn about or finally abandon after never finding out what they were for.

I decided we could do without a fire for one night, and so kept away from the switch.

When my family complained (they would complain about the one thing I had not decided to activate, amongst the 1,200 other items that were not only unpacked, but in their proper places) I spent most of the next week flicking the finger-switch up and down without any flames appearing.

The fire would take another technician an hour of consultation, manipulation and instruction before anything happened. When he told me we had done what was required with the various knobs and switches inside the fireplace that activated the pilot-light, it took another twenty minutes, staring at the empty black hole (with the finger-switch on the wall behind me flicked upwards) before the fire actually came on with a loud *Poohf*.

Not one technician, handyman or friend has ever been able to fully explain to me how a switch on the far wall of a house results in gas being delivered to a fireplace on the other side of the room.

After spending most of that entire week getting the fire to burn, my son then arrived one evening and, probably in an attempt to show some interest and solidarity, he asked, "What's this switch for, Dad?" and flicked it down, which to him was *on*, in anticipation

of something happening. Something did: Poohf! The flames disappeared.

If arriving somewhere in an adopted country has its challenges, one has also to deal with the fact that Africa can be a difficult place to leave in the first place.

Most lives, locations and situations present us with deep ironies and contrasts. This phenomenon would both torment and delight us when we compared our life in what is undoubtedly the most beautiful city in the world, Cape Town, to the excitement of a new country: Canada.

I had longed to leave behind the political turmoil of South Africa and its lack of safety. Something still gripped me, though and as attractive as the suburbs of Sydney or Vancouver appeared to be, I was sure I was missing something right there in Cape Town. I was determined to find some direction, or inner meaning.

I found myself clinging to my heritage. My original forefather arrived in Cape Town to serve as the Receiver of Revenue there in 1792.

One hundred and sixty three years later I *set foot*, in the arms of my mother, on the quayside of the small harbour on Robben Island, little knowing that I would spend the most impressionable years of my childhood there.

Bartholomew Dias, a Portuguese royal, was probably the first to sail around the Cape in 1488; one of his captains, Jao del Infante, in Dias's second ship, landed on Robben Island sometime after him to *molest the seals and penguins*.

I certainly hope this meant only to *eat* them.

These Portuguese explorers must have done so in Winter when the northwester blows regularly up to one hundred kilometres and hour, and sometime more, and consequently named *it Cabo das Tormentas*, or The Cape Of Storms.

I am sure the word *tormentos* is quite appropriate, and for generations my family and others have certainly experienced some level of torment that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the weather.

*Rob* is the Dutch word for seal, *robbe* being the plural, hence the name of the island itself: Robbe Eiland, sounding much like Robben Island to an English ear. Translations worked either way, of course, the Cape Colony being occupied by both the British and the Dutch and I am reminded of the little town called Hansop or Hensop, from the British *hands up!*

It seems that ever since then the island has, in different ways, been *molested*. Jan Van Riebeeck (the rather suspect looking employee of the Dutch East India Company, who in fact spent very little time at the Cape, but became the *father* of South Africa) and his successor saw the potential of the island as a prison. The British kept prisoners there and in 1845 Lord Charles Somerset had lepers moved to the island where they were to *live and die unwanted on an island of terror*.

For me, however, Robben Island was a special place. The first four years of my life were filled with happy memories of the island as my home. Far from being just a prison, it was first an army and then a naval base where my parents met and were married.

While various nations of the world spoilt and abused it, there is no doubt that nature wanted it to be special also. My father, a naval officer at the time, with the sanction of Doctor Hey, director of Cape Nature Conservation, turned an area into a nature reserve.

A 'Noah's Ark' berthed in the harbour sometime in 1958. My father stocked the island with tortoise, duck, geese, buck which included Springbok, Eland, Steenbok, Bontebok and fallow deer, Ostrich and a few Wildebeest which did not last long – all except the fallow deer are indigenous to the Cape. Many animals remained for decades, until quite recently when a lack of management and culling of rabbits resulted in nearly all dying. This menagerie included three species of tortoise - the most recently discovered in 1998 - two Parrot Beaked specimens that remained undetected until then.

The Leopard or Mountain tortoises might have suspected the past terror; perhaps they had no intention of being a part of a future infamy, but they often attempted the swim back to the mainland. Boats would lift them out of the sea in Table Bay and return them to us. I have had all sorts of experts over the years tell

me these *must* have been turtles. After years of searching I have been vindicated! Dr Ernst Baard of Cape Nature Conservation is adamant that this is one of the very few species of tortoise that does swim; apparently they have a vastly increased lung capacity, compared to other tortoises, which makes them quite buoyant. So my memory served me correctly: the boats did return tortoises and not turtles!

None of the original twelve remain, according to a Flora and Fauna audit done by Sea Fisheries. Four more were introduced in 1995 - these seem to have more easily accepted their new home as they are still residents.

One resident brought across a large Leopard tortoise discovered in a friend's yard in Newlands, Cape Town. He lived in our garden and grew big enough to climb over the wall and roam the island much like the sheep in Van Riebeeck's time. As children we were able to ride his great frame comfortably, as did some smaller grown men.

The buck and ostriches seemed equally happy and the ducks and Egyptian Geese were assigned a home in the old quarry, which had, some three hundred years before, supplied the dressed stone for the foundations of the famous Castle in the mother city just across the water. At the time of my residence the quarry bristled with fish.

Not all animals were wild. Za-Za was a deaf Dalmatian - she joined my mother just before I was born and lived without the fear of traffic. My mother only had to stomp on the wooden floors of our house to summon her. I was reminded of her, and the bizarre nature of coincidence, some time ago when I walked into the Cafe Verdi in Wynberg, Cape Town, and saw a young man with a Dalmatian pup outside. I told my companion the story of my mother's dog, he overheard and said he had read about her in the South African Navy archives, bought a pup and named her after the original. This some fifty five years later.



The dog I remember was my spaniel Lindy - soft and gentle enough to put up with my favourite pastime of sticking my fingers

in her ears and sitting on her when she carried pups, and faithful enough to sleep under my pram and growl at anyone who came near. The island, as you can imagine, was her paradise - rabbits or wild hare and birds to chase with frantic, delirious excitement, but seldom catch.

One animal that was an integral part of my happy childhood for a time was a buck called Bambi. She came across on the *ark*, alone and frightened. Her parents had been destroyed in a typical Cape fire. My mother assigned her to the empty chicken-coop (kippie-hok) at the bottom of the garden and she spent some time with us before being introduced into the *wild*. I fed her three times a day from my redundant bottles and the special childhood memory of her sucking my finger at the end of each meal lives with me. I can still almost feel her diminutive tail flicking through



the air with uncontrollable excitement at the sight of me. Or was it just the milk in the bottle?

All the inhabitants knew each other well. There was no crime, and nothing can take the place of growing up in a completely safe environment. I call it an island mentality - the feeling of being part of a special community ran through to everyone. My grandfather, then a retired Colonel and near the end of his life, had a frightening experience while pushing me in a pushcart far from our home. He fell badly and could not get up. I lay on my side, still strapped to my seat and, while he struggled to rise, my only attempt at showing sympathy was a bout of uncontrollable laughter.

Luckily for both of us a member of the now disbanded Cape Corps drove past in a troop carrier, helped both the old man and myself up, and returned us to our home. I was recorded as being indignant at his ending what I considered a unique adventure.

My mother's penchant for organising took expression in a massive carols by candlelight with a nativity tableau in which nearly all the inhabitants of the island took part. The naval tiffies (technicians) constructed large wings for the Archangel which consisted of real feathers, and the halo surrounding her tall frame was embedded

with lights which she controlled by means of a switch. The stable and manger were constructed by volunteer sailors, carpenters and artificers. The floodlighting was provided by my father and the head of the public works department who both battled against a raging Southeaster. I, at the age of four, was the stable boy.

The feeling of apprehension and excitement as I walked into the floodlit stadium, leading Mary's donkey, is still with me. The choir was given additional volume and depth with the naturally harmonizing voices of the black and coloured inhabitants. Few inhabitants sat in the stands – almost the entire island population was in the tableau itself - but we did get eager support from friends and family who came over especially for the event. The sound of Silent Night still today evokes the memory of the small children of the island walking up, hesitantly, to peer at the babe in the manger and deposit their gifts which were later dispatched to an orphanage in Cape Town.

Some inhabitants, including a few high-school pupils made the trip to the mainland each weekday on one of the two ferries - the Wolraad Woltemade and the Issie, named after Mrs Jan Smuts, whose husband, a former South African prime minister and international statesman. I sometimes made the journey sans mother but with my Nanny to meet my grandmother under the old station clock at Cape Town station.

Today we smile knowingly at Capetonians revelling in the Waterfront, arguably the most breathtaking waterfront in the world. The ferries berthed at the Victoria Wharf and the Harbour Cafe was a familiar stop. Nothing can match a stormy sea on a Sunday afternoon and the prospect of returning to our haven after a weekend in the *wild* city. There were the sailing trips on *Caprice* and other yachts; catching crayfish from small dinghies, and the night-time fishing expeditions by torch.

Capetonians are famous for the appreciation of their heritage and the Navy, famous for its hospitality, decided on an open day. Navy and civilian inhabitants braced themselves for the influx of one or two hundred people. I can remember a great throng of many hundreds and the ferries and their exhausted crews were

busy well into the night returning them to the mainland. A weary island population spent most of the latter part of the day in search of wayward Capetonians who had wandered all over, some thinking a night on the island preferable to returning to town.

I was familiar with the mechanics of the lighthouse - a special privilege for a young child, but just another part of life on *the island*. Mornings meant gathering in the library where my mother became, magically, a teacher and read to a class of pre-school children. There was a large swimming pool at the Mess. Knowing my love affair with water today, it is strange to vividly remember how frightened I was of it. My mother could no longer take my whimpering one day and hurled me in the deep end (I did have arm bands). She then couldn't get me out.

My soft-spoken Xhosa nanny, Mary (ironically from the same tribe as Nelson Mandela who would arrive on the island just a few years later), and I walked the island: long, safe walks of discovery enriched by the crisp, fresh sea air every day come rain or shine. The bird life is still magnificent, and the view of Table Mountain cannot be matched anywhere. The island farm was a favourite and a visit to the milking sheds was not complete without a search for the resident mole snake who was assigned a 'bunk' in the rafters in return for a diminished rat population. I cannot remember whether it was assigned any rank though.

Near the farm were the remains of a beautiful private garden tended by the Matron of the leper hospital and which had flourished in spite of the fire which had destroyed that part of the island when the lepers were removed. The rambling roses and variety of shrubs seemed to grow in colourful support of the courage displayed by all the people incarcerated over so many years. It was a place many visited with quiet reverence.

We also visited the now famous quarry for long-term prisoners doing hard labour. Now that a plaque stands in honour of Nelson Mandela and other heroes, it is strange to admit that I remember sitting on a rock, as a small boy, and watching lonely sun-drenched men lifting, in slow motion as if to forever remember the pain, their heavy picks and shovels.

Although they were clearly out of bounds to us, I do remember having brief conversations with them, practising my elementary Xhosa each time they saw me. Nanny, probably born in the same region as most of them, struck up a friendship with many non-political prisoners who, surprisingly enough, walked the island with relative freedom in small work parties. Long conversations and much laughter resulted from these encounters. These hardened prisoners were, to me, just friendly men with whom I chatted on most days.

What of Nanny and me? - I suppose we were a woman and a child, full of chatter and laughter, and a sad reminder of home. I realise now that it was her own culture, her life that first introduced me to the very Circle itself.

Nanny is gone. Many of the prisoners are now well-known, immaculately dressed men, imprisoned in our television sets and who speak of *the island* with ambivalent reverence. My own personal claim to fame, and a wonderful dinner startler is that I was born there. The fact that I moved there when only a few months old and was, in fact, born in Cape Town, has never perturbed me.

My mother, however, often reminds me of my indiscretion. I put it down to poetic license; I'll not change my CV for anything. She, in fact, like others, served in the Army there in 1942 and then again in 1946. She met my father there while visiting friends and they were married on the island in the Anglican church in 1952.

There can be no doubt that ex-inhabitants and visitors must wish for some safe sanctuary in the future. No development besides a careful reconstruction of the architecture and natural beauty can give any justice to its rich history and the many conflicting memories. The recent decision to turn it into a tourist attraction under the umbrella of the Department of Arts and Culture is, perhaps, the best choice.

There cannot be any doubt, either, that those friendly prisoners would have liked to have experienced the island as I did. Far from being just a "*dumping ground for offenders*", as one editorial in a Cape Town newspaper described it, the island has played host to a great deal of normality and even celebration.

Perhaps then, it is fitting to relate one last memory. One day a work-detail of prisoners arrived at our front door. I clung to my mother's side while the spokesman for the group handed over a gift roughly wrapped in brown paper. They had heard from Nanny that Bambi had been released - I had lost a friend and they wanted to show some solidarity. They had carved, lovingly, and probably with very primitive tools, the gift of a wooden spoon.

The spoon took pride of place in the kitchen and always reminded me that along with the memory of a very special place, there are always memories of special people.

I have never had any doubt, somehow, that this truly unique experience has made me feel different; peculiar.

So you can imagine how difficult my task was to become in choosing a country to emigrate to. Leaving Cape Town is not easy. Johannesburg, perhaps, but not Cape Town.

