

Dear Mum and Dad

What they have been calling a 'cold snap' has been reported on the news from Europe over the last few weeks. They have also been talking about masses of cold air from Siberia, which makes 'cold snap' sound rather inadequate. Here it has not been that hot a summer, happily, although we have had a few days in the nineties in the last two weeks.

They are having a cold snap now, as I write, near the end of 2010, and here in Australia we are beginning our summer, and have just undergone, or maybe enjoyed is the word, a cold snap.

We had a good two weeks holiday camping in some coastal national parks. Debbie is now in the States on a two week holiday. I am in reasonable shape, other than a sore knee which may be a torn cartilage. It has been giving me trouble for nearly a year, but

The weather, camping, work, bushwalking and meditation are the themes of this letter to my parents as they are of many others. The [Canberra Bushwalking Club](#) is still going strong and its website suggests that its culture is not unrecognisably different from the way it used to be. The knee damage eventually resulted in two replacements. I don't remember the Sesshin with Robert Aitken, who is an eminent teacher, also still going strong. I practised Zen in my early days of Buddhism but later switched to Vipassana, largely because its teachers were more willing to tell me what to do.

became much worse on a weekend bushwalk that involved jumping from rock to rock down a river gorge. It was lovely country and an interesting group of people, so I enjoyed at least part of it anyway.

They were all "senior" bushwalkers, "heavy" bushwalkers, men and women of experience, a touch eccentric and mutually tolerant. The practice is to bushwalk in the nude on such walks, it being considered impracticable to take one's clothes on and off because one is constantly in and out of the water. However I was wearing swimming shorts anyway, so I left them on: that seemed to be a tolerated eccentricity also.

Work, oh work . Energy is indeed somewhat renewed, but I certainly need to find some other way to earn a crust-or rather, quite a bit more than a crust. I have just found a book by a poet and fellow of all souls - thus do I locate him on some kind of map, or pantheon - about travelling in Ladakh and learning about Buddhism. I thought I would devour the book tonight but it is not a fast food, it needs more attention.

Robert Harvey was the poet and fellow of All Souls. I learned Zen with my friend Ihian, sitting cross legged on black cushions in the living room of his house in Griffith. His sexual life at the time was energetic, an object to me of wonder and envy. I wonder what happened to that girl. I have a number of Robert Aitken's elegant and scholarly books.

I have not been even a perfunctory Buddhist for some time, I have had little awareness, and much illusion, pain and bad karma. That sounds overly melodramatic.

This weekend I am going to a meditation retreat taught by a well known Zen Buddhist teacher from Hawaii, Robert Aitken Roshi. The "Roshi" bit means, I think, something like "eminent and accomplished teacher". He is a fine writer on Zen Buddhism and haiku poetry and we are lucky he is coming to Canberra.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

There is quite some distance between the typing of these words on this little green screen in front of me and your reading them. I will have to attach a printer to the home computer on which I am typing them, work out the commands for the printer,..etc etc. Put down like that it does not sound so much but one of the things I am finding out is that there is really no such thing as a "user-friendly" home computer: at best there are some which tolerate the user and they all demand a good deal of hard work slogging through their manuals and working out the meaning of their cryptic commands.

Still, it is great fun and it makes mistakes very easy to eliminate, and second thoughts very easy to incorporate into the text. You can take out letters, words, whole paragraphs, with a few taps of the fingers. Also it produces this lovely justified end-wrapped text. It is an effect of my time in the public service, I suppose, that I can no longer take seriously anything handwritten. It has to be typed before it is worth reading.

Ah, the early days of computing, when word processing was the cool new thing what hasn't changed, though, is the impulse to buy the cool new thing, and the rationalisations for doing so. Those were the early days of techno-consumerism, and I was one of its early adapters.

There are all sorts of good resolutions, voiced and unvoiced, that I have used to justify its not inconsiderable cost to myself. I am going to use it to compose books, poems, articles, letters: Debbie is going to use it to write her papers at college (she has started her full-time college course on community nursing, on a health department scholarship), the kids are all going to be computer-literate and thus better equipped to survive in tomorrow's Australia - etcetera. Some of that will happen. I do want to try to write a book: it is a long-suppressed ambition that I have to at least try, in these years of the mid-life crisis(I have read various articles and the back pages of various american best-sellers that have persuaded me that

this is a mid-life crisis). And the kids are already quite accustomed to computers - one of the teachers at the girls' primary school is an enthusiast, and Jacob has had quite a bit of exposure to them at various times and perhaps has the kind of mind that takes to programming. It would help Debbie a lot too: she always has trouble with drafts and this makes that process so much easier.

We are beginning to plan our trip next year. We hope to spend about six weeks in Scotland/Europe, at least two of them in the time you have leave. However we have forgotten exactly when that is. I will try to telephone you again: I tried several times over xmas and the new year but was unable to get through. I may have managed that by the time you get this. We also thought it might be fun to spend a couple of weeks together in Europe, perhaps in one of those villas you sometimes get for holidays, or in a french farm house. Debbie read about french farm houses in a californian magazine - gites they are called - this computer does not do circumflex accents which the french would consider an anglo saxon plot - anyway back to the farm houses - we also spoke to a french girl who said some of them are very nice and others are flea-ridden but could not suggest how one might tell the difference in advance. Anyway let us know what you think.

