

CHRISTMAS 2020

A lot of things happened in 2020. We went to great lengths to try to avoid them.

“We’ve gone on holiday by mistake” –

This plea is uttered by the character Withnail (Richard E. Grant) to a local farmer in England’s Lake District in the 1987 British cult comedy film ‘Withnail and I’ written and directed by Bruce Robinson. It is set in the late 1960s. Two unemployed actors, Withnail and “I” (Paul McGann), share a squalid flat in Camden Town in London. The pair go on a holiday, with disastrous consequences.

We’ve gone on holiday by mistake –

Shortly after Christmas 2019, Nam and I set off in our car and headed back to the southeast of South Australia and thence to western Victoria for a “road trip”. We had done something similar (and better planned) two years previously. We decided to head in the same general direction and to do some things we missed out on doing the last time. What could go wrong?

The southeast of South Australia is a limestone region riddled with caves, many permanently flooded. The town of Naracoorte is particularly famous for its caves.

Two years previously, Nam had spent a morning in a basic speleological group exploring some of the more accessible caves and learning how to corkscrew his body into impossible shapes in order to proceed through the cave system.

This time Nam wished to join an advanced team. But once in Naracoorte we learned that the advanced sessions do not run during school holiday times, as extra guides are required to usher groups of children through the simple walk-in caves.

Not to worry, we headed to the nearby wetland, Bool Lagoon. Last time, we had tried to be clever and used back-roads to get there. We had wound up on barely discernible tracks on fingers of solid land jutting into the lagoon. These tracks are not meant for the casual tourist! This time, we went the sign-posted way, and, lo, we did find the Visitor Centre and the boardwalk. Shame that there was no water in the lagoon this time. Zero from two so far.

The weather had been uncomfortably hot. Indeed, the bushfire season had started early, some months back, and nasty bushfires were still devastating swathes of the country further east.

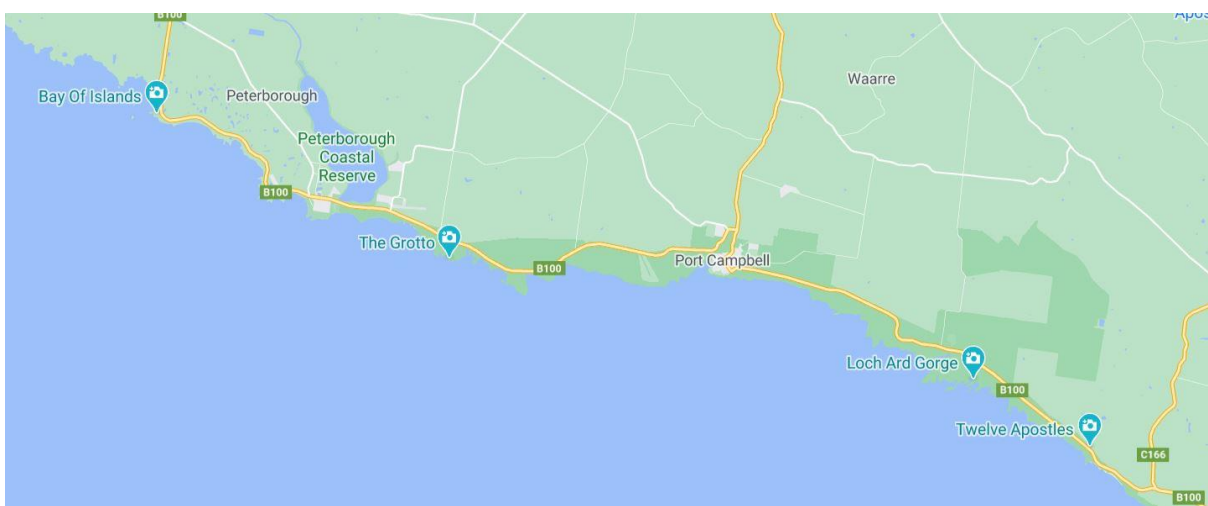
We had decided to spend more time than on the last trip in and around Warrnambool, a regional city in the west of Victoria. However, given that the weather was hot, that the city was a seaside holiday destination and that we were looking for a few days over New Year’s Eve, all Nam could find for us to stay in was a cabin in a family camping park. The rate was outrageously high, especially as our cabin was a glorified kennel next to the entrance to the camp rubbish tip.