We landed up in Canada: an excellent choice.

But, as they say, emigration is not for sissies.

We had no idea.

"I believe the world needs more Canada." Bono

"When I'm in Canada, I feel this is what the world should be like." Jane Fonda

## **TWO: Oh Canada! Why Canada?**

So we chose Canada. Why?

Why, indeed. Especially when one of our daughters had already moved to Australia, my stepbrother lived in Hobart, and at least four other school friends, and family members lived in Adelaide, Sydney and Perth?

I felt Australia would always struggle with a shortage of water. I was to discover something of a surprise when it came to water; especially with reference to Australia.

It is possible that my mother played a role. When she joined the army in 1942, in Cape Town, her sergeant-major warned all the new recruits against fraternising with the men calling at the Cape on their way from or to some combat zone. " *'Australians are to watch out for, but the Canadians are okay'* they told us," said my mother one day recalling her time on Robben Island as a coast-artillery gunner.

Life laughed at us in the sense that when we finally chose Canada it was only because of a job and nothing else.

Australia lost out. Oh Canada!

Talking of water, people often believe Canada has more fresh water than anyone else.

Loch Ness which, as we all know, is in Scotland, has in fact more water than all other lakes in England, Scotland and Wales: 1.8 cubic

miles of it, and is reported by most as being able to swallow the world's entire population.

But she *pails* into insignificance and her statistics are relatively wishy-washy when compared to Canada's lakes. In addition she doesn't even have a monster. Lake Superior, alone, could flood all of North and South America; and to a depth of twelve inches. Of course when this happens it might mean that the water would simply dribble back into the now *empty* lake itself, and other pockets below ground level which would make nonsense of this claim, but it is a fascinating image to hold in one's head for a few seconds.

One of my favourite past-times is to ask people, while sitting a little bored in the local sauna, how many lakes Canada has. I get answers from *oh, thousands; must be ten thousand; no, one hundred thousand.*

The truth is there are about two million of them. Some sites on the internet say three million, but then one can find anything on the internet, right?

Vancouver Island, alone, which is *only* 500 kms long, has 9,460 lakes, even though the island is minuscule, in size, compared to the rest of Canada itself.

About 7.6% of Canada's nearly 10 million km<sup>2</sup> is covered by fresh water; enough water is contained by these lakes and rivers to flood the entire country to a depth of over two metres.

Canada with almost exactly one tenth the population of the USA, has almost three times more water in square kilometres, although the US would not understand this because they are not metric.

Canada, however, thankfully is. But only when it comes to kilometres on the road. When it comes to measuring your lounge, it's feet and inches. Don't ask me to explain, please.

Canada *"has only 0.5% of the world's population, but its landmass contains approximately 7% of the world's renewable water supply."* <sup>1</sup>

It is amazing what governments will do in their bid to impress other nations. As if the inspiring water statistics, alone, were not enough, and despite being home to more than 60% of all the lakes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ec.gc.ca/eau-water/>

on our planet, Canada spent \$2 million (R22,500,000) on a marketing project in the form a pavilion that included a *fake lake* for the G-8 summit in Toronto. Let's be fair, while this was the cost for the entire pavilion itself, the little *lake* which was no more than a splash pool in size, but designed to reflect something of the glory of the two million lakes in Canada, cost \$57,000 or R655,550.00.

Perhaps a good photograph might have sufficed. And they might have used this sum to repair the water supply to outlying areas, for instance - more of this later.

Country	Total km <sup>2</sup>	Land km <sup>2</sup>	Surface area of fresh water in km <sup>2</sup> (which bizarrely allows for Australia to have more than Brazil - hardly likely.	Total renewable water availability in km <sup>3</sup> of precipitation, recharged ground water and inflows: [The world factbook CIA]	Coastline In kms  [The world factbook CIA]
The World	510,072,000	148,940,000	361,132,000		1,162,306
Russia	17,098,242	16,377,742	720,500	4,508	37,653
Antarctica	14,000 000	14,000 000	0	0	17,968
Canada	9,984,670	9,093,507	891,163	2,902	202,080 (largest in the world)
China	9,572,900	9,326,410	270,550	2,840	14,000
USA	9,526,468	9,161,966	364,502	3,069	19,924
Brazil	8,515,767	8,460,415	55,352	8,233	7,491
Australia	7,692,024	7,633,565	58,459	492	25,760
South Africa	1,221,037	1,214,470	4,620	51.4	2,798

Sources: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_and\\_dependencies\\_by\\_area](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_dependencies_by_area)  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2201.html>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_length\\_of\\_coastline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_length_of_coastline)

Another, perhaps even more astounding and interesting fact about global water is that Australia has more fresh water (measured in surface area only) than Brazil. Especially considering that the Amazon basin is responsible, not only for producing 20% of all the oxygen on our planet, but is also responsible for some 25% of all the world's fresh water that flows into the sea.

Australia also has a lot more water than Antarctica!

The figures in the table are an interesting illustration how easily statistics can show different stories. Under the column of the surface area of fresh water (4th from left), Australia is shown to have 3,107 km<sup>2</sup> more than Brazil.

However when it comes to *availability* of fresh water in total, there are 7,741 km<sup>3</sup>, more, in favour of Brazil which, of course, has more fresh water than anybody else. In fact Brazil itself has only 578 km<sup>3</sup> less than Canada, China *and* The United States of America put together.

The most disturbing fact, especially for South Africans, is that while they often consider the lack of water in Australia as one of the main reasons for not moving there, South Africa has some 440.6 km<sup>3</sup> *less* fresh water available. Ten times less in fact.

In fact South Africa has less water than both Egypt, and Greece.

People talk of a water war in the future; it makes us feel comfy living up here with all this water in Canada; in fact so blasé are we that we even give it away, mainly to the US.

A Globe and Mail article in 2015 stated that because of an uproar in BC, the government is now going to charge for this water. Here goes the *endless supply of resources, so we don't have to worry* approach.

Hoorah! BC residents must have thought - more money can mean more spending on some of that infrastructure neglect, right?

Perhaps.

*"Starting in 2016, the government will begin charging Nestlé Waters Canada (and other industrial users) a fee of \$2.25 per million litres of water. Yes, you read that correctly. Nestlé can withdraw a million litres of some of the finest drinking water anywhere in the world for the price of one of their chocolate bars. It takes about 265 million litres of the liquid gold every year for the outrageous sum of \$596.25 – or the cost of a backyard barbecue."*<sup>2</sup>

So much for the war.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Mason: The Globe and Mail, Published Friday, Jul. 10, 2015

Trucks arrive to fill up some of the 50 billion plastic water bottles that cost the average American around \$1,400 to buy water in every year, instead of only \$0.49 cents per day, or \$179 per year for the same amount of tap water (at a rate of eight glasses a day).

Making the plastic bottles to meet America's insatiable demand for bottled water results in more than 17 million barrels of oil annually - enough to fuel over one million cars for one year.

What is even more alarming is that while all these bottles faithfully carry a recycling symbol on them, the US has a recycling rate of only 23% for plastic. This means that 38 billion water bottles find their way into landfills, or the sea. Just from America. Each year.

It is one of the strange anomalies of Canadian society that shocks many who arrive expecting a Swiss-like first-world mentality and approach. The truth is that (at least in British Columbia) there is more of the wild west than anywhere besides the US itself.

An over-abundance of resources seems to fuel a psychic paradigm that *"you can have anything you want"* - a favourite retort in most retail stores when one finds oneself in a quandary about what to choose; it's as if people believe resources themselves will never run out, and general plunder is the name of the game as a result.

It is reasonably well known that Canada has one of the most appalling mining records in many countries (and some say in Canada itself) - as one person from Durban put it to me one day - *"in BC they still believe as their forefathers did: go into the interior, get as many animal skins as possible and then go home..."*

It's as if this pervasive mindset allows people to believe they are not really part of the permanent landscape.

Yet more and more people are arriving in this part of Canada.

My little gem of White Rock is in many ways one of the most perfect spots on the planet. Small, intimate, nestled against a 100 metre headland that will, if nothing else, protect most million dollar properties from a tsunami and the rising sea one day.

The retired and wealthy flock here and enjoy spectacular views across Semiahmoo Bay to Washington state and the Olympic mountains in the distance. Not to mention a dormant volcano, Mount Baker, that is snow-bedecked all year round and looms over

the city, in the distance, as if protecting it. It is often clear here when Vancouver itself is overcast, and White Rock is sometimes called *the hole in the sky* by the many pilots who settle in the area and who aim for the clearing itself, on their way to land at Vancouver international, using it as something of a beacon.

But even here a genuine Canadian spirit of giving and sharing has its darker side and results in the bizarre situation in which trains carrying dirty thermal coal from the US to be shipped to China, and whose cargo even Seattle refuses to handle because of its health hazards, trundle through the little town - the trains themselves almost dwarfing the actual city.

In fact some of them are the length of the entire marine drive itself, along the sea. In a recent letter to the Peach Arch News I noted that the largest ship in the BC Ferry fleet, the Spirit of Vancouver Island which has a passenger and crew capacity of 2,100 and can carry 410 motor vehicles, weighs in at 11,681 tonnes: still 819 tonnes less than most trains that run through this diminutive city.

Apart from the unsightly disturbance that spoils an otherwise idyllic setting, I sit writing this, and more, while the trains go by and find myself gyrating from left to right in something of a circular motion with each passing. Thankfully the house I live in was built on stilts and so does not collapse with the ground around it shaking.

Of course this concession means huge income for the province itself and its ports. Never mind the fact that serious health considerations has prompted Seattle to refuse the offloading of this "dirty" coal from its own port. At peak times some eighteen of these long, heavy trains bear down on this tiny resort each day, with not only some supporting this bounty from the income derived, but actually waving at the train drivers. They pull truck-loads of not only thermal coal, but many other toxic and dangerous chemicals much to the horror of many residents.

But even more alarming than this, to my mind, is that the entire track itself, and some servitude on either side which includes the entire seaside parking area in this little city, was sold, lock-stock and barrel to Burlington National Sante Fe Railway, a Warren Buffet company, some years back. This has resulted in the rather sad, but

comical reality, especially for White Rock tax-payers, that the city has to lease the land *back* from the railway in order to provide parking, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. I am no legal expert, and have little experience in this matter, but I have never heard of any sovereign state selling prime land, not only to a foreign country, but to another private company.

A 99-year lease perhaps?

But back to the water issue: you can imagine my surprise when we took off a weekend to visit Tofino. This little town which reminds me very much of Jeffries Bay and the small coastal towns up the east coast of South Africa, even has a little rickety surfing shop that still sells old vinyl records.

As I have said there are no waves in the ocean beside Vancouver itself, or the lower mainland, simply because the Pacific ocean is blocked by Vancouver Island - see map at the beginning.

The kids wanted to surf, so Tofino it was. We took the ferry from Tsawwassen near White Rock, landed in Swartz Bay, and started what I assumed would be a one and a half hour journey across the island to Tofino.

After two hours I was weary and irritable.

It was summer and we must have encountered at least 1,145 of the 9,460 lakes on the island, without any signboard signalling the proximity of Tofino in sight. Everybody's uncle, granny, little sister and dog was having a good time in each lake. The road is narrow and meanders gracefully (unlike my mood at the time) through the millions of trees and around the multitude of lakes. I was exhausted from having to slow down each time we encountered a picnic spot. And we're not talking South African-style of slowing down from 140 km/h to perhaps 80 km/h. We're talking 30 km/h each time there was a picnic area or campsite. And each lake had one.

"If I see one more freshwater lake, I am going to scream!" I said.

My kids both stopped breathing in the back.

"Dad?"

"No, it's okay, we're still on our way..."

What seemed like more than four hours later we had finally covered the 220 kilometres, reached our beachfront resort and found

ourselves with our toes washed by the glorious, crashing, thunderous waves.

You can imagine our surprise, when we returned to the unit to find a relatively large sign on the kitchen wall: *Please be advised that Tofino has initiated water restrictions - use water with care.*

It was not a prank; they were serious. I stared incredulously at the notice; we just driven past enough water to revive half of the Karoo in Southern Africa, yet had to abide by water restrictions.

Apparently there is an abysmal record in the maintenance of infrastructure in BC, and beyond, say many in the know. And not necessarily a shortage of water.

But it does go some way towards supporting the theory that people, deep down, believe they're here just to get as much out of the country, give the rest away (to America) and then go home - so we don't want to spend too much on infrastructure, right?

But none of this figured in my strategy of finding a new home, at the time. How did we land up here?

It was simple because I had stumbled upon the website of the Fraser Valley.

The Fraser Valley was just outside Vancouver, so as one might move to Somerset West, but talk about moving to Cape Town, similarly we were suddenly focussed on *Vancouver*.

We had no idea, in just about every way, what this potential move would really mean.

From a positive angle: few if any people start in Vancouver. Almost without exception South Africans and others *do their time* in the boonies - Canada's version of De Aar, Uitenhage (if they're lucky), Kakamas, Klaarwater or Clocolan. And, trust me, while some of them might reach 32 °C on Summer days (and hotter if you are inland - think of the Karoo), we're also talking -20 °C on most Winter days inland, and lower. See average temperatures further on.

Vancouver is to Canada what Cape Town is to South Africa; it is markedly unlike the rest of the country, and everybody wants to live there.