I will close this for the night as it is late-and try to save it on a cassette file so I can come back and finish it and print it - when I have worked out how to attach the printer

Here we are again, about a week later. The whole system probably is going to work. The printer is working. I had a bit of trouble at the beginning: I told it to show what it could do, using a command that meant "go through the full character set and the numbers, using all the print types and speeds and densities". However I could not get it to stop - it went on and on, at enormous speed. Eventually I just switched it off. There are a few problems just now: the keys are not doing what they are supposed to do, consistently. However, enough of this. On to the message - enough of the medium. Had a nice weekend: did some gardening on Saturday morning, went to a theatre restaurant in the evening to hear a singer and pianist do a tribute to female pop stars of the sixties: Dusty Springfield, Cilla Black, and the like. Most of the audience were younger and trendier than us but there were a few others in the prime of life and we did not feel totally out of place.

More quaint historical references from my early days of computing. Cassette files, dot matrix printers, "commands". I owned at different times a Commodore and an Amstrad before my first and many subsequent PCs, and my eventual ascent to the heaven of Apple Computers. Only a faint shadow remains of anxiety about justifying the expense - I have worn it out by ignoring it too many times.

Sunday I did a little more gardening and then took the motorcycle out in the afternoon: There are a few nice biking roads in the neighborhood, good surface and not too tight bends where you can gently squeeze on the throttle around the apex of the corner. It was brown and dry and strong-smelling dry grass and dry cow dung and warm winds and eucalyptus or pine when you passed a clump of trees. The bike is giving a touch of uneasiness: it has an oil leak out of the rear crankshaft oil seal (I have probably bored you with this before -the anguish of the amateur mechanic) which leaves little dribbles behind when it is parked, and I think I keep hearing suspect sounds from the engine: piston slap, . cam chain clatter, gearbox backlash, terrible and expensive-sounding

ailments that mechanics and workshop manuals mention so casually.

However I managed to stop worrying about it for a while on Sunday. If you concentrate properly and relax and lean with the bike and keep the throttle hand gentle it can sometimes seem as if the road is reeling through your mind, and you attain an easy but total concentration that copes impeccably with the touch of gravel on a corner that could send the back wheel sliding or the pothole in a shadow that could do your front wheel. The danger of it is essential - concentrates the mind wonderfully. If you forget about the danger you are lost in it, of course. Australia has its special character for motorcyclists as it does for other fringe interests: thousands and thousands of kilometers starting at your front door with no frontiers or oceans, great slow changes unrolling across days and nights. I am exploring close to home at the moment, my furthest about 2-300 miles from home, but I hope to find a bit of time next year before we come overseas to go further.

Jacob went fishing at the weekend and came back with a 20 pound Murray Cod, the second one about that size he has caught: I think we sent you a picture of the first. Our fridge is still full of steaks from the last one so Debbie took this to a fishmonger and sold it for 25 dollars - I suppose about 20 pounds - which pleased Jacob mightily. He has, I am sure I have told you, the most expensive tastes in equipment. I tell him that I made do with bamboo poles, twine, bent pins etc at his age. I rely on you not to disabuse him of this belief.

I still have a sore knee after my bushwalking accident: I think I mentioned that in the last letter: either a cartilage or arthritic degeneration, the doctor said. He has prescribed rest, exercises to strengthen appropriate muscles, and anti-inflammatory drugs, in that order. He promises acupuncture and cortisone injections if I do not get better soon. So I have given up running and taken to weight training in the gym. It is a new world, the gym. Very large men who can lift a good deal more than me I could cope with quite easily. Smaller men who could lift a great deal more than me required an adjustment to the ego. Earlier this morning when I found myself watching a small woman who could lift a great deal more than me, it was necessary to drop the whole business of the ego and simply hump that iron.

The paragraphs about motorcycling make me feel nostalgic and remind me of why I loved it for 20 years. I sold my last motorcycle nearly 5 years ago, because I wasn't using it much, and felt fear rather than pleasure a lot of the time when I did use it. The bike must have been my [R80 BMW Boxer Twin](#), whose leaking rear oil seal, and the mechanic who took quite a bit of my money for never quite fixing it, I well remember. I have to confess that when I googled "BMW R80" and found one for sale I was tempted to contact the vendor.

I took Jacob fishing the other day, for the first time in years. He was only mildly interested, and said that if he caught anything he thought he would throw it back, not wanting to cause it pain. He was a skilled and enthusiastic fisherman as a boy and young man.

The knees have been replaced. Titanium and Plastic. Still no running.

I have a very cultivated friend, John, a man who freshens up his latin so he can read Virgil in the original as a recreation, who for some time has been keen on weight lifting, which I always regarded as an aberration. I suppose I still regard it as an aberration but now share it. It is a satisfying form of exercise. You go from muscle to muscle, working each till it is tired, but with no feeling that you are causing any longer term damage such as comes with long running.

Love

Kenneth

I never got into Weight Training, and have lost touch with John, who now lives in New York with his wife who is a senior executive with a multinational company. He watched his weight carefully, always impeccable in that as in other dimensions of his life.

Dear Mum and Dad

It is some time since I came anywhere near this machine - the home computer - some sort of inhibition probably because it is a bit of a graveyard of abandoned projects. Not that it is the only way of writing letters - I just seem to have convinced myself it is.

Winter is deluding us that it is over as it always does around now. The wattles and the daffodils are all out, it is pleasantly warm in the middle of the day, the lawn needed mowing last weekend, the trays of vegetable seedlings are for sale in the garden shops, and I can often ride home after work without wrapping myself in the full motorcyclist's weatherproofing outfit. However we still get fogs and frosts in the mornings and will need fires most evenings for another 4-6 weeks. It will probably snow, or the like, next week.

I have burned wood fires in Winter for most of my time in Canberra. For a while I gathered my own wood, using a chainsaw in State Forests and on country properties owned by friends. Later I decided that wood is cheap to buy and that some suppliers provide excellent quality

Or at least Debbie will need fires. She knows - with her rational mind - that cold can be combatted by putting on more clothing - but the deep convictions of an air conditioned childhood - the belief that the temperature should and will adjust itself to you - will be shaken by nothing less than primal therapy. Simpler just to buy some more wood.