The weather became impossibly foul, with extreme temperatures and fierce northerly winds creating a fan-forced oven effect. We spent one entire day in the cabin in front of the air conditioner, with towels blocking door gaps from the hadean winds.

Two years previously, we had driven along the famous Great Ocean Road from its western end near Warrnambool, only to discover that all the glorious rock formations such as ‘The Twelve Apostles’ had become ridiculously clogged with local and international tourists. On that occasion, we had proceeded much further east to Apollo Bay, with the view of taking a helicopter ride from there back to the rock formations, and thereby avoid the tourists. However, the day we were booked to fly two years ago, which was our last day in Apollo Bay, we were thwarted when the weather had turned foul with blustery hot north winds and threats of bushfires.

This time we had planned to take a helicopter ride from the western side with a helicopter service based just outside Port Fairy, not far from Warrnambool. The weather and fire situation were even worse this trip, so we were ready for another letdown. Our booking was late in the afternoon on New Year’s Eve. Around lunchtime we received a call from the operator: he had overlooked the fact that it was NYE and he had promised to lend his chopper to a group of his mates to go to Melbourne for the festivities – as you do. 🙄 Would we mind coming earlier? No problems, we’re on our way. Partway there, the phone rings again: a critical engine part has failed and requires replacement. No helicopter rides for anyone until the new part can be sourced. Sigh! (As it happened, later that day we drove past the airfield. Indeed, there was the chopper with the “hood up”, as it were, and a guy working on it. So, it looks like the reason given was true and not just a brush off.)

We were due to leave Warrnambool on New Year’s Day to travel to Bendigo, a city north of Melbourne that had been one of the boom towns in the heyday of the Victorian goldrush. We decided to leave Warrnambool at “crack o’ dawn” and travel to The Twelve Apostles carpark before turning inland to head to Bendigo. There was quite a substantial helicopter outfit based there, and we secured a spot on an imminent flight that went all along the rock formation coast, including of course The Twelve Apostles. Everything went like clockwork! The view of the many formations from the air was stunning, and the pilot provided an interesting commentary along the way. The company was run extremely efficiently, and I thoroughly recommend to any visitors that you suck up the cost and call this a “bucket list” experience! Take their helicopter ride along the coast!



The helicopter flew from The Twelve Apostles (east) to the Bay of Islands (west) and return

Incense and Smoke –

Bendigo proved to be a delightful few days' visit. Nam had booked an excellent Air BnB apartment that shat all over the more expensive dogbox at Warrnambool.

As mentioned earlier, Bendigo reached its zenith in the goldrush days of Victoria. Unsurprisingly, then, Bendigo has quite an extensive and diverse history and so offers heaps of good things to see and do. The weather was still exceedingly hot, and additionally we were now far enough east that that we could smell the bushfire smoke in the air. Not only were we getting the fumes from the extensive fires in the east, but also there were even small local bushfires to cause us alarm.

We had always planned to make Bendigo the furthest east we would go, and it proved to be just as well. The eastern half of Victoria seemed to be entirely ablaze. One enormous bushfire had conflagrated with a massive one north of the border with New South Wales to produce one of the largest bushfires ever seen in the country! I was now hearing reports on the radio of new bushfires in the southwest of the state that were menacing roads we had earlier driven over. Our route homewards was ruled as much by the emergency services app on the phone as by the GPS!

A significant part of the heritage of Bendigo was due to the Chinese who had come to work on the goldfields. They had brought Buddhism with them, and there was still a legacy of Buddhist sentiment in the area. On the day we left Bendigo to start heading west again, we stopped by a huge Buddhist complex still being built 14km north-west of the city, The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion.



The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion

We arrived very early, so one of the reception staff called up their electric service vehicle and gave Nam and me a ride through the magnificent gardens right up to the Stupa. This was a godsend given my current mobility issues. In the gardens, each major world religion who chooses to participate is given a small area to develop, to represent their religion. A recent completion was from Catholic Christianity: a statue of St Francis and some animals in a beautiful garden setting (a fairly obvious nod to the present Pontiff of that Church). Inside the Stupa, there are many exquisite statues, altars etc. that visitors may view and worship at, and there is still much left to complete. The greater complex also offers accommodation for retreats, conferences etc. There are Buddhist monks and nuns living there permanently.