Canadians often say there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing. Of course it's cold, but then again I have heard many

ex-South Africans say they were colder in Bloemfontein. I can certainly remember minus temperatures on my father's farm in Ladybrand in Winter.

Vancouver, weather wise, is Cape Town on steroids.

It can reach 32 °C on extreme days in Summer (all-time record of 37.8), with around 275 fires burning in the forests north of the city (reminding me of February on the Cape Peninsula) and with the average daytime temperature in Winter here around 7 °C, dropping below zero on most nights.

In fact if you're used to the Karoo, or the Free State in Winter, -3 to -10 °C isn't that bad at all. When I used to smoke I could sit on my stoep in Ocean Park, BC for a ciggie in just a shirt, at -7 °C long enough to finish the cigarette, and then retire into a warm house.

Many north Americans understand the word *stoep* and also *pinkie*; many do not know that the Dutch arrived in New York to do business, just as they did in Cape Town. I suspect they fled when they saw the first *Indians* in New Amsterdam - the first name for New York.

But, it rains in Vancouver. A lot. Something like England, almost *all* Winter. Vancouver and the geographical area surrounding it is a rain forest. Not tropical, of course, but temperate, if I remember my geography from Mr Waller at SACHS, in Newlands, Cape Town; but whatever the classification, it rains.

And that means dark, grey skies.

If you want open, blue skies and sunshine, settle on the prairies - Edmonton or Calgary (Alberta), or Morden (Manitoba) - I only mentioned this town because we know a South African family there. They love it. Blue skies. Sunshine. Low temperatures in Winter? Sure: -35 to -40 °C.

It starts getting really uncomfortable at -15 °C.

You will need sunscreen if you do settle in these areas - kids play outside, and will need it for their faces, whether at plus or minus temperatures.

Talking of sunshine, one of the myths about South Africa is dispelled in the table of statistics further on and which shows that Durban has *fewer* days of sunshine than most Canadian cities, and

there is even a town in Canada that, potentially at least, annually sports less snow than many towns in South Africa during cold winter spells.

The sun might shine brightly in many cities in Canada in Winter, but if you cry, or your nose runs, any body fluids freeze. A doctor friend often tells the story of returning from a late night call; he had stupidly left his jacket at home, thinking he would be travelling from his garage to the underground of the local hospital (many cars are plugged in, or the garage itself is heated for an easier motor vehicle start). When he returned in his car, he found his street snowed under - he was unable to get into his driveway, so he parked across the street. He looked long and hard at the front door which was about twenty metres or so away.

There was little he could do, besides phone his wife and wake her and the kids up, so he took the plunge, exited the car and ran through the snow to the entrance. It was so cold that he only just made it, and with his arms almost freezing he was barely able to find his keys to open the front door. He described it as agony, and with the fumbling of the keys and the painful manipulation of the front door handle he recalls how he actually had visions of himself collapsing and dying on the threshold of his own home without his wife even knowing.

That's Canada, mostly.

But not Vancouver, thankfully. In fact while writing this just before Christmas, 2015, Vancouver has had a dusting of snow which disappeared within hours.

Record lows are around -51 °C: Osoyoos, Canada's only desert. Yes, I said desert: this little city sports a record high of 41.5 °C. It is situated on a lake which shares its waters with the US, and sports a number of top wineries that are worth visiting - the Burrowing Owl in particular.

In 2009, our first year here I videoed my daughter lying on our couch in South Surrey/White Rock, with a fan on her and a thermostat reading of 34.5 °C on the wall. Another misconception of Canada dispelled.

City Province	Hottest month average	Coldest month average	Population	Climate Classifi- cation	Days of Sunshine p.a.	Annual rainfall in mm/inch	Average annual Snowfall in cm/inch
Calgary Alberta	24 °C 75 °F	-3 °C 26.6 °F	1,097,000	Dry humid Continental	333 4.06% > Durban	419 16.50	128.8 50.70
Winnipeg Manitoba	26 °C 78.8 °F	-12 °C 10.39 °F	663,617	Extreme humid Continental	316 26% > Cape Town	521 20.15	113.7 44.70
Vancouver British Co- lumbia	18 °C 64.4 °F	4 °C 39.2 °F	603,502 (city) 2,313,328 (metro)	Temperate Rain Forest	289 16% > Cape Town	1457 57.35	44.6 17.56
Ottawa Ontario	20.8 °C 69.4 °F	-10 °C 14 °F	883,391	Semi- continental	304 23% > Cape Town	920 36.21	175.4 69.06
Regina Saskatche- wan	23 °C 73.4 °F	-11 °C 12.2 °F	193,100	Dry Continental	322 23% > Cape Town	390 15.35	100.2 39.45
Edmonton Alberta	23 °C 73.4 °F	-15 °C 5 °F	895,000 (city) 1,278,000 (metro)	Warm Summer Continental	325	476 18.73	123.5 48.62
Toronto Ontario	21 °C 69.8 °F	-3 °C 26.6 °F	2,615,000	Humid Continental	305	831 32.71	121.5 47.82
Brooks Alberta	-11 °C 12.2 °C	18 °C 64.4 °F	14,185	Semi-arid climate	330	348 13.70	71.7 28.23
Montréal Quebec	21 °C 69.8 °F	-9 °C 15.8 °F	1,650,000	Semi- continental	305	1000 39.37	209.5 82.57
Osoyoos British Co- lumbia	29 °C 84.4 °F	0 °C 32 °F	4,845	Arid Biotic Zone (desert the only one in Canada)	306	250 9.84	5.4 2.12
Durban Kwa-Zulu Natal	28 °C 82.7 °F	20 °C 68 °F	3,012	Humid sub- tropical	320 3% < Brooks, Alberta	1,009 39.71	0.0 0.0
Cape Town Western Cape	23 °C 73.4 °F	13 °C 55.4 °F	3,750,000 (metro)	Mediterra- nean	249 16% < Vancou- ver	475 18.70	0.0
Perth Australia	25 °C 77 °F	13 °C 55.4 °F	2,020,000	Mediterra- nean	265	867.5 34.15	0.0 0.0

Some people much prefer the extreme cold, but rather with the blue skies, to the relatively mild climate of Vancouver and surrounding regions that can be depressing during a long, grey, wet Winter. If you really dislike Cape Town because of its winters, don't come to Vancouver. Some weird, scary and bias-smashing facts are in the

table further on. But don't think that South Africa is necessarily always preferable. Unless you hate snow.

Cape Town, Perth and Durban all actually have fewer days of sunshine than most Canadian cities, and it actually rains more in Perth, and Newlands in Cape Town than in most Canadian cities. What I find particularly weird is that Cape Town with only 249 days of sunshine per year<sup>3</sup> comes a dismal second to even Vancouver which is an overcast city in the middle of a rain forest climate. The figures might be misleading because the statistics I used for Canadian cities were given in *number of days of sunshine* while the site referenced here below for Cape Town was given in hours, so I had to convert to days. Frankly I cannot believe that Cape Town has fewer days than Vancouver - you might like to do the calculation yourself. It states that "there is an average of 2993 hours of sunlight per year (of a possible 4383) with an average of 8:11 of sunlight per day".

SAD (seasonal affective disorder) is a significant psychological factor here, especially in BC with the overcast weather in winter.

So much for sunny South Africa.



In 1886, thirty centimetres of snow fell in my favourite Karoo town, Graaff-Reinet - almost as much as Vancouver's annual snowfall.

Here I am circa 1977/8 in with my favourite aunt, Beth Pienaar, from Graaff-Reinet - the jewel of the Karoo. We drove out of the town for about 5 kms, and then had to turn around because the snow was so deep; motor vehicles could simply not go any further; two student friends lost their way and barely made it to a farmhouse. They emerged only three days later.

On 18th July, 1909 Johannesburg saw 40 cm of snow - 7 times more than the annual average for Osoyoos.

Osoyoos is, as I have already said, the place to go for good wine, and spectacular vineyards. It's not quite Vergelegen, but it is worth

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cape-town.climatemp.com/sunlight.php>

a getaway, and it sports a lake that's swimmable for 6 months of the year and boatable all year round (the water is relatively warm).

But back to comparisons: on September 7th-9th 60 cm of snow was recorded between Harrismith and Van Reenen - more than 50% more than the average for Vancouver itself. If the minus temperatures in Canada alarm you, it is interesting to note that Sutherland in the Cape Province often descends to -20 °C. I can testify to this because I spent a delightful time there viewing The Southern African Large Telescope (SALT) which is the largest single optical telescope in the southern hemisphere and among the largest in the world, and sports a "*hexagonal primary mirror array 11 metres across, comprising 91 individual 1m hexagonal mirrors*".<sup>4</sup>

Of course these snow facts in South Africa are unusual; in most places in Canada it snows every Winter. But the figures illustrate, albeit tongue in cheek, that reality is often very different to our preconceived notions.

Vancouver has the same cosmopolitan feel to it as does Cape Town, and is also surrounded by the sea, with an abundance of mountains on its north side. Just as one says of Perth - *it's not like any other Australian city*, and we insist on giving the same status to both Cape Town, Vancouver is also definitely not anything like the rest of Canada.

But be prepared to have equity of at least R3 million to buy a small town home (townhouse); of course with interest rates hovering around two and a half percent, and a reasonable income, this is *relatively* doable.

We were lucky. Few make it to Vancouver, or its surrounds. Few doctors, traditionally, even initially try to find a position here, but instead as I have said, do their *time* in the prairies.

And then, if lucky, find something in BC.

Property prices would soon rocket. With mountains to the north, farmland to the east, and sea to the west and south this

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.salt.ac.za/>

means that land is becoming more and more expensive. The property growth over the next seven years would almost mimic that of Cape Town itself, where, in the life of our 19 year old daughter, our Meadowridge property, bought for R350,000, would fetch nearly two million Rands.

But startling for Canadians - even those who have lived in Vancouver and the surrounds all their lives and are aware of the location's special offerings, voice their dismay that few if any of their children will be able to afford a new home, the average price of which, in 2015, had exceeded \$1 million. That's R11 million.

Of course everyone blames the Chinese.

While there is some truth in the reality that after making millions selling us everything from our televisions to our toothbrushes, many arrive in Vancouver and South Surrey, and buy property with bucket loads of cash, it is to some degree doubtful they are responsible for the property *bubble* that Canadians have been waiting to see burst since our arrival in 2009 - I know people who after their divorce stashed their cash payout away in some investment account, and pay someone else \$17,000 or more a year in rent, rather than buy (in case the market comes down).

Did I say Canadians were cautious? One even quoted figures to me showing that his mother had bought a condo in Montreal in 1989 and "*she cannot even get what she paid for it, now*". Of course condos are not single family homes where the growth in Vancouver and South Surrey has been around 40% plus, over the last five years.

Vancouver is nothing like the rest of Canada. Cape Town is nothing like the rest of South Africa. And both are experience a property-rush to equal or exceed that of the gold rush experienced in both places in the 1800's.

So the bubble hasn't arrived and the Chinese are blamed even more ferociously.

In fact The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. produced figures that were much lower than many Vancouverites claim: approximately 2.4% of Toronto condos are owned by foreigners, and only 2.3% in Vancouver. In some neighbourhoods in Vancouver this

rose to 5.8%. Nothing comes close to the figures people bandy about.

This is reminiscent of Cape Town also, with President Zuma wanting to restrict ownership of property by foreigners. Samuel Seeff, from the well-known real estate company I worked for briefly in 1995, claims that in fact less than 3% of owners are foreigners.

*“Even across the richest and most expensive residential real estate strip favoured by foreigners, the Atlantic Seaboard and City Bowl, just over 10 percent of all sales last year were to foreigners,”* Seeff said.

Here, top exclusive properties have been going for R10-25 million. I always do a double-take when I read something like this: as an ex-Capetonian I suddenly realise that the average Canadian professional could pay for one of these properties in Cape Town relatively easily with the cash sale of their home in Vancouver. But this comparison belongs to another section and debate.

But make no mistake, the Chinese and their money have arrived.

It is not uncommon to see young Asian boys (many here would rather not classify anyone by race or country, and so feel that the term Asian is more acceptable, neglecting to follow the logic that any classification is either helpful or it is not) - because sixteen year olds can drive here - strut their new found testosterone in Lamborghinis and Ferraris. When someone has passed their theory test, and has driven with an L on the back of a car for a year (with only one parent in attendance), they then pass on to being able to drive with a green N sign on the back of the vehicle, allowing only one passenger plus one family member (but without the parent).

I thought I had seen everything until I was passed by a young man (looking around seventeen), and driving a McLaren 675LT.

While not necessarily wanting to conjure up any reference to *The Beast* from the book of Revelation, I was intrigued that this McLaren actually sports a brake horsepower of no less than six hundred and sixty-six. Let's be quite clear here, that's 666 Bhp. And with torque of no less than 700Nm - probably enough to tow six eight-berth caravans and still throw the driver back into their seat, while pulling off in third-gear.

The power inherent in this motor vehicle is only some 25% less than that of an average formula one racing car.

I must admit, he was driving quite sedately and respectfully past the local Macdonald's 24-hour outlet. Let's give credit where credit is due. Apart from anything else he did have his green N sticker prominently displayed on the back window.