Jake and I are just back, from a week's ski touring in the mountains. Snow fell on us 6 days out of 8, often heavily. We travelled small distances from hut to hut each day and spent quite a bit of time brewing tea in front of fires. Surprisingly, we had two of the huts to ourselves and others were not crowded. I suppose the weather must have kept people from moving about much. We had one perfect day with blue skies and heat shimmering off the snowfields when we climbed Mount Jangungal, a leonine peak in the north of our big National Park. The mountain was covered in snow and the rocks at the top grew flowers of wind-blown ice. That night we camped and watched the sunset paint the snow an exquisite

and unique shade of pink with a touch of apricot.

I have enclosed three photographs. We crossed the river in the first photograph by jumping from snow-covered rock to rock - Jacob successfully, I with one slip which soaked my boots. Later in the day I slid down a slope into a smaller creek then toppled over like a felled tree under the weight of my pack and was soaked to the waist.

A late winter letter, noting the signs of spring in Canberra and remembering a ski trip in the Snowy Mountains with Jake.

We did these trips most years, usually with friends, Graham Scully and one or more of his sons, occasionally just the two of us. They were hard and dangerous enough to be deeply satisfying. Jake believes that we were once lost, but I claim we weren't truly lost, just not sure exactly where we were within a known broad area. Yes, there is a difference.

I don't have access to the photographs described in the letter (they are probably in a large old suitcase in Debbie's house) but [these photographs](#) are of similar trips and feature Graham and his son Andrew as well as Jake and I.

Work also features in the letter, with just a hint of grandstanding about my job to impress my parents. It ends with travel writing, a Western, and an early reference to retirement, all themes which will reappear in these letters and were often on my mind.

Naturally I was glad the Grey Mare Hut - the next photo - was not far. That scene is very typical with everything hung up to dry and life gathered around the big open fireplace. See the bottle stuffed into a hole in the wallboard to keep out rats and the breeze on the left hand side. The rats are not really rats, they are big grey furry marsupial mice - but they can be too much of a good thing as in another hut when they were running up and down our sleeping bodies.

The third photograph shows Jacob in a typically cheerful mood out there. He hates work and will have to find something that uses his talents sooner or later but loves to be out in the wild and is a good camper and skier, skilled and good-humored despite smelling unpleasantly of tobacco - the reformed sinner speaks.

Back at work, I am quite content for the time being. I am responsible for introducing the Department to new legislation to protect the privacy of personal information. I have two likable and energetic women working for me who have excellent ideas and do what needs to be done quickly and successfully. I was lucky - they both just turned up, really, without my having to go through the lottery of recruitment. For myself I can do a mixture of writing and traveling to spread the gospel which suits me well. Debbie has just gone back to work after her six months off. The first week has gone quite well but I expect there will be a crisis or two before she settles to anything.

I have been reading Robert Byron's "Road to Oxiana" for the second time. The first time I was disappointed because I expected it to be about a long-distance walk but found it to be about architecture. Then I found out that Bruce Chatwin (of "In Patagonia", "The Songlines", et. al.) venerates it so thought I would try again and now see what he means. It is a "minor

classic" - deserves to live forever - at once casual and controlled, effortless and polished - a joy for some perfect writing whatever one's interest in architecture.

I am also watching the 8-hour mini series "Lonesome Dove" on TV and have even converted the reluctant family to it (or some of them). It is about a very long cattle drive from Texas to the

I have rented the DVD of Lonesome Dove a few times over the years and may do so again. The Larry McMurtry book is also good, a bit like Cormac McCarthy if less relentless.

north west in the late 19th century. It has several interwoven story lines and a large cast of characters, most of them stereotyped but interesting and most of them doomed to die unpleasant deaths somewhere along the way (stabbing, snakebite, gangrene, to name but a few). I have also read the book to which the series is faithful and which was also very long and won a Pulitzer Prize. We are 4 hours in and 4 to go. Dad, I am sure you would like it - Mum, I am not so sure.

Love to you both, and to the rest of the family. Amazing to think of Alan and Alastair having children so young. I feel relieved. Superannuation is much in the news here and I take an interest.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

Saturday morning. Not moving very fast today as I had an operation on my knee yesterday. The surgeon inserted a small tube through a small incision, looked around, found something wrong with the cartilage, and "tidied it up" with a pair of scissors also inserted through the tube. An arthroscopic meniscectomy. A fairly trivial operation, but still quite a shock to the system, especially the general anesthetic. I still don't know exactly what he found, but will learn at his clinic on Wednesday.

The same surgeon assisted when the knee was totally replaced more than 20 years later

Something happened to the knee playing rugby at the Edinburgh Academy and for years it used to "go" on me. After I started running the problem disappeared, but then early last year after running the marathon and forcing the knee into a quarter lotus position on a meditation course it became sore, and later in the year it gave way on a bushwalk - I must have told you some of this. Right now it is heavily bandaged and feels stiff. I hope it is at least improved. I must also lose some weight.

Other things - are going quite well. Debbie and I are getting on better. She still spends every other week away, so she can study and get away from the house. When we are together there is a measure of happiness, although no kind of certainty as to the future. (That, a week later, seems a bit pessimistic, though not exactly wrong).

I have a new position (Director Policy it is called) at work, and they have confirmed me in a promotion that was provisional for more than a year. These together seem to have produced a bit of extra energy and enthusiasm so I have been earning my money. However still no success in changing Jobs. I I seem to get plenty of interviews and come close so I suppose it is just a matter of time.