An old man seeks sanctuary at the Stupa

Yet Another Holiday Fail –

Our next stop was in Halls Gap, a hamlet in the heart of The Grampians mountain range. This range is truly spectacular, with numerous walks up very steep slopes that rewarded the dogged hiker with stunning views. I have been to Halls Gap many times in my life, but for Nam it was only his second visit, the first being a daytime stop on our trip two years ago.

Back on our previous visit, Nam had climbed up to The Pinnacle, a famous Halls Gap landmark offering sweeping views down to the hamlet and down the main gorge in which it is situated. This time, at my encouragement, he went up to the northern part of the range and climbed Mount Zero and then the more challenging climb up Hollow Mountain. (It's starting to sound like an extract from a J.R.R. Tolkien novel!) I had made these climbs way back in 2002.

We had arranged to stay a few nights in a cabin in Halls Gap, with Nam tackling ever more precipitous climbs up the peaks while I sipped coffee in a nice (free Wi-Fi) café that was in the hamlet. I had not realized that Halls Gap had grown considerably, to cater for the tourist trade, since my youthful trips to The Grampians. This accommodation, including our own set of cabins, had no option other than to grow in a ribbon development along the road into Halls Gap from Dunkeld to the south. My present mobility difficulties meant that getting to and from the café was impossible, and the heat and the persistent smoky atmosphere put Nam off any further hikes.

Ah, but Nam had spotted a company offering scenic flights over the whole Grampians National Park. We shall book one of these. Insufficient visibility of course: the pilot sarcastically offered to take us up for a view of the grey layer of smoke haze from above. So, instead, we went on a drive to some nearby towns like Stawell and Ararat, taking care to avoid the local bushfire that was adding to the general smoke-filled atmosphere of Victoria.

The Final Chapter –

We left Halls Gap having scored a C– on our plans there and headed roughly west-southwest through the far-western Victorian town of Casterton on our way to Robe, a famed seaside village on the southeast coast back in South Australia. We arranged to lunch at Casterton as our friend Heather Sherlock (our wedding-cake maker) had decided on a “tree

change” and had packed up her goods and chattels and abandoned Adelaide. We spent a couple of nights at Robe, mainly since I had never actually managed to visit the place, despite its popularity. Apparently, Robe is great if you like fishing, which I detest. The village was crammed to the gills with tourists and the weather was still horribly hot. After being completely underwhelmed by Robe, I was glad when Nam pointed our Subaru back up the Princes Highway towards Adelaide.

As holidays go, it was not the best. A bad start to 2020, so surely things must get better from here?! Alas, not!

Vale, Neil Branford –

My father, Neil, had lived with congestive heart disease for many years, and everyone knew that his next heart attack would be his last. In early March, he sat down to dinner and promptly collapsed to the tabletop. Neil was taken to the ICU of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and placed in an induced coma.



The late Neil Leslie Branford (1934 – 2020)

After a few days, Neil was successfully brought out of the induced coma. The whole family had been with him that morning. He was awake and he was able to recognize and interact with us. However, we were all called back to the hospital in the early evening when his condition deteriorated.

At 22:00hr on Saturday evening, 07-March-2020, my father, Neil Leslie Branford, died of heart failure in the Intensive Care Unit of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The whole family was present at his bedside when he died; I was holding his hand and my mother Joan was stroking his brow.

I said the following Prayer of Committal.

Neil Leslie Branford, we commit your body to be cremated and your ashes to be scattered, to rejoin the creation whence they sprang.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Your soul is already with the ineffable Almighty God which permeates all creation. As the years and the decades pass, your name and your visage will fade, but your soul will be immortal, as its influence percolates down through the generations of people whom you knew.

Rest in peace.

You were a good man.

I then kissed him on the forehead and we made our final farewell and exit.

Neil was 85-years old. He is survived by his wife, Joan, of 64 years. My father was privately cremated and his ashes will be privately scattered.

The Silent Symphony –

We had barely returned to normal in at least some sense after my father's death, when we found that things would never be normal again. The virus that came to be known as SARS-CoV-2 and which in many people caused the often-fatal CoViD-19 disease had escaped its origins in China and soon was shaking the whole world.