So that's where the money for just about everything in your home goes. I stopped to catch my breath, and chuckled when I remembered once using a quote from P.J. O'Rourke (an American political satirist): *"giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys."*

I was grateful that this Chinese student drove with respect on this occasion and quite obviously without any alcohol.

But we've had disasters. Lamborghinis wrapped snugly around highway barriers, concrete medians and lampposts. And many grieving parents. And divorces. In a country that has only just, amazingly and daringly adopted a speed limit of 120 kms/h. And then only on very selected highways (none to be found anywhere near Vancouver itself).

Despite the challenges of this vibrant, but very expensive city (imagine having your car towed away for incorrect parking, and having to fork out R1,512 (\$135) for the towing, and another R1,600 for the ticket), we have always been acutely aware that we were very lucky to find a position here.

It is often touted as one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in (and one of the best, vying with the top five regularly) yet is almost last when it comes to the median income, compared to other cities in Canada.

It is not for nothing that many claim BC stands for Bring Cash. There is a money-grabbing culture here which would rival any American obsession with capitalism.

This is what we had escaped, though: I had made contact with a recruitment agent in Alberta and was looking at the small town of Brooks. We were offered incentives as an enticement. I got suspicious. When I Google-earthed it (the town, not the incentives) from space, and zoomed in, I noticed a large open area. A very large area.

Larger than the town itself, in fact. On closer inspection I realised it was a holding-pen for what looked like many thousands of cattle.

Brooks sports the largest cold meat processing factory in North America.

They say if you have leather in your car, within two years it smells of polony (Polony is the name for a large sausage created from a mixture of beef and pork that is popular in South Africa and was very popular in Britain during the 17th and 18th centuries).

They all keep their windows closed because of the smell, which permeates even the curtains. Few houses have curtains - mostly blinds, which could offer a solution to the problem.

And few, if any, Canadians open their windows, so you'll be okay, said some. Get ready to walk into homes that have not been aired all Winter (except with air from the furnace - make sure you know where the filter is), and where the temperature is around 22 °C. It feels like someone swiftly pulling four blankets over your head, especially when you've spent time outside in minus temperatures.

My mother was half German, and obsessed with fresh air, so I keep some windows open throughout Winter, much to the dismay of my Canadian friends, except Hernan my Paddington Bear friend from Peru. While staunch, faithful and proud Canadians, we have much fun comparing our lives from our respective countries to that of our Canadian experience.

In truth, my family and I had landed with our bums in the butter, and it took a while to realise how lucky we were.

I have spent a week in Toronto. Apart from finding a Belgian pub with many genuine Belgian beers on tap and fabulous mussels, I felt I was in Jo'burg: rather depressing, although there are many South Africans there. And it is *much* colder than Vancouver.

My home town of White Rock I spoke about earlier is sometimes called the *Miami Beach* of Canada.

I have lived in White River, Eastern Mpumalanga, and now in White Rock, British Columbia. I taught for twelve years in Muizenberg, on False Bay. So my reminders of home are both White Rock and False Creek - the main inlet downtown Vancouver which affords spectacular walks, views and living.

White Rock is a delightful little city - I am used to the British model of cities needing a cathedral to be so classified; here anything can be a city, including White Rock which is only 3.5 kms long and about 1.5 kms wide, yet with its own police force, garbage collection, water supply and dog control unit.



It was so out of the way years ago that they found it difficult to find people to settle here, so they offered "lots given free" with a subscription to a magazine.

I can't help thinking of areas such as the Atlantic seaboard, in Cape Town, where finding a home for R50,000 in the seventies was not too difficult. What a lack of foresight we all had. In fact, although White Rock is situated on the US border,

making access to shopping and cheap gas (petrol) easy, and on a beautiful bay which reminds me of Hout Bay or Camps Bay in Cape Town, the city found it just about impossible to get people to move here: hence the sale of part of its land to the rail company in a desperate bid to attract new visitors. Bad move.

Today speculators and investors buy teardown properties, in order to construct new homes, upwards of \$700,000, in order to build new view-homes. But beware.

Because the rail company owns a significant portion of the city's land, the property taxes are much higher than across the road in Surrey, often with the same views.

You can imagine the pressure on the housing market. It has resulted in young people moving elsewhere to find work and affordable housing. It is a huge problem that grabs national attention at times: the poor plight of Vancouver - too much money.

If you've made up your mind about Canada, Vancouver is where you want to be. But bring cash. Lots.

Otherwise move to Australia.

Having said that I have a doctor friend from Barbeton, South Africa (which is as close to Hawaii in climate as one can find), who loves Calgary, Alberta: the Texas of Canada and the centre of the oil in-

dustry. Cowboy hats and large belt buckles are the most common attire and it seems everyone owns at least one horse. But if you're in any way environmentally concerned, know that Alberta, our provincial neighbour, which has no provincial tax (set in BC at 3% in 1948, and which is now 7%), is also the supplier of the world's dirtiest oil. It has been the most wealthy province up till now; but with rapidly falling oil prices and more discoveries in Dakota and Texas, and the US claiming they could be self-sufficient within the next few years, Alberta is anticipating an economic wobble, unless they can find either cleaner oil, or build massive solar power plants - with more days of sunshine per annum than many South African cities I cannot imagine this would be difficult.

Talking of sunshine and mild weather, it is interesting to note that Mossel Bay on the east coast of South Africa is in the Guinness Book of Records as having the second mildest all year round climate, next to Hawaii itself.

Those of us who have spent time on the Wild Coast near East London, or know Barbeton and Eastern Mpumalanga itself, with its dark brown earth, Frangipanis, palm trees and beautiful Strelitzias, might want to reconsider spending huge sums of money travelling to Hawaii; there is very little besides the flowery Leis they place over your head, upon arrival, that is any different.

The Strelitzia Reginae, native to South Africa and which is more commonly known as *the bird of paradise* is not only the official flower of Los Angeles, but is common in Hawaii too.

It has an interesting sex life, as do many plants.

As most readers probably know unless a flower is self pollinating, it needs to find another way of having sex with another plant of the same kind. But this is problematical when you are literally rooted to the spot.

In most cases a go-between is necessary. The Strelitzia relies mostly on sunbirds, although some sources claim that bees might also be involved.

It has a clever perch seemingly designed for these birds - the perch itself cleverly takes the weight of the sunbird into considera-

tion. They arrive, expecting free nectar, and stand on the spathe or perch itself in order to indulge themselves.

The slippery perch results in the bird trying its best to balance and eat at the same time, and the inevitable happens - its weight opens the spathe itself which releases slippery pollen and the bird slides down the perch into the pool of pollen itself, literally putting its foot in it.

It then flies off in search of more nectar from another flower with the flower's *seed* stuck to its feet. And so the sex life of the *Strelitzia* is hopefully brought to a climactic conclusion, with the nectar as payment for the sexual favour itself, reinforcing the message that sex is seldom, if ever, free.

A visit to Maui might also surprise one when encountering proteas. One such business selling them claims that their "*protea blooms are as much a part of Hawaii as the clear blue skies and white sand beaches.*" Bit of a cheek, I thought. Proteas of course originated in South Africa and were named after the Greek God Proteus who was able to change his form at will - the protea coming in a wide variety of forms obviously ignited images of this god, in the mind of Carl Linnaeus who named the plant in 1735.

Proteas and *Strelitzia* are reminders that parts of South African can be found in some form or another on just about every continent. So if you're toying with the idea of going to Hawaii you might just be disappointed when you arrive - even the beaches and surf remind one of the same in South Africa, and you might just be wondering why you spent all that money going to Hawaii in the first place, and leaving the Wild Coast or the beaches of East London, Durban or even Cape Town behind. If nothing else the experience will probably ignite the old adage that South Africa is *a world within one country*.

Because so many people start their Canadian journey in small towns in the middle of nowhere, all you will hear about is snow. It can be fun the first Winter, but when all you see of the world is through stark beautiful white vistas, day after day, it becomes a bit much.

So much for the weather and property. What of society? The two quotes at the start of this chapter go a long way towards giving a good description of what it is like to live here.

This can only be described as a very gentle society.

Everybody takes their time, seldom stating things exactly as they are and if you're into the excellent personality test by Marilyn Manning Ph.D. that I found useful in classrooms for decades, with divisions of personality into Driver, Expressive, Analytical and Amiable, or amicable, then Canada falls squarely into the Amiable category.

Never walk into a Driver's office and just talk; have your information and thoughts clearly prepared. Preferably written down. No time for chit-chat. State your case clearly and concisely. Offer solutions and expect an answer within seconds, then leave.

Not so an Amicable. With them, one sits down, offers some tea, notices the picture of the kids on the wall. One offers lots of sympathy; talk about the weather, and when things have progressed warmly, then perhaps talk about the possibility of mentioning the subject you need to broach.

Canadians would generally rather tell you what you want to hear, than offer any challenge. Like all Amicables they try to avoid *all* conflict. Drivers on the other hand don't mind it at all, and in some cases seek it out. Especially when they know they're right. When an Amicable knows s/he is right, they make you think it was your idea. How lovely. And I don't mean that condescendingly at all. It really is.

Canadians, generally, are very gentle people. Thank God for this, because the reality show just south can sometimes be unsettling to say the least; what with walls being built across the southern states of America to keep Mexicans out, and the idea that Muslims should be banned from entering, one sometimes feels one is sitting on top of a major volcanic fault, which of course we are in Vancouver.

But then you'd think we South Africans would be used to such precariousness: coming from a country which makes one feel one is sliding down a razor blade, using one's balls as brakes.

It is a comforting feeling arriving here in Canada. News readers giggle at one another; when November arrives in Vancouver, they give *severe storm warnings* which means that the wind is probably going to blow at around 70 km/h. When it doesn't cause that much damage at all, the same announcers laugh at themselves, citing their own panic as the source of their amusement. This and many other examples continue to give me the idea that I am living some rabbit-hole experience.

But then, when one's norm has been a constant reminder of the brutality and long lasting effects of an abhorrent social system, and a birth-right which seems to include a severe inferiority complex (more of this later) it is perhaps to be expected. Reminders, almost daily, persist - of my own heritage and history - both brutal and full of wonder - and the experience of living here in Canada which as one friend put it is like *living in the world's largest old age home*.

However one chooses to view living in Canada, there is no doubt that coming from a life in South Africa, it is like having a very soft, warm blanket wrapped around one on a dark, cold night. And a cup of coffee placed into your hand.

Things move slowly, as I said. Drivers generally obey the law; police officers almost go so far as to apologise for ticketing an offender. Tickets are rare (some feel too much so) and the norm is often a group of ageing volunteers who sit at the roadside with advanced laser detecting equipment and a flashing LED-sign saying how fast you are travelling. Once I received a letter in the post stating that I had been noticed down at Crescent Beach - a delightful beachside community below our house - and that I had been clocked at 48 km/h, and *could I please remember that the speed limit is, in fact, 30 km/h* (as irritating as a tick in the flesh for a South African, to even contemplate driving at this speed). And could I have a nice day.

But that's why we came here, right? For a gentle experience. It is possible to drive here for weeks without hearing a hooter (horn) in traffic. In fact most Canadians will say something like *Ha - there goes someone from Johannesburg*, whenever a horn is heard.

It takes a while to acclimatise.

One morning on the radio I actually heard this encounter between two radio anchors; the ensuing conversation is retold as well as I can remember:

"So, John, traffic not too bad this morning, I am told..."

"No, Carol - only two incidents and it looks like it's going to be another sunny day!"

"Yes; a sunny day indeed for someone out there!"

"Oh, do you know something I don't?"

"I do, indeed, John. Two technicians working down in the sewer last night came across more than they were bargaining for..."

"Oh?"

"Yeah; believe it or not - a one carat diamond engagement ring - imagine that!"

"Oh my; what I can imagine is the devastation someone must be feeling right now."

"Yeah! I can imagine that also, John. Just one slip of the finger, a soapy hand... and away it goes: plop!"

"Well, it was nice of (*names*) to bring this to our attention and to return it to the authorities. Perhaps we can help?"

"Yeah," says Carol, on live radio - "so if you're missing an engagement ring and your initials are CJP, then give us a call right now! We're looking forward to returning this beautiful ring to the rightful owner."

I stopped the car for yet another rabbit-hole moment: was it just me, or did this sound weird? I tried to imagine this happening in Cape Town. The phone lines would almost certainly have been jammed for hours, with a long line-up outside the studio and a flurry of officious looking documents bearing what *might* look like the initials of CJP.

But then I reminded myself that this gentle, almost childlike existence is what the battered, the bruised and the bothered come to Canada for.

Buried very deeply in the psyche of Canada is the fear that something might offend someone. People seem to use the concept of being offended when, perhaps, they mean being irritated.

And I do get the feeling that some take this too far sometimes (at least their feeling offended). I shall not easily forget the day I approached the manager of a bedding shop to ask her opinion about mattresses. South Africans: do not take *any* of your bedding or beds to Canada: it share's another planet with the US and nothing matches with the rest of the world. Leave all your beds, bedding and electrical appliances behind. And your Tupperware, unless you paid handsomely for it.

I had bought a solid foam mattress and found my nights hot and sweaty, and so people were steering me in the direction of natural latex or rubber (as a material for a mattress-cover, just in case you're thinking of something else).