Next year, travel plans are a constraint. My present employer will give me 3 months off, but any other might be a bit reluctant. Dad, your mention of the West Coast of Scotland certainly struck a chord. I suppose one could spend a week wandering around Skye, on foot or possibly bicycle. I had already given up the idea of Ceylon - not enough time or money. I have also decided to land back on the West of Australia and come round the north of the continent by road. That will take a month or more: it should be a marvelous trip through some remote and wild country.

Jacob is getting longer and moodier. I think I have done the grumpy-parent-of-an-adolescent number before so I won't bother here. He doesn't fill me with confidence as to his ability to make his way in the world. He has acquired a small motorcycle, not licensed for the road, so he now has something to take his mind away from fishing. Next year he might stay out of school

altogether and get a job, since he will miss half the year anyway. Zoe and Ella's legs (and the rest of them) continue to grow. You will enjoy them - they are quite a pair.

A week or so later - my knee is much better: I have been doing some swimming and some weight training. We spent the weekend down at the coast - the first of the summer. It was marvelous. We drove down on the Friday night through mist and rain, so did not expect too much, but it was sunny and hot most

More on my knee. At that point one knee was damaged and the other was ok. Later the ok one and the bad one switched, and later still both went bad. The tripartite diagnosis that it was caused by rugby, running, and unskilfull effort in meditation is still what I trot out. I have now had both replaced and enjoy being able to walk again.

Debbie, my then wife and now beloved friend, appears in many letters. This one has a hint of our marital difficulties but also of our closeness.

What I right about Jake is painful to read, given the difficulties in his later life. These letters show his good qualities and his weaknesses. The former were prominent then and are still in play now, despite those difficulties.

The reference within the letter to the conditions of its writing is a common feature of my letters to my parents, as it no doubt is of other people's letters and various kinds of text (e.g. this text and this kind of text). Recognition that it is a text and a performance. No doubt something to be said about that rhetoric of that as it illuminates what kind of mental and material object a text is. I am an unpentant naïve realist, believing in authors, the real world, and facts.

of both days, with just the odd storm passing by to add a bit of scenic variety to the sky.

Debbie is getting very fit these days, doing a lot of swimming and

running and aerobics. She plans to go on a long bicycle ride (500 miles) next year in the States: she will be returning there after Scotland for a month or so, the time Jacob and I will be driving across Australian deserts. She was studying for her final exam which she did this morning (confident of passing) down at the coast, and taking runs and swims to wake her up when she became tired of reading.

The previous paragraph was getting a bit tangled in its own syntax. I took a bottle of whiskey down to the coast. I remember wondering how anyone could like the stuff, but I have no objection to it myself now. I have probably mentioned that a few times too.

Your neck/arm/shoulder sounds very unpleasant, Mum. I am the more sympathetic because it sounds exactly like an ailment that has kept a friend away from work for the last two weeks - she just returned yesterday. She was getting severe muscle spasms and having trouble sleeping. She gave a vivid account of how demoralizing it was. The doctors did not seem to know exactly what was wrong, and the physiotherapy was some help but not solving the problem. In the end she had some relief from anti-inflammatory drugs, and real help from acupuncture. I don't know if acupuncture is easy to come by in Inverness: I am sure it must be available. Here it is becoming almost commonplace, and is certainly no longer a treatment at the lunatic fringe.

We are about to buy our tickets for next year. We will be arriving in London very close to the first of August. We have some capacity to change that date a day or so either way. If the Cretan trip does not begin until a few days into August we thought we might be able to stay down there with Florence and meet you at the airport - if your flight goes through London - or in Crete if it does not. I will have to

This letter refers to unrealised plans. I never made the trip around the north Australia by road, and Debbie never did the long bicycle ride, although she is doing some now. And we went not to Crete but to Lesbos. Where we had a wonderful time.

find out a bit about Crete. Have you been there? I have an image of olive trees and bandits.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

There is a beer commercial on television in the next room. It seeks to associate the beer with the exploits of an Australian cowboy on the American rodeo circuit. It is one of a series associating beer with sportsmen. A rival beer goes for a more sophisticated image. Accomplishment, young executives in penthouses attended by girls in evening dresses, and the winning of the Americas Cup.

Jacob is watching a slightly odd movie with Peter O'Toole giving one of those stunning performances in mediocre parts to which he is often reduced. I have just reached the bottom of my third

glass of "inexpensive" chardonnay for the night. I made a note about it on my computer wine file of tasting notes. I am a bit embarrassed to confess the computer wine file of tasting notes. I am however beginning to remember different tastes a little, which, like swimming and a few other things, I once thought I could never do.

Australian wine writers all agree that low and middle priced wine values in Australia are better than anywhere else. My cheap chardonnay was around £1.50. I will have to see, if I remember,

what I can get for that in England and in Greece. It will probably not make it by Xmas, but we will have spoken on the phone by then. I hope you all had a good time. It is warming up here, after an unusually wet spring. An old farmer friend of Debbie whom she nursed when she worked in the Kidney unit came by yesterday and said his wheat was 60% lost and his sheep had soaked fleeces and were fly-blown in patches all over. He is a tireless talker in company as he lives alone and stores it up, I think. He was giving a graphic account of how the sheep were flyblown as Debbie was beginning on a plate of spaghetti with meat sauce.

I have the week around Xmas off, and Debbie has the day and Xmas Eve, which is the best she has had for years. I plan to take the kids up to the mountains for a few days after Xmas and stay in and around one of the old mountain huts. I am sure I have mentioned them. We have a big National Park to the south covering land that is often snow covered in winter and that used to be used for summer grazing. The huts were used by stockmen and shepherds. Jacob and I have been to a few huts in winter while ski touring. There are two in particular within five kilometers of the road which I think the girls could manage on foot. They have said they will try.