The nature of the spread of the virus soon resulted in the closure of many activities, and live performance was hit particularly hard. We had enjoyed an evening in February in the Festival Theatre with Jane Hutcheon reprising her former role as the interviewer in the successful television series "One Plus One" which had been broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship television channel. Her guest was the delightful actor David Suchet. For each of a few thousand people, it felt like we were one of three people sharing an intimate evening chatting in the lounge room. David Suchet is known to most people as the definitive Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie's fastidious Belgian detective in television adaptations of a string of her mystery novels. But David Suchet's abilities are extensive, and he has appeared in roles of many different characters: he can do an excellent villain too!

March is the month in Adelaide for the Festival of Arts and other festivals. Very early in the Festival, Nam and I saw a production of Mozart's "Requiem", one of the headline acts of the Festival. The Festival of Arts almost made it to its conclusion before the novel coronavirus blanketed Adelaide in lockdown. Alas for me, a performance of Mahler's Fifth Symphony by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, scheduled for very-near to the end, fell foul of the pestilence. The *Adagietto* Fourth Movement is my favourite piece of music: Gustav von Aschenbach was robbed of his Tadzio moment. (Some readers will know to what I am referring; the rest will be left to ponder!)

I had booked a full subscription season of concerts by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra for Nam and me, even successfully negotiating with the very-helpful ASO booking team for seats that would not only be easily accessible but also would be well placed for viewing, given my mobility difficulties. Not a single performance was able to proceed. A special event planned for the year was a performance of every Beethoven Symphony over four separate concert evenings, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in 1770. Technically, this is just postponed until 2021; time will tell if we get to immerse ourselves in these masterpieces.

La Maison Invisible –

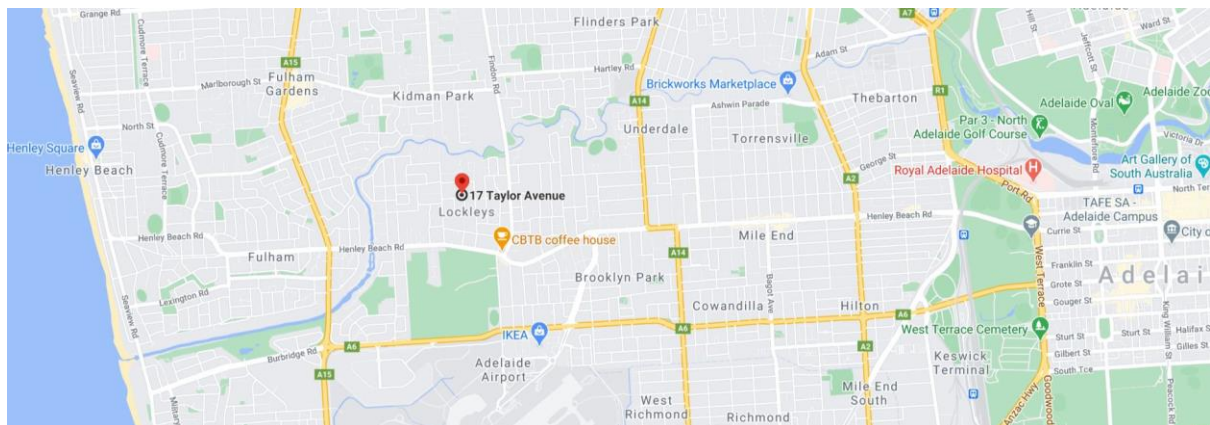
In October 2019, we ceased letting the 1950s house on land we had purchased in the western suburb of Lockleys in 2017 and began the process of building a new home for ourselves. We had engaged a firm of Architects who specialize in “climate responsive homes”. They have considerable enthusiasm and expertise for state-of-the-art products and building techniques along these lines.

Nam has been the driving force for this Project for many years, both as a new bespoke home for ourselves and as an energy-efficient, climate-responsive dwelling. I had been less than keen on the idea, but with my diagnosis in 2015 of a peripheral-neuropathic disease which is idiopathic, debilitating, chronic and degenerative, I warmed to the idea of a bespoke, larger home that was adaptive to my possible future disability access needs.

The design phase was proceeding swimmingly in early 2020, and then ... the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic!