She, the owner or manager, was (and in many ways typically) most considerate and very helpful - we explored the world of foam, traditional spring and latex itself; she seemed overly keen to assist me, so much so that when customers approached her and she would refer them to another shop attendant, I felt a little uncomfortable about this and began to apologise, which is another thing Canadians are well known for. She was adamant that our conversation was quite appropriate and continued to advise me about my dilemma. I felt very grateful and began to view her as a particularly gracious person. Especially in the light of the fact that she didn't even sell mattresses.

What happened next was something of an introduction to a shadowy side of the Canadian psyche. A security guard from the shopping complex approached her, in uniform.

I, mindful once again of my intrusion, stood back and said: "please don't let me stop you; please go ahead..."

There ensued a very simple explanation that the guard had arrived to ask permission to view the fire extinguisher in order to make sure it was up to date.

I smiled, Hercule Poirot-style, nodding my head in anticipation of her reaction, I assumed, that would include a feeling of being looked after, a sense of ownership, or feeling you've-got-my-back, perhaps?

Not to be. The shop manager's reaction was swift and to the point: "The manager knows very well that I have my fire-extinguisher checked every year."

"Yes," said the security guard. "I think I did get that from her, but I have been asked to check - not sure it can do any harm."

I nodded once again, showing solidarity with the security guard, but feeling decidedly uncomfortable. *Good idea*, I might have said, *what if the company you use to check annually doesn't do a good job of it?*

The shop owner felt otherwise:

"Frankly, I am offended. Go and tell your boss that."

I felt like beating a hasty retreat, just in case I got it in the neck with something I was more than likely to say, in offence.

My own butcher who educated me in the essential need to eat only grass-fed beef which I am delighted to say is prevalent in Canada, made another statement expressing offence that left me a little stupefied.

"Oh, these massive homes on small lots...," he said in answer to chit-chat that was taking place in the store about new residential developments in the area, (obviously a new trend in the second largest country in the world, where large lots and gargantuan homes were always the norm), "...frankly I am offended by them!"

People are terrified of offending others, probably because they are easily offended. Perhaps it's the other way around: people are easily offended because others are usually so careful to tread lightly around even the possibility of doing so. It gets complicated.

But one thing is sure: every individual has impact; society buries itself heavily against our own psyches and this can be seen no more clearly than in the contrast between somewhere like South Africa and Canada.

And rabbit-hole moments pop up all the time here. Because of my personality, and my inability to actually sometimes hear, when I am listening, I have landed myself in some difficulties, at times.

I prevail. I concede, and am now a proud South AfriCanadian and believe, quite truly, that for many reasons they are the two great-

est countries on Earth. Yes, I insist on spelling Earth with a capital E, as it is the only one we know of.

But the journey has been harrowing and one embarked upon not without significant courage, fortitude and a deep sense of humour.

If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia. – Margaret Atwood

### Three: making me feel at home

While most locals here in the lower mainland of British Columbia, and Vancouver itself, repeat a mantra of *I wouldn't want to live anywhere else*, and I often find myself very happy to echo this sentiment, there are times I feel, quite sure, I am also living on a Monty-Python film set.

In all encounters, escapades and connections with organisations, companies and government there are two things one needs to keep in mind: privacy and fear of liability. These are, to my mind, the driving forces, the psychic propellants in so many policies, and decisions.

Take our local pool for instance. I have taken to spending time in the sauna and then swimming daily, a habit that started with my son taking up diving and eventually winning a BC Games gold medal at the age of twelve. Even though he stopped (much to my regret) I still grace the pool with my presence, and, as a previous *diving father*, am the only one allowed to swim up against the bulkhead in the deep end. This is sometimes much to the consternation of the lifeguards who don't know me, or forget that I have permission from the Olympic medal-winning diving instructor, Bev, whom I get a cheery wave from whenever I jump in.

There are times when there are more lifeguards walking around the pool than there are people inside the water.

On any given busy day there are at least thirty swimmers in the swimming club, another two or three swimming coaches, each with four-six toddlers in the general instruction section of the main pool itself. And then the entire diving team. In total there are around eight coaches supervising these swimmers and divers.

In addition to this, a minimum of four lifeguards are also walking around the pool.

"Life means something here," say my family and SA friends again and again, contrasting it, I assume, with Africa where they believe it means very little, and taxi drivers drive over jaywalkers when they feel the inclination.

Life means something at the pool, that's for sure.

When someone does teeter over, from sitting in the sauna too long, or from low blood pressure all hell breaks loose. A lifeguard blows their whistle and everyone jumps into action. Even though the person who needs attention is on the one side and possibly not even visible, everyone is instructed to exit the pools. This results in about one hundred kids, coaches, swimmers, divers, etc. all staring at the poor victim lying on the pool deck. I have made a point of not collapsing or even looking vaguely dizzy in the pool area.

Frankly I'd rather drown quietly under the bulkhead than get that much attention.

While it is soothing to swim in the pool, knowing that should anything happen, one of the multitude of lifeguards will rush to your aid, blow their whistles, alert the fire-station, paramedics, the police, and your immediate family while comforting you, there is another side to the pool.

There is the sauna.

As if to stand in almost violent contrast to the gentle, non-offensive and slow moving way of life I have gotten used to, not only in the pool but in broader society, the sauna itself is somewhat akin to being lowered into a pot of boiling water, head first, while someone plucks your toenails with a wrench.

And it has little to do with the temperature.

At certain times of the day a collection of interesting folk arrive. As though tired of the hypercaution and non-offensive nature of

their society, they seek to offer their views and values as though particularly keen to make sure others do not think that Canada is the old age home some believe it to be.

Thomas, a man in his late sixties, is rumoured to celebrate, each year, Hitler's birthday while standing beneath a Nazi flag. In addition to this he has little good to say about most cultures in the world, except right-wing white supremacists.

It is possible he felt that because I came from South Africa I might understand this. But even with my racist upbringing, he managed to shock me.

He regularly gives himself permission, in the presence of many unsuspecting individuals who have come from the hectic turmoil of work, congested highways, difficult familial obstacles and a bad week to seek some refuge in the sauna, to bad-mouth Jews, The Queen, our Prime Minister, in particular gays and also the highly efficient female mayor of Surrey, in one single breath.

The first time this happened I, like my son when alarmed, stopped breathing abruptly. But then as with someone suffering from sleep apnea, my brain kicked into gear and I spluttered my way back to reactivating my diaphragm.

I was particularly alarmed because while I encountered such right-wing verbal roughage against various members of society, I was perplexed by the inclusion of the mayor because I was proud of the fact that I came from Cape Town whose mayor had achieved the same accolade as the mayor of Surrey in that both had won the Best Mayor In The World award. Thomas found this particularly irritating and spluttered unimaginable expletives whenever her name or office arose: verbal assault that he usually reserved only for the The Queen herself.

When he was finished he had the entire sauna sitting in stunned silence. A few exited, seemingly to cool themselves down under a shower of cool water and never to return, but most seemed simply, as the Canadians say, to suck it up. I was to discover this would be a daily ritual.

I was determined not to suck any of this up.

I happen to quite like The Queen, probably because, not only had my father danced with her, but I had in fact written her two letters, and had received very gracious replies.

The second letter was written when my eldest daughter decided to get married in England. I was aghast to discover that Great Britain required me to purchase a visa to attend the wedding. In my letter I reminded The Queen that not only had my grandfather attended an elite English church school in South Africa, while his father fought her army, but that I came from a *British Colony* (The Cape Colony) and now had achieved, after nearly four gruelling years, permanent residency status in Canada while living in **British Columbia**.

The immigration department, to my mind, had overlooked this fact. And not least of all the fact that Canada, my newly adopted country, still recognises Her Majesty as its head of state. Why then would Great Britain not trust Her Majesty's Canadian immigration department but demand some \$300 from me in order to exit Heathrow airport where I had always been a prisoner over the years during many trips back to South Africa, and which I had come to loathe as the worst terminal in the world, and attend the wedding?

Part of my letter read as follows: *"Although I have been through the rather gruelling process of acquiring such (permanent residency), I have the additional misfortune of still having a South African passport. I therefore require a visa to visit my family in the United Kingdom and attend my daughter's wedding.*

*"While I perfectly understand that the Ministry of State for Immigration should consider the security and the economic necessity of placing visa requirements on certain countries, it is very difficult for me to understand that they do not seem to take into account that I enjoy the same national status as that of all citizens of Canada (except the privilege to vote) - a country that enjoys your protection as Head of State.*

*"I do feel this restriction has an adverse affect on tourism, and perhaps in some cases, on the economy in both countries. I have more than once cancelled my trip to visit family because of the cost and*

*circuitous manner required to obtain a visa here in **British** Columbia - I have every confidence Your Majesty will enjoy this irony."*

You may laugh, but she in fact did reply, albeit through an aide, and promised to "send (my) letter to the Secretary of State in charge of this matter so that your approach to The Queen and the points you raise may be considered."

I must admit I was a little disappointed by her using an aide because when I had written to her before in her *Annus Horribilis*, reminding her as a way of diversion that my father had gate-crashed the royal ball in honour of her 21st birthday in Cape Town, she was far more willing to not only reply personally but also to say that she was grateful as he had been one of the few who had not stepped on her toes when they had danced together.

Although I was a little disappointed that my father's efforts were somehow more salient in her mind than my being kept prisoner in her Terminal Five at Heathrow airport (because without a visa I could not exit) I still felt obliged to show her some allegiance.

Sitting there in the heat of the sauna I wondered whether I should offer to all present my correspondence with The Queen as some way of balance but was loathe to ignite more rancorous spleen in Thomas, so I kept quiet while contemplating my rebuttal.

I then had an idea.

I remembered my one Jewish friend, also a student my school for boys and who now lived down the road from me. I recalled with some amusement how people used to ask me what school I attended, and when I mentioned the name, they would jokingly say "*that's a good Jewish school,*" simply because many of the immigrants from eastern Europe in the sixties landed in Cape Town and of course sent their sons to the best school they could find; it happens to be the oldest, and still is one of the best. Anyway, not really important except that I had asked this friend out for a dop (a drink) at the local, but he had declined because of Yom Kippur.

Luckily for me my Peruvian friend, Mr P (p for Paddington, who no one in Canada had heard of, by the way; in fact I found very few that had heard of Roald Dahl) was sitting next to me and, as if on cue, he asked what I was cooking that night for supper.

I knew then and there what my answer was going to be. Not only for Thomas but for myself. My time had come. I turned nonchalantly towards him and said, "Not tonight, Josephine, it's Yom Kippur."

Thomas' sudden discomfort was palpable even through the rivers of sweat that poured over us. "You celebrate Yom Kippur? I didn't know you were one of the chosen ones," he said, clearly shaken, and in between a few grunts and expletives.

"Shalom, Thomas," I replied.

Mr P. chuckled while his stomach shook in unison with Thomas's ensuing silence that reverberated like a wave from one side of the sauna to the other.

I had managed to still the vitriolic Thomas who from then onwards referred to me as "the chosen one," and also perhaps redeem myself for all the Swastikas I had drawn on the arms of The Saint while at school in the sixties: God alone knows why. As a former racist, although in my younger years and without knowing what it really meant, I felt I was paying my dues.

We never heard anything about Jews from Thomas again; certainly not in my presence. He did manage to *redeem* himself though, and my association with my dear friend Mr P, and probably the mention of *Josephine*, encouraged him now and then to insinuate that we were *close*. I waited for the gay word to exit his mouth, but it never did.

So much for Thomas.

Kevin, a tall good looking man who's nationality I will not mention, if for no other reason other than to protect the country of his origin, heard my accent and immediately greeted me by calling me a *kaffirboetjie* when, after a brief period of phatic communication, he determined that I did not hate black people. He was clearly disappointed.

This Afrikaans word perhaps needs some explanation. When any white person, English or Afrikaans speaking showed any solidarity to black people extreme white supremacists would call them *kaffirboetjies*, literally translated as *brothers of kaffirs* or black people. *Kaffir* was in fact an Arabic word used originally by the Portuguese

explorers in a rather benign sense, referring to black non-Muslims in the slave trade - the word itself meaning a *non-believer*. It is even possible that they did so in order to distinguish between those black people who were in fact followers of Islam and those who were not, for whatever reason.

Trust me, when white South Africans adopted the word we turned it, as we did so many things, into an extreme racial slur that hurt millions of black people with each utterance. There could be only one deeper level of insult as a derivative of this word: the word *kaffirboetjie*, referring to someone who might offer some, or any form of sympathy to black people.

Frankly, in some ways, it was an accolade for someone to call me this, depending on who used the word and looking back I should perhaps have felt honoured. However coming from Kevin, it definitely was not an accolade. It was clearly meant as an insult.

This was a man that had found solidarity with another ex-South African (thank God I never met him) who had clearly fled the continent because he hated black people, and Kevin's calling me this was a clear attempt to place me squarely in the corner opposite those who were proudly racist. And frankly, going by Thomas's example, just about anybody that didn't agree with his views.

The fact that it was rumoured he celebrated Hitler's birthday with Thomas himself did not escape me.

We did have an altercation. I had quite gently, and in reaction to his using this highly offensive word, asked him with a detailed explanation to please not use it again.