They are getting quite long-legged. I walked up the hill above the house with them and their friend Jim this

Beer advertisements, Australian wine, sunburn, fly-blown sheep – a bit of playing the antipodean here for the benefit of the parents back in the old country. Sunburn also featured heavily in my Ceylonese childhood, as my parents would have remembered. We did Xmas in Australia (as other Australians do) but always with a sense that it misplaced in the middle of a blazing hot summer. There is more about this in other letters.

More recently my feelings about Xmas have included a notion that it is an ordeal to be endured. A pleasurable ordeal in many ways, but still an ordeal.

My palate for wine hasn't developed much since those days. I still don't go too far beyond "I know what I like", although what I like has probably become a little more refined.

I worked in the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman for maybe five years. Professor Jack Richardson was Ombudsman then, the inaugural incumbent of the office in Australia. I joined it on the administrative side but made a successful transition to the higher status role of an Investigation Officer. Working for the Ombudsman was nice: it let me feel I was on the side of the angels and some kind of superior breed of public servant, not a mere bureaucrat.

I left because what Investigation Officers essentially did was read files and report on their contents and that, although satisfying and suited to my talents, was not enough, if I was going to be a public servant I wanted to make and deliver policy. This meant becoming a mere bureaucrat, so I had my reservations. Other letters reveal how it all worked out.

Zoe and Ella are "the girls", often described as a pair in the letters as they were only two years apart and often together. I have thought with regret that I didn't take them camping or fishing as often as I did Jake, so am pleased to find that I sometimes did.

afternoon. They went up fine, and only complained a little coming down, the discomfort of walking in thongs beginning to tell on them.

I am getting jumpy about leaving the Ombudsman's office. I have been there a long time and regard the people as family. It is the right move etc but I am leaving behind what has been a large part of my life. Perhaps that is why I have been jumpy and irritable. More to it than that - the usual old encounter with the unsatisfactoriness of things, beginning with me. I am certainly jumpy - drinking too much, wanting to be elsewhere, shifting my attention to the present with difficulty, giving my family a hard time.

Xmas now two or three days away. We have-the tree set up with lights. We tried a kind of tinsel - long threads of silvered plastic - it is pretty but drifts sinuously off with a breath of wind and settles sometimes a long distance from the tree. Luckily Debbie has a lot of tree ornaments collected over years, so it can spare some tinsel. And the tinsel looks good tied around the girls' ankles and wrists.

I need a shower. It is just getting hot, so a half-hour run produces exactly the relaxed washed out sensation I get from a sauna. I have made my usual purchase of a bottle of maximum sun protection factor ultra-violet block out hypersensitive skin sun tan lotion, but am still a bit red around the boundaries between flesh and clothing. Jacob has been worse - a couple of grillings before he remembers to protect himself is his standard every summer. There is an anti skin cancer campaign here on television featuring cute cartoon animals frolicking about and singing slip (on a shirt) slap (on a hat) slop (on some sunscreen). Slip slap slop to a catchy tune. I loathe the tune and the cute animals, but I confess the message has got across to me: lying in the sun (which I was never very keen on anyway) now makes me think of malignant melanomas.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

Herewith another bundle of photographs from the latest roll. Mostly taken around July, when we did some ski trips and also had some time on the coast with Mark and Miranda. I think I have already written to you about that trip. Now, in October, quite a lot of that snow is still left and indeed more was falling this morning, but spring is here as we have planted out the tomatoes and the swimming pool is beginning to grow prodigious quantities of green algae. I am also trying potatoes this year, a tiny square of them (by your standards) grown under straw using a method disclosed to me by a bearded man

It sounds as if I am beginning to get disheartened about the pool, which consumed a lot of chemicals, required a lot of cleaning, and received occasional use.

I met on a training course who was restructuring his life to get out from under the toad work. Involves large quantities of "dynamic lifter", a.k.a. chicken manure processed to release its goodness slowly. The shed is rich with the aroma of dynamic lifter which I rather like - the family give me strange looks when I tell them about liking the aroma of dynamic lifter and Debbie mutters something about deodorant and refuses to repeat it when I tell her I did not quite catch what she said.

We spent the afternoon in one of the large public parks at a festival known as the floriade - large beds of tulips, poppies, grape hyacinths along the edge of a lake, a cluster of tents including an outdoor cafe, a garden shop and a bookshop. One of the older parks with pine trees among the eucalypts - they don't plant pines any more as they are not native. It was warm out of the wind but aggressively cold in it. My patience proved fragile in the presence of a four-year old boy who poked everyone with sticks and lobbed rocks at them all afternoon while his parents smiled and chatted and ignored him. The scent of blossoming gorse bushes from a nearby plantation reminded me of scottish summers and distracted me from the plan I was forming to drown the infant

The photographs mentioned above are probably somewhere in a suitcase of old prints which Debbie has somewhere in her house. Still in this universe, but for practical purposes inaccessible.

The swimming pool came with the house in Cook, an above-ground pool around 4 feet deep which kept the kids cool in summer and kept me occupied for much of the rest of the year filling it with chemicals and removing leaves. It was eventually removed and replaced by garden, after the kids had largely stopped using it, possibly because some or all of them had left home

I tried vegetable gardening intermittently for years, with modest enthusiasm and modest success. Debbie was better at it. I do remember that the potatoes grew very well under their straw and we extended the method to other crops.

Floriade, Canberra's spring festival of bulbs, was a smaller and less commercial affair in those days, and cost nothing to attend.

I have always been a bit of a software junkie - hardware too, of course. The two proceed in step, new software requiring new hardware which in turn would be wasted without more new software.