Our new house at Lockleys, end of 2020



17 Taylor Avenue, Lockleys, between the Gulf St Vincent (west) and the Adelaide CBD (east)

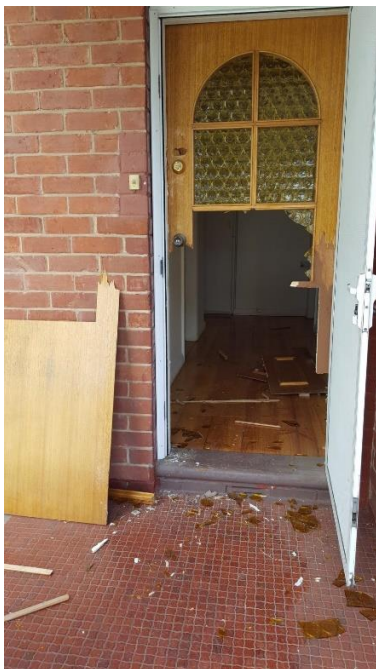
The pandemic forced everyone to rethink everything, and our home project was eventually delayed by the order of about six months. As at the end of 2020, we have detailed Building Plans and a builder lined up, but you can see from the photograph above the extent of the site work. Sigh! Notice our Subaru parked outside our “new house”. I cannot share with you in this edition of the Christmas Letter the plans for our bespoke home, ‘*il palazzo del gatto*’. But in the next edition, I hope to have pictures more exciting than:



The site of the planned 'il palazzo del gatto'

The astute among you will have noticed that we at least have a cleared building site, and not a tumble-down 1950s home. The demolition and clearance was originally planned to be part of the building phase, with the builder subcontracting the demolition and clearance. In order to deter squatters, vandals and illicit drug manufacturers and vendors, we decided to arrange that part ourselves (the demolition and clearance, that is, not the drug manufacturing etc.). The Architects gave us the name of the demolition company that the builders they work with usually subcontract to.

We did our due diligence: a simple web search revealed that this company had been prosecuted and fined for illegal asbestos dumping, so we knew they were right for the job. A couple of days before the contracted start of the demolition, there was a fuss in Taylor Avenue. An intruder had violently forced entry into the premises by a spectacular attack on the front door.



A simple knock would have sufficed

This resulted in a total of three police units attending the property during the course of the day, as concerned neighbours reported the home invasion. The couple directly over the road had our contact details, and eventually this was discovered by the police and we were notified.

We had got to know the couple directly over the road some months before, as they had house guests for many weeks and had asked for our permission for them to park their car in our driveway rather than on the roadside. We had gleefully agreed, as this activity would, we

hoped, make it not so obvious that the house was vacant. It was at that time that we had discovered that they had 24/7 video surveillance cameras, one of which captured the entirety of the front of our dilapidated ruin.

So, like amateur sleuths, we examined the video feed for the day. We found a tradesman's vehicle pull up in front of the property, a man emerge from the vehicle with a crowbar and proceed to attack our front door. There emblazoned across his vehicle was the name of our demolition company!

The next day I rang the manager of the demolition division of the company. He just shrugged the matter off, explaining that the guy was the foreman of our demolition and he was just wanting to check the place out before they started – wanting to see if there was anything of value he could salvage more likely! So I just calmly told the manager that the site did not come under his company's control until the demolition date in the contract, there was video of the foreman smashing the door (why had the company not just asked us for a key?), there were three police units involved and we were discussing with them whether charges of criminal damage and aggravated break and enter were necessary given that the place was due for demolition within days. The manager became very conciliatory at this point – I can't think why. I am told that the demolition industry is filled with ex-convicts, so the foreman probably already knew the policemen anyway!

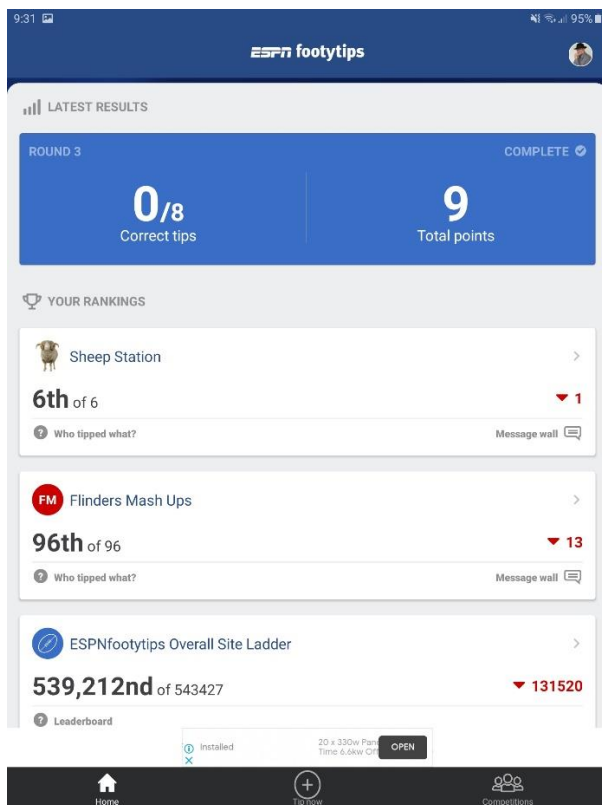
By the way, we had already stripped everything of value from the house. The demolition and clearance went very smoothly after that.