The following day he entered the sauna, and greeted me with the same *accolade*. I smiled, demurely, recognising that One, we South Africans were responsible for its offensive use and Two, he had probably been irrevocably influenced by a master white racist and that perhaps, like a child, he could possibly be indulged or excused to some degree. I took him aside, explained why it was offensive to me and asked, once again, if he could find a way to not approach me in this manner. He ignored my plea, and continued to chat to me about how Africa was a lost cause. I left to take a shower hoping it would be as cleansing as the shower taken by

South Africa's president after he had slept with his best friend's daughter, knowing that she had HIV - an explanation he had offered to the judge at his trial.

Another razor-blade moment. Razor-blade, rabbit hole.

And I thought Canada would be all roses.

The next day he started all over again. Unfortunately my friends and support group were not there with me. The police, fire-engines, helicopters, a population of lifeguards and paramedics were waiting outside for me to fall, have a nose bleed or simply look mildly dizzy but there in the hot, churning, stinking bowels of the sauna itself, I was left to my own devices.

I looked to my left and to my right. Two men I had never met before sat on either side of me. I approached the problem in what I later felt might have been a little aggressive. I said: "Kevin, let me tell you something. I don't know these two guys next to me. But they are my witnesses - if you call me that name again, I am going to hit you very hard right here, and in front of them."

The two men squirmed on the cedar bench and I confess I have long since wanted to find a way of apologising to them. So to you two guys who sat by me, albeit quite still and a little stupefied, in my need to sever myself from my own racism and that of others, I salute you. Please look me up and I'll buy you a beer.

Kevin said nothing.

I am happy to report that I never heard that offensive word again. Thank you Kevin.

There were others, though. Including one who called all his five ex-wives unmentionably disgusting names and reverted to overt sexual innuendos when any young girl made the huge mistake of entering the sauna when he was there. I realised it was time to vacate my position and seek solace elsewhere.

Henceforth, I now sit in the sauna next door, or make sure I sauna and swim earlier in the day.

Thank goodness these individuals are not representative of our broader society and when I sit chatting to my favourite lifeguard, we laugh together about the contrast between the violently riotous sauna, into which she also sometimes boldly ventures, and the

old-age-home atmosphere outside in the pool area itself. And beyond.

At least I know that my life is safe outside the sauna.

Inside I had to take care of myself and I remain known to all and sundry at the pool, and much to Thomas's bewilderment, a Jew.

Even though I conferred this title on myself.

While there is little privacy in the sauna, there is an abundance outside. Privacy is clearly misunderstood here I am sure.

My first foray into this frightful arena was when I bought a second hand Mercedes Benz station wagon. It had done some ninety thousand kilometres. One day I decided to do an oil change - it struck me that I had no service records - I might need to know, for instance, whether the previous owner had used synthetic oil or not.

I decided to go right to the top: Toronto and the headquarters of Mercedes Benz; no messing about.

After establishing initial contact, I found I was talking to Tony.

"Good morning Tony. I have a query about a car. May I please give you the VIN number?"

"Sure, go ahead," was the prompt reply. I did.

"Okay," said Tony after some time. "I can see that the car is a 1999 E320; silver."

"Yes, that's right. It's gold, actually," I said.

"Okay, I have it in front of me - a silver FourMatic; what did you want to know, Michael?"

"I'd like to know if you have any records; I have just bought it and there is no service book so I have no idea, for instance, what oil the previous owner used."

"Oh. Well I can see from our records that it was never serviced by Mercedes Benz."

"Oh, dear," I sighed.

"Anyway, even if we did, I wouldn't be able to give them to you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well I wouldn't be able to give you any details because of privacy," said Tony politely, but firmly.

I faltered a bit, then regathered myself.

"Not sure we're on the same page, Tony. Perhaps it's my accent - I do have a funny one, I admit; ha-ha. But, listen, I am not interested in the previous owner himself; who he is, where he lives, or the number of ex-wives he has. I would have liked to know what oil he put into the engine - that's all I need."

"Sorry," said Tony. "Even if we had the info, I couldn't give it to you."

I never did find out, but I used synthetic oil anyway.

The dentist was a bit more of a shock I felt.

Both of my kids had needed work done and one had to be referred to a surgeon of their recommendation (the dentist's, not the kids') for some extractions. Off we went, some 50 metres down the road on the same side of the street to the recommended dental surgeon.

I stood at the counter, with the kids behind me, while the receptionist assisted me.

"So Dr Bloomberg referred you, did he?"

"Yes, he did. My daughter has to have some....aah..."

"Yes, I see from the referral - extractions. No problem. If you could just fill this form out please."

She handed me a clip-board. Fill out forms? I scanned the multiple pages.

"Aah. We're all patients of Dr Bloomberg. He has all this information on us. Address, names, care-card medical numbers, etc. ..." I was waiting for her to notice her mistake and see that we were in fact referred, and then simply look on her screen for all the required details.

"Oh, no," she said with a smile. "We don't share personal information."

I stared at her.

"I don't understand. He's our dentist. He has all the information, pages of it, obviously we want him to use it in his professional capacity. I assumed he would give you the information because he referred us to you..."

"Oh, no. We don't do that...." She then looked at my drained, vacant look, and added: "for privacy reasons."

It took me yet another twenty minutes to fill out the forms, which did not include the trip back home to fetch the care-cards for their numbers.

I was to learn later with some weak-kneed bewilderment that all city employees and doctors in the province (and elsewhere) have their full salaries blazoned across the internet on provincial and government sites for the entire universe to see, giggle over, criticise or formulate mass meetings or demonstrations about.

So much for privacy.

This fear, this penchant for believing we can never do enough to protect people's privacy and avoid liability (law suits) pervades every aspect of society and can cause some frustration.

Other times it is just a simple matter of lunacy that gets me into trouble.

In addition to Tim Hortons, Costco is another Canadian institution although it is American. Every large centre apparently has to have one.

If you're South African, think Makro; it is however different. It models itself on that of a wholesaler - expect to buy large sizes in bulk, and the prices are almost always the lowest.

But you won't find six brands of ketchup; instead of stocking 125,000 products which is the Walmart strategy, it seldom has more than 4,000 (according to a blog named Neatorama) - this is apparently to "*combat choice paralysis*."

It's a strategy that works. Staple products such as toilet rolls and detergent are ever present at spectacularly low prices; then there are what Costco calls *treasures* - you can walk by their watch counter and find a Bulova at a crazy-low price the one day, but find it gone two days later.

"You have to get a Costco card - this is a must for every man," said our estate agent on day two after landing. She had booked us for the entire day to view homes, and our first port of call was a government office to secure a social insurance number. Apart from the work permit we had glued into our passport and the essential visitor's visa, a SIN (social insurance number) card is the most important and valued card. So important the agent made sure we had

one before we did anything else. Even before visiting Costco. Canada does not mess around with money - the SIN card carries one's tax number, and basically one can do nothing without it.

Across the road from the SIN card office was Costco. So far so good.

She took us on a tour; we were impressed although not used to the *one-brand only* approach: this week Garmen GPS's are on show, next week not.

Costco obviously knows what it's doing, though despite my reservations.

According to this entertaining blog, it sells \$4.5 billion worth of meat each year; together with another \$4 billion of produce. And 103,000 chickens every day. They have a fast food stand for weary shoppers, with their hotdogs at a stupidly low price that (at least in the US) has not changed since 1985: \$1.50. This results in their moving more than 100 million dogs, as they are known here, every single year. Apparently it buys half the world's supply of cashew nuts, and sells some \$300,000 (R3,465,000) of them every single week. The cashew nut containers are square, instead of round - another testimony to Costco's ingenuity and business acumen, as this saves them "*some 400 truck-trips in shipping .... to it's 600+ stores...*"

It manages to do all of this and yet be one of the only companies in the world without a public relations department. This saves them even more money.

But it does charge a membership fee: apparently 80% of its profits comes this alone. Just to be able to enter.

I thought it a bit strange that customers had to pay a fee, up front, to enter a store itself and in order to buy their products. But it seems they have few problems surrounding bad checks and stealing compared to normal supermarkets - people are less likely to commit fraud having given all their details up front before even entering, apparently. I can see the logic.

There's more *out-of-the-box* logic that seems to work: they move things around. One week light bulbs are in aisle seven, next week they're gone - they call this a *treasure hunt* and of course it

forces people to walk around, irritating someone like me .This *hunt* apparently results in greater sales.

In fact one of the reasons I allowed the membership I fought for so gallantly for to lapse is that I find it impossible stick to a strict shopping list when there, and always overindulge as one tends to do when drinking beer after a hot session in the sauna.

They are particularly generous to their employees who earn around \$20/hr compared to Wal-Mart who pays its full-time employees only around \$12/hr. Consequently its turnover rate is spectacularly low and this results in saving money hiring and training people - a pity many companies do not realise that it costs around three times more to hire someone new than to keep an employee happy.

They are kind to their shoppers also: "Our rule of thumb is to give 80 - 90% (of savings) back to the customer," says Richard Galanti, Chief Financial Officer. These two approaches have resulted in them having eighty one million members each paying them \$55. That's \$4.45bn per annum. And that's money *before* anyone enters a store to buy stuff.

What is even more amazing is that they enjoy a 91% renewal rate and the accolade of reaching number sixteen on Fortune's list of the *World's Most Admired Top 50 All-Stars*. And currently number one amongst speciality retailers.<sup>5</sup>

A pity I didn't know all this when I entered the Surrey Costco early February 2009. I had a lot of money in my pocket, so to speak, with a mandate from the family to have the necessary equipment for the kitchen and the broader house when we moved in on 12th of that same month. Keep in mind that coming from a country that uses only 220 Volts, we had left all appliances back in South Africa. That means I was shopping for everything from a hair dryer to a slow cooker and a kettle.

Costco, I was to discover, was perhaps not necessarily the right place for electrical appliances, especially once I had discovered their one-product-line-at-a-time model which did little else but irritate me.

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<sup>5</sup> Fortune Magazine, December 2015, pg 26.

But this was only after I had finally gained entrance.

And what a mission gaining entrance proved to be.

I was stopped at the main door and, because I didn't have a card, was shown to the Customer Service desk. I found a gap, and approached the counter. Clive stepped forward, his name prominently displayed on his chest.

"Good morning, how are you today?" This is just about the standard greeting, everywhere, and one that I often find a little foreign and usually reply to by saying: "Hi. Am not quite sure; in fact I am very often not sure." I received a blank stare. Silly of me, I sometimes think.

"How can I help you?"

"Thanks; am hoping you can. I have just arrived from Africa and need to set up our family home. I would very much like to perhaps walk around to see whether you guys have what I need...?"

"I am sorry, you have to be a member to enter."

I considered this (not knowing their strategy at the time) for a moment. "Okay, so do you perhaps have a visitor's card?" Of course the visitor's visa was forefront in my mind, having landed in Canada only a few days before.

"No, sorry, we don't."

I was starting to feel a Monty-Python moment coming on (my first).

"Okay..." I said, feeling put out, "so the only way I can enter, even if it's just to see whether I would like to be a member, is to buy a membership."

"That's right," he said very matter-of-factly. He had obviously (and I accept the blame) not been enamoured by my *not-sure* comment. It was my first lesson in not offending Canadians which is considered worse than doing absolutely anything else.

I stepped back and thought about it. Was it worth the \$55? How could I know? Yes, I had walked through with our estate agent a few weeks before but in all honesty, after the forty hour in-transit journey and coming from a full-blown 30°C Summer to a Canadian Winter together with having to view some ten houses that day, I could not remember much of what I had seen.

I stepped forward boldly. "Okay, Clive, let me get the membership," I said taking out my credit card.

His eyes dropped quickly to the wallet in my hand. "I am sorry, but we don't take credit cards, and anyway we don't accept Visa."

"Oh," I said, taken aback and feeling a little wounded. My attempts at gaining entry were not going well. "How..., how can I pay then?" I asked, starting to feel a little stupid.

"You can pay in cash, or write a check."

A check? I tried to remember the last time I had had a cheque-book in my possession.

"I don't have a check. Cash? Is there an ATM here?"

It was, I soon discovered, the *one thing* Costco did not have.

"No, I am sorry. But there is one down the road."

I turned to look in the direction of his gaze. The large entrance loomed to one side. Outside I could see one of my first views of flurries (snow) coming down.

"It's snowing," I said, rather down in the mouth.

"Yes, it is, I see..." he said, a whole lot more cheerful than I was feeling.

It was time for me to step back and relieve both of us of what was fast becoming a tiresome and difficult encounter. I walked backwards and thought of my options. I definitely did not want to go back to my car and drive around looking for an ATM, even though it was only a light snow-fall.

I found myself looking around: to the right the ubiquitous fast-food stand with a long line-up of tired and hungry shoppers all getting their slice of pizza or their rock-bottom-priced hotdog, with a coke.

To the left the entrance and, beyond, snow. Hotdog, or parking lot, with snow falling? I am sometimes mentally challenged when it comes to making decisions. Frankly I was wondering whether it would be easier for me and Clive to swap places. He, at least, knew what he was doing.

The universe seems to take pity on me: I looked up and saw a large banner advertisement for a Costco Mastercard credit card. I studied the details below a picture of the card itself. Application

and ownership meant not only the ability to purchase within the store (they didn't take visa, remember), but it also meant that one's photograph (for identity) would be displayed on the credit card itself, thereby negating the need for a Costco Membership card. I read this over and over before approaching the bench again.