Sadam Hussein, and then drown his parents. He got his revenge just as we were leaving, catching me a sharp blow on the lip with a large pine cone. There were a lot of children in the family - I counted six and was told there were others - I suppose ignoring misdeeds could be a sanity-preserving strategy on the part of the parents.

I am writing this using a new, updated, improved version of my old word processing program which I obtained for \$99 from America and which does not work anywhere near as well as the old version, but which I am reluctant to junk

because I have paid my \$99. I am just back from a three-day residential course in another town where I said about five words and spent most of the time struggling to keep awake, with mixed success. I am finding my current boss something of a trial. He is clever but personally erratic and prone to make enemies, often

of people whose help we need in order to get our jobs done. Time, perhaps, for a change of jobs. On the other hand, I am very happy with the people who work directly for me and I have friends in neighboring sections.

Debbie is also unsettled at work. She has mostly finished setting up the early release midwifery program she has been with for the last year or so, and now does not have enough to do. Unfortunately the health services here are having to cut spending, including on staff, so there are not many other vacancies. She feels she should recommend the abolition of her job, but would prefer to line up another one before she does so.

I believe the early release program is still going strong. Debbie did a lot of good work modernising midwifery services in the ACT.

Back to the old word processing program again, and finding it working like a charm. I will have to write an irascible letter to the company. I suspect the trouble is, all the powerful new features they put into it need a newer and more powerful computer than mine to make them work. I am mildly tempted to buy one, but quickly reflect that we have no spare money and the cars are all falling to pieces and the price of petrol has nearly doubled because of the Gulf Crisis.

I sent various Australian friends to visit my parents over the years. They didn't seem to mind. More on Jenny below.

I think you told me on the phone, Mum, that you had received my last letter - the one in which I mentioned that Jenny Bounds who works with me and her friend Caroline Coombes may visit you in Scotland - I have given them your address. I mention them again just in case the letter in question did go astray and you were a talking about a previous one. I think you will enjoy meeting them - Jenny will call you from London - may have already done so when you get this.

Zoe has a boyfriend or, as they say, is "going with" a boy, Tim. We have not yet seen him, interrogated him, checked out his financial circumstances or grades. It does not seem Zoe sees an awful lot of him either, except at school. She thinks her report will be an improvement on last term. Her social life is intense - visits, plays, concerts, telephone calls. She just came in to say that Tim had finally given her his phone number which is not in the book but he had given it wrong, so she persecuted an elderly chinese woman by ringing her three times asking for Tim. She is now writing him a letter, as she will not see him tomorrow, as she will be at volleyball all day, as school is really over and they are just killing time.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad,

I just lost the first paragraph of this by pressing the wrong button on the computer. I have some strange aversions and preferences in relation to writing. At the moment there seems to

be some reluctance to give an account of myself. No dark secrets. just an avoidance of sensitive places.

Thanks for your letter, Dad. The prices of crofts on the Black Isle (whether decrepit or restored) are appalling. What is mad cow disease? A joke? When all is said and done, beef burgers in the freezer are probably better than no beef burghers in the freezer, at least up to the Nth beef burgher, whenever that comes. And after the Nth, I am sure Maxi will be ecstatic. It was nice talking to you. I am glad

My father was a good, if irregular, correspondent. I only have one of his letters. I wish I had saved more. Some of them were written late at night, after a few beers, like some of mine.

Ella spared you an uncongenial yoga position. Sorry to miss you, Mum. Did you lose any students? Or, come to think of it, acquire any? It sounds as if Europe is very accessible - I wonder if it is getting all alike - I hope not - I would like there to be a bit of

locality left when I finally get a chance to wander around it again.

Maxi was my father's last dog. I never saw much of him, because in those days my parents used to come out to Australia rather than us visiting them in Scotland. We used to phone them occasionally, but in those pre-Skype days the cost was an impediment.

I had good travel opportunities at work, getting to know all the Australian State capitals quite well and spending the occasional weekend visiting in their vicinity. Darwin was always a favorite, with Kakadu and other wild country within easy driving distance.

I still remember the hike up Mount Scabby and neighboring peaks and sometimes imagine repeating a small part of it as a day walk. The letter makes it clear that I did appreciate it at the time, although it seems now as if I could not have appreciated it enough, along with so much else that has passed

I never bought the American kukri, although I did extend my knife collection which now occupies a medium-sized drawer in my studio.



The kukri in the middle used to belong to my father. I had its sheath made by a cobbler in Moruya. He did a very beautiful job.

I am not sure about the Himalayan adventure. Money, and I would get homesick, and Kashmir could become a theatre of war any day. I might still do it. Whatever happens, I will take the month of July off work and get away somewhere. There are also places in Australia. I had a good week in the Northern Territory, seeing the dry country around Alice Springs and (briefly) Kakadu National Park which certainly is all it is cracked up to be and more. It depends if Graham Torrance comes over, and what he wants to do. I am being a bit erratic about it all, but so be it.

After a period of anxiety at work I have lapsed - or perhaps ascended - into a state where I simply do what has to be done. Much politicking goes on all around me, especially above. I am feeling a bit remote from

it all, as if I were watching it. It is partly that the prospect of taking a month off casts its shadow ahead of it so I stop caring about work. Also the real pleasure is in simply doing this or that smallish job. Zoe has the flu and her school marks have gone down this term because of the demands of her social life. Floods of tears and promises to do better.

He never got a job out of it, alas. It might have suited him.

Jake is doing a technical college course to become a "field hand in geology" with some hope of a job at the end of it. It is much better for him than unemployment. Ella is taller and more mellow. Debbie is getting fidgety in her job.