AFL Footy Tipping –

A winter obsession amongst many Australians are the various “footy tipping” competitions. Exactly what one means by “football” is very demographically determined. In the states of Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, this is overwhelmingly “AFL” football. “AFL” merely stands for Australian Football League; this is the peculiarly Australian game and is most similar to the peculiarly Irish game referred to as Gaelic Football.

Australia is a federation of sovereign states; public health is one area that the States retained control of and did not cede to Canberra. So, as the virus pandemic waxes and wanes in various areas of the country, so the rules governing sporting events and the rules governing interstate movement vary constantly. Sporting administrators have been frantically trying to enable their respective sports to play their seasons, creating playing “quarantine bubbles of teams” and other creative tactics.

In the AFL, there were many surprise results during the season, blamed on the general dislocation and chaos. That is certainly the excuse I am offering for my match-winning tipping this season.



In Round 3, eight games were played (not the usual nine, for reasons I cannot recall), and I correctly picked the winner in none of them. This left me in last place in the competition that I ran ('Sheep Station'), in last place in the competition called 'Flinders Mash Ups' and of the 543,427 tipsters playing on the ESPN app, I stood proudly in position 539,212. I lost interest after that, and I have no idea of how I finished up at the end of the season.

Aunty Betty, the elderly, demented aunt who sits in the corner dribbling –



Alan Branford (Auntie Betty)

Elderly, demented aunt who sits in the corner dribbling

My Facebook profile header

No Christmas Letter would be complete without a long lament about the state of my health, a bit like a cross between the Biblical Book of Job and the collection of poems by the classical

Roman poet Ovid called 'Tristes' in which Ovid constantly moans and complains about his exile from Rome to the Black Sea region.

Condition

Peripheral Axonal Sensory Motor Neuropathy

Nature

Idiopathic, debilitating, chronic and degenerative

This is a disease of the peripheral nervous system (as opposed to the central nervous system), that is affecting the axons (the nerves themselves) rather than the myelin sheath. Both sensory and motor nerves are affected. The qualifier "idiopathic" means "a disease of unknown cause".

Mobility

The disease has damaged (and is likely to still further damage) both sensory and motor nerves in my legs causing me to lose sense of where my legs are in space and to lose the ability to control them anyway. The consequent loss of mobility causes muscle degeneration, particularly to the quadriceps muscles, thus further affecting mobility.

The neuropathy has also manifested in my feet as Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), a common neurologically based disorder of the feet. This condition also affects my mobility, as well as requiring ongoing monitoring and management by a podiatrist.

Assistive technology:

I already utilize the following assistive technologies:

- Mobility Electric Scooter
- Rollator (combination walker and transit wheelchair)
- Bespoke Wheelchair

and the following rehabilitation technology:

- Exercise Bike

I am likely to require in the future the following assistive technology:

- Indoor motorised wheelchair

Needs Assistance From Other Persons:

Physiotherapist – regular treatment

Podiatrist – regular monitoring and management of the feet

Debilitating Pain in the Thorax and Upper Arms vs Brain Fog

The disease has severely damaged the thoracic peripheral nerves. Debilitating pain is ameliorated only with extreme doses of a neurological medication pregabalin (common name Lyrica). There are multiple and significant side-effects of this medication. There is a trade-off between debilitating pain due to the nerve damage and cognitive incapacity due to the medication. Either way, this has implications for me to successfully deal with ... well, life.