When I saw that Clive was free, I took a deep breath and proudly presented my new-found discovery.

"Hi Clive, I see the credit car above you. From what I understand this is also a membership?"

"Yes," said Clive with a little more enthusiasm. I wondered if he received commission.

"So, let me get this straight: I get the card. You put my picture on the back of the credit card and that means I don't have to carry around a Costco Membership card..."

"Absolutely," he said.

"And this means that I can use the card to shop here?"

"Yes," he nodded, now wide awake and a look of expectation.

"And," I noted with pride, "this also means that I don't have to pay the Costco Membership, because it's built into the price of the annual membership of the card itself?"

I had obviously struck a cord. Clive must have been aware that, for once, I had been paying attention. He got so excited that I thought he might actually mount the counter, jump right over and give me a hug.

I quickly stepped back again, and without necessarily wanting to dampen his response and enthusiasm in any way, I did offer a gentle challenge: "I'm not sure that I should be getting yet *another* credit card," I said, forgetting that I was in North America, and the *land* of debt in which the average person probably had at least three.

His smile disappeared and he began to look disconsolate once again. I sighed.

What with the snow outside, my eager desire to set up house, Clive's patience in dealing with me, his need to get on with his own day, and mine to arrive at some solution, I felt I should simply take the plunge.

I did. Those who know me well might tell you that there are times when I am laboriously hesitant to make up my mind. I sometimes sit staring at a menu without even knowing whether I would prefer fish or meat. I felt that this could not be such a moment, so I took a deep breath and did the brave thing.

I stepped back up to the counter, boldly pushed my chest out with pride that, at least, I had made an important decision and said:

"Okay, Clive. Let's do it! Give me one of those..."

I was definitely not prepared for his answer.

Not least of all because he said it without malice, or offence, without any devious intention or need to take revenge. In fact he was quite businesslike about it when the words came out of his mouth:

"Oh, sorry, you only get one of those if you're a member."

It was, for me, to be the first of a number of Monty-Python moments.

Sears was another one. But here the fear of liability came into play. At my expense.

Just after the Costco encounter we had, in fact, bought a house. Time was of the essence. Apart from having no electrical appliances, we also had no beds.

If you're moving from just about anywhere in the normal world, certainly from any former British colony, don't bring your beds. I mention this again, just in case you're a little like me and don't listen sometimes. North America, as I was discovering daily, is on another planet. Bring your beds, but then be prepared to return home for linen when required. Nothing fits here.

Sears: large furniture store. Unlike Costco, apart from the fact that it was founded three years before I was born in 1955 (same year Disneyland was born), I could find little interesting about it.

We had planned a Saturday morning to buy three beds and mattresses, and organise for the delivery of the same, on the day we took possession of the house, which was to be February 12th, a day on which it also snowed, and if you've read the book from the beginning, you already know about.

This was less than a month after we had arrived - beware: possession of a property, unlike some other things in Canada, can be far quicker than the average twelve weeks it takes in South Africa and elsewhere. It is swift once the offer to purchase has been accepted, as I have said.

We had to decide quickly, or sleep on the floor.

The family got out of the car and stood in front of the store. My choice had been quite stupid. Did I not know them well enough?

"Oh, look there's a Chapters bookstore next door!" they said excitedly and disappeared, leaving me at the entrance of Sears.

I now had no kids, no Costco membership, and nobody to help me choose anything. And it was cold outside. I walked disconcertingly through the entrance, feeling that if Sears demanded a membership also I would return immediately to South Africa.

Thankfully the family returned later, looking just a little guilty, but each with a book to console them.

We chose the beds and mattresses one of which, now, two years later became the focus of another Monty-Python moment.

It had to be returned.

We had had an *inspector* walk around the freshly made bed, take pictures, look underneath, lift, gently, the covers, use a tape measure to determine.....whatever, and then place a long pole-like ruler across the top of the fully made bed itself.

"Definitely a collapse," he said. "Yes, the pillow-top section has collapsed." It was his second visit.

He left, with his notes and two weeks later I was telephoned by a Sear's Customer Service agent with a code and the instruction to return to any branch and choose a new mattress.

I thanked them, but did not feel entirely jubilant about returning to start all over again, and within only two years. How much more junk, returns, foul products and badly manufactured items could our planet take? Perhaps someone could benefit from our misfortune and find the mattress useful.

No.

Sears was adamant that they would simply dispose of it.

I did choose another one; paid handsomely for the difference because I was determined to go back to a foam-like structure rather than fancy pillow-tops and box springs.

I made my choice of something apparently designed by NASA, according to Gord the salesperson, and after testing a plethora of options, and falling asleep on one in the store. I must admit it was not just the thought of NASA itself, but when I lay down I did in fact almost feel I was drifting off into space.

I signed, paid, gave the address and set about exiting the store.

"Excuse me!" said a husky female voice from behind. "Do you have your plastic bag kit?"

I thought she was talking to someone else.

"No, you sir. You need to take the kit otherwise we cannot exchange the mattress."

This needed some clarification, so I turned around again and walked back.

"You have to take the plastic kit to cover the mattress, otherwise we cannot replace it."

"Plastic kit? I don't understand. Why must the mattress be covered?"

"Well," she said, flinging her head back, "you cannot expect our people to handle your mattress with their bare hands?"

I stared at her.

"How about they wear gloves?"

She was flummoxed. "Sir, if you don't cover the mattress they will not replace it."

"That's a bit difficult, " I said, "because there is no way I can cover that mattress. It's king size - do you have any idea how heavy it is?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

That was it. I had no choice but to take the plastic bag kit home with me.

The liability bug has bitten me hard, and in the arse. I was going to make someone else fully aware of the pain, so I wrote a letter after, not only this incident, but what turned out to be a mild fiasco, deserving of a comedy reality show:

Dear Sir, I have been fortunate enough to have been granted the replacement of a mattress. The same has now been delivered to my home and I am delighted to report that not only should the salesperson at the Langley Home Store, Gord, be congratulated for her superb service, but that the mattress itself has met, over the last few days, every expectation and we are convinced it will solve all our problems. So thank you for this, we fully appreciate the efforts made by him, and by corporate head office in assisting us in this way.

There was, however, a problem with the delivery and I wish to take this matter up with you, as well as the question of corporate policy in so far as my expected involvement in the replacement procedure; more of this later.

When the new bed-set arrived the appointed sub-contractor/driver said he was unable to load the old bed-set and I would have to store it in my house because no instructions had been issued. He showed me his form on which he had been instructed to deliver the new bed-set only. I phoned the branch; they were unapologetic and simply said that another truck would have to come some time in the future. I said this was not acceptable and asked why the driver could simply not load up the bed-set, as clearly he was supposed to do. The answer was no, he could not. I then received notification that a truck would return on Wednesday in the afternoon to pick up the old bed-set. This did not suit me as I had an appointment elsewhere on Wednesday, (that was why I had set aside Monday as the replacement day, not expecting that this replacement would take place over a period of time). It was left to me to phone the dispatch division and to arrange for another pick-up day. In fact, what transpired is, that despite the new rearranged time, I received a phone call from the pick-up person an hour early, and had to rush back home. I was not only able to do so, but was delighted that I would not have the mattress in my lounge for yet another day.

This serves only as the background, and does not highlight the main issue I wish to bring to your attention.

It is this: your corporate head office has a policy of expecting the customer to be responsible for maintenance of hygiene, with regard to the sub-contractors who handle beds. Not only am I expected to

cover a mattress I am barely able to lift, but I was expected to make the journey to the store itself to fetch the plastic covering. I am incredulous when I realise how I was duped into driving all the way to Langley to do this. The reason given to me was to sign papers for the replacement. Surreptitious stuff to my thinking, as they had already asked for my Visa number over the phone.

Why could the person delivering the new mattress and bed-set not simply arrive with the visa papers to sign? I asked. No, that has to be done at the store. I now know why: to pick up the plastic covering no one else wants responsibility for.

My personal view of this matter is simply this: Sears has, perhaps, had some claim issues with unions and or drivers of delivery vehicles about hygiene (difficult to believe, as the two drivers who arrived both wore gloves), and have decided to place the full responsibility on the shoulders of the client.

In essence it is left to me, the customer, to do the dirty work. I think not.

I am unsure as to what you would expect of an invalid, suffice it to repeat that a king size mattress is barely manageable by even two fully grown men, witnessed when the driver and his assistant had extreme difficulty moving it downstairs into my lounge for storage. More about this later. More about the second pickup driver and assistant who could hardly get the mattress out of my front door, without some assistance from me!

I have explained the facts surrounding the second part of the replacement – yesterday, when the second crew arrived to retrieve the old mattress and bed set. I am delighted to say that they waited for me (they were one hour early, as I said) and were able, with extreme difficulty to drive away with the items in question. This was after they removed the plastic from the mattress simply because, with all three of us making every attempt to lift the now bending, and probably broken king size mattress in order to fit through the front door, there was simply nothing for us to hold on to. In fact the only way the two crew members were finally able to bring the mattress to the truck's side, was to drag it down my driveway.

The fact that both crews arrived with gloves (my suggestion in the first place) and the second crew had to remove the plastic covering, makes comic nonsense of Sears policy that requires **me** to not only cover the items with the plastic mentioned above, but to drive to the nearest store to pick up the three pieces of plastic in the first place.

Never before have I encountered a policy that requires the customer to become physically involved at any stage of the replacement of any piece of furniture; my personal feeling was that I might have been required to remove the bed sheets and pillows from the bed and mattress – a reasonable request. I am somewhat confused by this policy and wish to tell you that I feel not only inconvenienced, but quite frankly abused; and in good faith, I assume this was never the intention of the policy maker.

It should **not** be the concern of a customer that any employee or sub-contractor of Sears should have issues with hygiene, health or any other matter. The person appointed to inspect the mattress in the first place, and who did such a shocking job that only a bed-report was submitted, when a mattress inspection was requested by Langley Home Stores, and who then had to return a second time, I noticed, was able and willing to touch the bed, mattress and bed linen. Without gloves.

Should any sub-contractor or employee of Sears have any issues with handling of goods it should be up to **them** to provide proper protective measures. I might have expected them to arrive with plastic covers; I might have expected them to replace the new bed with the old mattress – thereby pushing the old mattress into the large (perfectly hygienic) box which arrived with the new mattress itself. I might have expected them to wear gloves.

What I did not expect was to make a journey at my expense to pick up plastic so that, just in case there was some issue with hygiene, Sears Home Store and corporate would be covered.

I think this could easily be seen by many as Sears corporate refusing to take responsibility themselves for something that has nothing at all to do with the customer.

I wish to add that both pick-up crews did a sterling job, offering advice, sympathy and offered every assistance, and were it not for

*them, and their understanding of my point of view which I was sure not to elaborate, I might still be sitting with a mattress and bed-set in my lounge.*

*I eagerly await your response.*

I never did get one.

One of the main reasons for extreme caution is liability itself. As I have explained, using the pool example.

My family revels in the *fact* that life here is important, and coming from Africa, they would rather experience irritating overcautiousness and feel safe, than feel neglected.

I do concur. I would rather have the overcautious response when parts of my body are lying on the highway than know someone might drive over a severed hand of mine in their desire to get to work quickly.

But one Sunday did perk my interest in this quirky phenomenon of being overcautious.

We had recruited a number of people mostly from South Africa, and it was my job to settle them in our basement, and do what our real estate agent had done for us - at least in the first week: tour Costco, and get a SIN number. My duties were far more involved as very often the airport pickup involved an animal and a spouse or partner. Their professional registration and orientation also involved trips to downtown Vancouver, then there was the mission to find them transport, and eventually when they were sick of our basement suite, and me, their own accommodation. I enjoyed this task and made friends with all, making sure they were welcomed, fed each night, and on occasion also did their washing and ironing - much to the bewilderment of my Canadian contacts and friends as no one seems to iron here. It was, of course, during one such ironing session that I heard the interview with the Iranian refugee who jumped out of the plane.

But that's another story.

This one ends with a small insect.

One *recruit* in question travelled with us, one Sunday, to west Vancouver to visit another South African, who has spent the last twenty five years bragging about the fact that he doesn't have a

front door key, and that returning to Cape Town, where he studied at UCT (University of Cape Town) and met his Canadian wife, would be foolish, stressful and completely unnecessary. His wife did return for her class reunion, enjoyed herself so much cycling the winelands in the Boland that she persuaded him to return with one of their daughters. They went for a short holiday.

This man, who happens to be a friend, but is also something of an extreme sport fanatic, not only revived his South African personality and love for the country, but went a little overboard when he and his daughter thought it would be fun to cycle from Bloemfontein to Cape Town, did so, and then promptly enrolled her at UCT.

His brother and their family didn't think it much fun when he led them into Soweto at night, on bicycles, and got lost.

Frankly I think he's nuts, but then he probably has more fun than I do.

What on earth has this got to do with the doctor and an insect?

Nothing really, except that we were sitting on this person's deck overlooking the marina at the bottom of the road when we heard a siren.

"Let's go down to the marina to see the boats and see what the fuss is all about," I said to my new friend.

Of course he was game for anything in our new country, so off we went. At the bottom where the road skirts the marina itself we noticed, outside one of the stately homes, a fire-engine. If you're from anywhere else in the world I would forgive you for thinking there was a fire. But this is Canada, and for many reasons, not least of all for those in British Columbia where there are billions of trees, the fire department is the first response unit for anything.