We have had some lovely cool clear autumn days after the big wet. They showed satellite photographs of the flooded area, tonight, still hundreds of thousands of square kilometers under water. The water is moving slowly south and west - it will take 4-6 weeks for it all to drain away. Some towns have been destroyed and the price of meat and vegetables has climbed, if not as much as expected (supplies have been brought in from other States).

Last weekend I had a walk in the local mountains, ascending two peaks and camping in a highish saddle in a spot that I thought would be sheltered from the prevailing wind, and which was, but turned out to be exposed to fierce gusts eddying off the mountain in the opposite direction. I lay awake much of the night thinking the tent would blow away, but it did not and I did not mind much being awake. Next day I had further to go than I expected and was exhausted when I reached the car, but also exalted after two days alone of wind and water and forests and sunshine.

This was a lovely walk which I still remember from time to time, most recently when I caught a glimpse of what I thought might be Mount Scabby while walking near Tantangara Dam. The memory these days is colored by a sense of loss, of the usual suspects, youth and fitness and some kind of innocence. I might be able to get up it again, if I approached it by bicycle to cut down the total time. That would be worth doing (or trying).

It seems another world. On top of one peak, unkindly named Mount Scabby, the wind was blowing so hard I could hardly stand up. There was water everywhere after the rains, swamps and rock pools and all the creeks running. In one place a mountain tarn unmarked on my map which would only be there one year in five.

There is an old farm up there, now part of the national park so the cattle have been gone and been replaced by kangaroos, hundreds of them, big mobs all out feeding in the paddocks, standing together and looking over at me together then bouncing slowly away in the evening sun.

We have been watching a famous english TV documentary about children first filmed at the age of 7 and then at 7 year intervals - tonight they will be 28. I will go now because it has started, and finish this later. 28 was the last - 35 is supposed to come out next year. It is a fascinating program -in the end, I found, touching and warming in ways unrelated to the theories of the

filmmaker (about how the class system is ineradicable and the child is father of the man). The phrase "the getting of wisdom" came to mind. They all do get some, or almost all and one or two seemed to have a lot to start with and to get more. The theories were all true enough but much less interesting than the people as individuals. Bourgeois individualism they call that.

I am tempted to extend my small collection of knives. An imitation kukri, made in America out of superb steel with an indestructible handle of some rubberoid space age material. There is a shop here simply called the knife shop to which I must take you next year. The kukris from india you can buy here appear to have been made out of used car body panels. This american knife is so well made that I can almost forgive the plastic handle.

Love

Kenneth

Taking an entire month off would have been something of a luxury, given four weeks annual leave. Maybe I took some long service leave as well. One hears of people who accumulate leave, and has difficulty imagining how that could be. The trip with Graham Torrance, who I have known since our ages were both in single figures and attending Boarding School in Sri Lanka, was most enjoyable. It was a winter of heavy snow in the mountains which allowed us to ski into a hut at an altitude where snow falls most winters but rarely remains long on the ground. Somewhere north of the yellow road on [this map](#).

I am not sure where Jake and I went on our ski trip. Possibly in from Cabramurra on the snow-covered highway, then south towards Jagungal to stay in O'Keeffe's hut and Bald Mountain Hut before heading north again to Kiandra. The advantage of restocking on food half way through the trip was that one could take heavier and more interesting items like cake and alcohol.



Double click on this icon [GoogleEarth_Placemark.kmz](#) for a summertime view of the start of our journey, from Cabramurra to the reservoir below, and on beyond it.

In winter most of it could be done on skis and the winter we took the trip the snow was deep - we had to dig down to open the door of O'Keeffe's Hut - and, at least some of the time, crisp and even, as my ancestor John Mason Neale put it in his best known hymn, "[Good King Wenceslas](#)". The link is to Lorena McKennit's version. Another of those Canadians.

Dear Mum and Dad

A bit more than half way through my month off. It is raining steadily outside, washing away some of the snow on which Jacob and I hope to be skiing next week, but probably not all of it. Graham Torrance has been and gone - we spent ten days skiing and bush camping in the mountains and wandering along deserted south coast beaches (no one goes to the beach in winter). We had a good time and got on well, despite hostile weather and each other's irritating habits. (I am excessively given to striding on regardless while Graham likes to stop, change his lens, take nine photographs, then minutely examine the local geology). Graham, of course, has the wiser habits and I benefitted from imitating him - but he also saw a bit more geology and reached a few more photo locations

through following me.

I have a few regrets about not going to India, but it was worth spending the time with an old friend, and India will still be there in four or five years time, when I will go for sure. As an orthodox buddhist, I tell myself that the pure land is in the mind and Ladakh will only be what I see - but of course that leaves Ladakh exactly where it was, as a place it may be delightful to visit.

After dropping Graham in Sydney with the descendants (living prosperously in north sydney, selling personal superannuation plans) of a former planter named Ha-Ha Harrison (deceased - did you know him?), en route to visit his (Graham's, that is, of course) mother in England, I went on north and joined Debbie and the kids in a flat on the beach half way between Sydney and Newcastle. We, and quite a few other persons of discrimination, do actually go to the beach in winter. Just north of Sydney it is still a bit cold for swimming (relatively) but the air is so much warmer than Canberra at this time of year and we enjoy the sensation of escaping the clutches of winter.

We used to holiday for a week or two at The Entrance between Sydney and Newcastle. [Here](#) is a link to a Google Maps image. We stayed in holiday cabins at a Caravan Park adjacent to both the Estuary and the Beach. The fishing was excellent, I had my first success with beach fishing for Australian salmon and Tailor (Bluefish to North Americans) a few minutes walk from our cabin. Mark and Miranda lived in Newcastle, an hour or so north. The beach was a bit wild for children's swimming but the estuary was perfect.