Special Equipment:

There are now implantable devices to deliver Spinal Cord Stimulation which I could consider having. An implantable spinal cord stimulator delivers small electric signals through a lead implanted in the spinal dura next to the spinal cord. Pain signals are inhibited before they reach the brain. The lead is inserted at the base of the spine and extends to slightly above the area being treated. In my case, this would be a considerable distance, as the lead would have to be inserted as far as the juncture of the thoracic and cervical spine regions. A controller and battery unit are implanted in my buttock. I have already been assessed by a neurosurgeon, and he is prepared to conduct the procedure.

Possible complications include paraplegia or quadriplegia if the spinal cord is damaged, leakage of spinal fluid and infection. The positioning of the electrode is crucial, and so post-operative movement of the electrode could render the device useless. I am still thinking about this proposed intervention. It is the only option on the table, but the risk analysis makes it a scary option.

Needs Assistance From Other Persons:

Clinical Psychologist – until/unless an intervention of the kind explained above, psychological strategies supervised by a clinical psychologist directed at palliation of or coping with the chronic neuropathic pain

Other Comorbidities –

Of course, the idiopathic peripheral axonal sensory motor neuropathy is only one item on a list of chronic comorbidities. While most of the comorbidities are under control in some sense of what one might mean by “control”, this first one is, like the neuropathy, an existential issue.

Treatment-Resistant Major-Depressive-Disorder / Anxiety

Ameliorated with high doses of an SNRI medication, but DASS scores still show moderate to severe depression

Disc Protrusion in the Neck

A disc protrusion at C3/C4 touches on the spinal cord. Condition “moderate”. (There is also a more minor disc protrusion at C5/C6) These could lead to major spinal cord injury in the future, but the likelihood seems low

Crohn's Disease

Controlled with large doses of immunosuppressant medication

Herniation and Ileostomy

There is major herniation related to the historical abdominal surgeries for Crohn's Disease, which included an ileostomy, as well as a parastomal hernia. These are stable, but they could become problematic in the future. There are unlikely to be any surgical options; girdle-like clothing is likely to be the only option

Genetic Haemochromatosis

Iron levels are regulated by regular venesection

Hypertension

This is mild only and well controlled on medication

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea

Treated with a CPAP machine – Apnoea Hyponoaea Index, AHI, now averages below 5

By way of an executive summary, my days permit only a low activity budget. I only really function between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and my stamina is very low. I can realistically manage one “activity” per day at most. So, for example, if I have a podiatrist appointment on a particular day, then I do not consider scheduling anything else that day. I am reluctant to go out in the evening at all. My memory is irritatingly affected, and generally the cognitive impairment is frustrating. I spend a lot of the day dozing or being fully asleep.

And that is the purr-fect segue into the next and last section, since my daily existence is much like a certain cat named Lily ...

Cat Capers – The section you’ve been waiting for!



Isaiah 9:6 (abridged)
For to us a cat is born,
to us a kitten is given,
and the government will be on her shoulders.
And she will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Feline, Princess of Pussies.



"It's not morning yet, I tell you. It's not morning yet!"



"What do you mean 'morning'? We had one of those yesterday!"



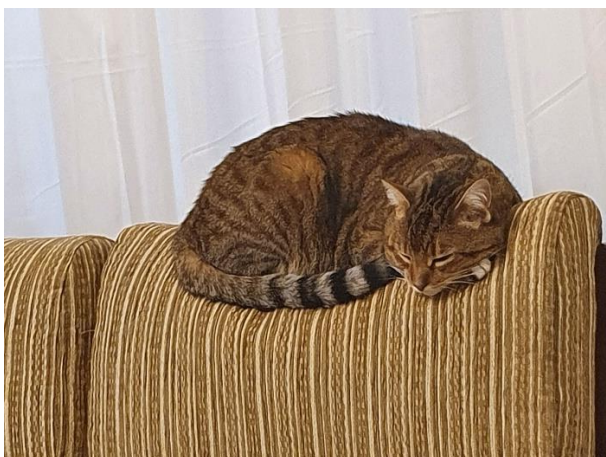
"I suppose you'll be wanting me to pour your coffee as well?"



Breakfast Ambush!



Cat Origami – she really is asleep!



An unusual antimacassar on our couch



I also find this a perfectly comfortable sleeping position 😊



"I'm helping my little daddy with his work"



"Now little daddy and I are exhausted"



"Time for a good night's sleep"

Best regards from Lily, Nam and yours truly ...

Alan