There it was, in its red splendour, beside the driveway.

"Afternoon," I said to the fireman tending some hoses on the side. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah; no problem."

I waited for him to perhaps indulge me and give me some information. He didn't.

Of course I could not resist it, so I added:

"Was there a fire?" I asked innocently, knowing there had probably not been one.

"Oh no..., no fire," he said, continuing to repack the hoses (I know this sounds like I need to enforce the image of a fire truck, but this is exactly as I remember it).

"Oh," I said, thinking I was being patient enough; I mean, why couldn't the man just tell a inquisitive bystander what the call-out had been? "So, what was the problem?"

He looked at me a little sheepishly: "A bee-sting," he said.

"Aaaaah, of course...," said the South African in me: *that makes real sense - did you hose him down, perhaps; kill the bee with a fire-man's axe?*

Clearly I had not, by this stage, developed a proper understanding of the way things are done in Canada. No wonder it took so long for my citizenship papers to finally come through. They knew all about me.

"Anyway, have a great day," I said, as Canadian as I could muster.

He waved us goodbye with a broad smile, and walked back to the house.

We visited the marina, bathed in glorious sunshine and with the yachts bobbing up and down on the sparkling water, and by the time we had returned to the house, no fewer than two ambulances had arrived, squirming their way down the narrow road to sit beside and keep the fire-engine company.

You can never feel abandoned here.

I did feel a little abused, once, however.

But then because I enjoy interaction with people (at least those who don't hide behind the privacy laws) and am usually keen to help, I was willing and able this time to lend a hand, even though the entire episode was so contrary to *any* other experience of Canadian overcautiousness.

Still with the liability issue and Canada's penchant for super-cautious safety measures in mind, someone from BC Hydro (BC's power utility) appeared at my front door one day.

While I have subsequently learnt from one of my sauna friends who is an engineer with BC Hydro itself, that the average BC household consumes some 11,000 kWh every year, that they serve 95% of the population - and this by using almost exclusively hydro-electric power - that this water generates up to 56,000 Gigawatt hours per year, it was more to do with the fact that they have over one million utility poles carrying the power cables themselves that was of particular interest to me.

Something else I was finding difficult to get used to is the fact that while power cables are placed underground in South Africa and most other parts of the world, except in the centre of the city, in BC every one is traditionally *above* the ground in most suburbs. This means that one may drive down streets with two-million-dollar houses and be greeted with the swaying clutter of thick black cables mimicking scenes out of a ghetto in Tokyo itself. Or perhaps Africa.

Here comes the negative perceptions we as South Africans have harboured for so long - that everything we have, there, is inferior.

If there is one thing I still find disturbing it is this: I often find myself on the deck of a three million dollar home, in glorious sunshine and with a view of Semiahmoo Bay and the Olympic Mountains of Washington State before one, like some majestic painting but also with the entire scene *scribbled* over, as if by some precocious child, with a multitude of thick black cables supported by a few of the one million utility poles BC Hydro supplies and services.

It was a matter concerning one of these poles that had prompted me to phone BC Hydro itself.

My jolly German neighbour had built his retirement home next door to us and in true German style had done everything super fastidiously and with great care and precision. He had also decided to place his power cables underground.

I would have thought that this exercise might have resulted in fewer utility poles for BC Hydro to have to service. I mean, doesn't it kinda make sense - that if all power was delivered underground there would be no need for poles?

Clearly I was wrong.

One might be forgiven for thinking that British Columbia's liquor laws, whereby the province controls all warehousing, wholesaling and delivery to all outlets, provincial or private and results in the bizarre situation in which a Horsnby Island distillery is forced to ship it's produce to Vancouver for warehousing, then back across the water to Victoria for distribution, to be shipped once again across on a ferry back to the same island in order for it to be sold in the liquor store exactly 350 metres away would be enough lunacy for one province. But I found out that the pole issue seemed determined to follow this kind of logic.

My neighbour and I shared one main pole. So between my neighbour's house and ours there was one very tall pole - this received one thick black cable from across the street, and then split this into one for the neighbour, and one for us. Each one bending like the lines of a hammock from the large pole itself to each roof connection.

So far so good.

So the neighbour and I assumed that because he has paid thousands of dollars to have the cable travel underground to his house, the cable itself would obviously no longer be swinging in the breeze to his roof, but would travel down the large pole, underground before it surfaced at the wall of his garage.

Yes. And no.

All this, according to BC Hydro, required another pole.

Not only did the neighbour have to pay \$1,500 dollars for this dwarfish looking and much shorter pole which was required to receive the thick black cable *before* it was allowed to travel underground, but it was placed directly besides its big daddy: the large, main pole itself. About one metre away. Makes sense, eh?

So now instead of doing away with a pole, we enjoy the presence of yet another one.

It was this additional connection, and the neighbour's brand new giant sized heat pump that caused me problems. Whenever the heat-pump came on, all my lights dimmed dramatically.

I phoned BC Hydro. They responded almost immediately.

There was a knock on my front door within days.

Had the man outside not been wearing a BC Hydro overall with a bright yellow don't-drive-into-me luminous jacket and was, instead, homeless I might have fainted in a dead fright because he looked exactly, in every way (besides the uniform), just like Rubeus Hagrid the half-giant son of Fridwulfa.

He even laughed and spoke like him. After just minutes I felt myself drooling down my chin in stupefaction.

"I believe you're havin' power surge problems. Rah-Rah!" he said.

I stood quite still for what seemed like minutes.

He shifted from one foot to the other. I could have sworn the two front doors shook.

"Oh. Yes. Thank you so much. My name is Michael," and I proceeded to explained, again, the situation to him in great detail.

He listened intently nodding his gargantuan head.

"I think I have a solution; but...," he said with a Hagrid-cock-of-his-head, while he looked way down onto me, "I might need some help, ye know."

I thought of Hagrid's Care Of Magical Creatures class in which Draco Malfoy had been injured by Buckwheat, and when he had asked Harry Potter to help him calm Buckwheat down.

I wondered what he had in mind.

He turned around and started to walk back to his gigantic truck across the road. I could have sworn he was humming a magical tune as he did so.

Of course I followed him.

"So, there now. I have a small problem, and I thought you might like to help me with it!" he said, almost condescendingly, as if talking to a young Harry, Ron or Hermione.

I nodded obediently, my diminutive head.

"You see the truck over there? I have to get up inside that cage and cut the cable on that pole above it!"

I followed his gaze up, up to the top of the large pole itself and the conglomeration of black cables that cluttered around its head.

"But I don't have an assistant today, *rah-rah!* He never turned up, you see...!"

My mind started to do somersaults.

Perhaps he wanted me to control the joystick for the lift, so that he could mount the pole in his cage.

My heart started beating and I felt like I was sixteen again.

I suddenly wondered whether he might give me a jacket just like his, and a hard hat. I imagined myself strutting around in the middle of the road and glaring, with superiority, at any car or bus that drove by.

I would be *the man*. Like Harry Potter, controlling Buckwheat. This was a quintessentially exciting moment for a simple house-band who did little else besides ironing, cleaning and cooking all day.

But then I thought about it and realised this was crazy. Especially when I recalled how I had embarrassed myself when I needed to replace my car's tires.

I had some weeks before driven up to the entrance of the local tire franchise (which by the way will mend any puncture for the life of the tire, free) and pointed the nose of my car at the ramp of the hydraulic lift.

On my approach, the technician greeted me with a waving of his arms in a series of movements that looked just like those used by aircraft marshallers when bringing an aircraft to rest on the apron of a runway.

This was the norm back home in South Africa, where it was quite usual for the driver, already in an approaching car, to assist the garage by driving onto the ramp itself.

When I saw the young man's highly articulate waving I felt important.

In fact I was so impressed with these marshalling gesticulations I felt I could just as well be landing a helicopter, instead of only an ordinary aeroplane or, in my case, a pedestrian motor vehicle.

I responded to his waving by driving in further and mounting the ramps of the lift just as I would have done back home.

Suddenly he disappeared through the doors to the main office, his arms still waiving quite madly.

I stopped the car and watched him, bewildered.

Why had he disappeared at the crucial moment of my entry? Just as I was ready to place the entire car onto the lift for him, and save him the hassle?

I looked down at my dash - was my car on fire? Did I have my bright lights on; what!?

He came back with a manager in tow, his arms still up in the air, but without the articulated aircraft-marshalling gestures I had got so excited about before.

I felt totally confused when the manager proceeded to admonish me, and made me back up my car, away from the regulated interior of his tire franchise *that was reserved for his personnel only* (because of our old friend liability), and **not** for customers.

I was left feeling quite deflated for months afterwards.

I thought about this when I looked up at the tall utility pole across the street that Hagrid was pointing to with a finger the size of my biceps.

I realised there was no frigging way this unionise BC Hydro man was going to allow me to even get close to his truck.

Or his joystick. This was Canada. What a pity - because I had already found myself imagining the process: *Jzzzzz-jzzzzz - just up a little more; too much. Down - jzzzzz-jzzzzz; left. Okay, that's it - keep it steady!*

Sadly it was not to be.

What happened next defied all previous encounters with my new country's penchant for hypercaution; its rules, regulations, its super liability-driven maniacal fear of doing anything that might offend. That might be politically incorrect; that might end in insult or discomfort; bruise an ego or bruise a hand.

He climbed into his cage, raised it himself with his own toggle joystick, and shouted down at me. Very loudly. As though he were on the back of Buckwheat herself way up into the trees.

"I am going to cut the main cable and it's going to fall right down onto the road!"

I looked up at him, and then followed the line of the thick black cable, now held in his mighty hands, from across the street to the

utility pole outside my house on the sidewalk that I shared with my German neighbour.

I nodded but without any drastic movement in case this might entice further instructions I might not be able to follow.

"And when it lands, you see, there won't be enough time for me to come down to move it!"

Like, *dugh!*

I didn't respond immediately and tried to fathom the consequences of this proposed action.

He looked at me blankly.

"Well - what if a bus comes by and drives over it?!" he asked - like, *you promised to help, didn't you?*

My eyes grew very large.

"You'll have to move it for me!" he insisted. Like, *what the hell, Harry Potter; you're my Man, my prodigy of Magical Moments!*

Oh yes, of course. How silly of me.

I had, so far, found it difficult to escape the constant examination of a multitude of lifeguards, while sitting alone on the bench outside the sauna at the local pool - all expecting my looming demise in falling over in a dead faint. Or the ability to drive my own car onto the ramp of my local tire franchise in order to assist the young technician, but here a unionised technician was asking me to pick up and drag, across a very wide arterial road that supported local busses, the heavy thick, black cable that supplied all the electricity to my house.

AND that of my neighbour.

I surveyed the wide expanse of the road itself.

I was turning sixty in just three short years. Would I make it back to the sidewalk in time? I mean, would I make it back across the road, before some bus, or utility truck the size of Hagrid's came thundering down towards me?

In one frantic, desperate moment, I realised I was not entirely certain what religion I followed.

But failing this confirmation, I quickly remembered that Canada used only 110 volts, instead of the 220 back in South Africa.

I *immediately* felt inflated.

I mean with only 110 volts, I might just perhaps only jump across the road like a ballerina, instead of taking off like a rocket, with 220 volts and smashing into the bus that might come down the road at the wrong moment.

I shivered.

I wondered whether he might offer me some protection.

I asked, as meekly as a disciple of Jesus, or like Oliver Twist when he asked for some more food, if he might consider giving me some gloves.

"Gloves? What for, Harry? It's just a silly o' cable!" he said. "You won't need gloves. Just pick it up and drag it back across the road!"

In a magical moment I felt Hagrid must obviously know best.

I decided this was it.

I stood ready, faithful to my calling, and hoping desperately that the cable itself was not actually live. Frankly, it was more like *hoping* that the cable itself was not so.

"Here we go!" he shouted, so loudly that my neighbour came running out and said something to me in German. It actually sounded like a command to start the attack on some battlefield. Of course it meant I was watching him and not Hagrid.

With one quick, loud snip the cable broke loose and fell with a thunderous and determined *thwack* into the middle of the road, causing my head to spin around.

It was just my luck that a bus came around the corner and bore down on us as this happened. My neighbour shouted even more loudly, and I imagined that his being German and having the inherent ability to save all of Europe economically, he might just be giving me some crucial advice. Or predicting my death.

I sprang into action with dedicated enthusiasm and picked the cable up, tossing it between one and hand and the other, thinking perhaps that if it were live I would receive only half the charge, and dragged it across the road out of harm's way.

Just in time.

Thankfully the bus driver slowed down, and I was even rewarded with a nod as he then drove past us.

I managed a hand salute of solidarity as he sped away, feeling that I had managed that day to do something useful for my new country, even though I must have looked less convincing without a hard hat. Or gloves, or a luminous jacket.

Hagrid came down.

"There you are, you see. Not so difficult. You did just fine - all done and dusted, it is!"

I smiled, weakly. Sadly, much more like Draco Malfoy than my true hero, Harry Potter.

"Now, if you'll just help me with the new cable. I have to bring it across the road to attach it your pole now, don't I? To give you all the power you need!"

I wish to report I followed through, like a true South African.

But that's another story.

All I can tell you is that I never complained about the ironing again.