Miranda and Mark came down and joined us for a weekend - on good form, and we had some good walks, meals, and games of scrabble and carpet bowls. We will have to introduce you to carpet bowls next year (and will of course practice intensively between now and then so we will have something to compensate for our inevitable defeats at scrabble). Miranda lead us all into the sea on several occasions, and some (not I) even stayed in with her for several minutes.

Jake and I are going for another winter ski tour. We will be out for nine days and plan to cover rather more distance than on previous trips. Actually, it is only about 75 kms as the crow flies but the practicable route is a good bit longer and we will have to make some distance every day, unlike on previous trips where we have been able to lie around in huts, drinking tea and venturing out only to replenish the wood supply for more of the time than we mention when we talk about it afterwards. I will be leaving a bucket of food half way, in a hut or a tree, to reduce the weight we will have to carry (a major road through the national park crosses our route).

When you get a chance, send us a photograph of Florence's and Alastair's houses. The housewarming party for Florence sounds heroic, as does the presentation by your students. I half expect to hear next that you will be leading a party of navigation and carpentry students to Australia in a boat they have constructed themselves. Now that would make a wonderful presentation.

The family are all well. Debbie also on holiday, goes back next week. The girls back at school. Jacob in good spirits at the arrival of the ski season though still unemployed.

Let us know approximate dates as soon as you have them for your visit next year so we can get in touch with Miranda and make some plans. We thought - if you agree - that we would not attempt any heroic journeys, rather stay in the circle bounded by here and Newcastle (assuming M is still there) because there is plenty to see and do close to home.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

A warm night at the end of February. I am feeling a bit sunburned, having been down at the coast for a week with the kids, and then out running at lunchtime today. A hot night as we are having a spell of real summer with clear skies and the threat of bush fire.

The Coastal National Park was [Croajingolong](#), in Victoria, where I later took my mother camping (after my father's death), and where she made a closer acquaintance with Australian insects than she wished and (possibly) experienced the hallucinogenic properties of wild mussels, harvested from the rocks at the mouth of the estuary and cooked with wine and garlic in a stockpot over the fire.

Mark and Miranda's relationship turned out to be serious. 20 years on, they and their two strapping sons are still going strong.

We camped in a coastal national park just over the border into Victoria. A perfect camping area among tall trees with areas of bush demarcating each of the sites. Set on a tidal inlet, 20 minute walk down to the beach. The inlet lies in the middle of about 90 miles of almost untouched beach with a hinterland of sand dunes leading into a variety of coastal forest, rivers and even the occasional lake. Lots of birds and animals all around the camp - fat lace monitors (large lizards) stalking through with an air of

absolute ownership, possums coming down the trees to raid the food at night and persisting whatever you yell or throw at them. A bit like Fraser Island, less spectacular in some ways out with much less human pressure. The kind of place that makes me glad to be in Australia.

The Commonwealth Games on Television - or rather, not the Commonwealth Games, rather endless interviews with Australian teenage swimming stars, and their mothers. One has to be thankful for the rare moments of actual competition we are allowed to see between the interviews and ads.

If I had been asked back then whether I thought the Commonwealth Games would still be going in 20 years I might have been doubtful. As I am now.

I hope to visit Miranda and Mark in Newcastle next week - I will be away for a few days visiting some offices down the Coast north of where she is and should be able to stop off there overnight. Mark very likeable - very easy to be with around the house,

obviously adventurous like Miranda being off around the world as well if not quite her equal as a traveller), and with a nice sense of humor and fun. I am not sure if the relationship is serious - not that I doubt it, I am just not sure how one would tell, other than by asking, without long examination. Debbie, Zoe and Ella all think that it is serious. Debbie was going to ask Miranda at Xmas but apparently did not get drunk enough to pluck up courage.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

I am not sure what the wonderful news was about. Pregnancy, I imagine.

Wonderful news about Miranda. We have written to her and hope to see them before long - they were planning to call in on us on their way to Tasmania, I forget exactly when.

Thanks for the long and entertaining letter, Mum. It was wonderful, full of amazing visions of adventure in the wilderness. Dad, armed with a sacred golf club but outpointed by another knight errant with two, the long-awaited round tent, the mad american waterfall-plunger, you and Betty conspiring to slow down the long-striding ranger. It made me homesick for family, Scotland and the magic of the west coast.

I am also envious of a friend who works in my section, Jenny Bounds, and her friend Caroline Coombes, who are just planning their eight-week tour mostly of Britain and will be coming up from Fort William to Inverness. I suggested the Black Isle would be worth a visit and that you might be able to give them a bed for a night. Jenny then found an article about the Black Isle and became very interested, particularly in the (pre)history and the occult associations (Braham seer etc). At that point of course I mentioned Betty. One of the great mysteries about Jenny is whether she really believes in Astrology. Perhaps you could find out.

I am sure she believed in Astrology. I am here revealing my own misgivings about anyone who did. I no longer feel that way. People believe all kinds of things. Nothing to do with character.

I think you will enjoy Jenny and Caroline, if they do turn up. They are women of character - you will see what I mean. Jenny is an expert ornithologist and naturalist and a very organised person, a quality which, as her supervisor and one who lacks that quality, I exploit with not much shame. Caroline used to work in the same Department as Jenny and I and is a good match for Jenny. I don't think she is a grandmother but I think she has one kid at least who could make her one.

I am just about off on another ski trip. I can't remember if I told you about the last one, which Jacob and I made at the end of July. It snowed a lot and the clouds were low, except on one day when we climbed Jangungal, the lion-mountain at the heart of the northern snowfields, when there were no clouds so the white mountain stood against a deep blue sky and the wind on top was strong enough to

lean against. We were almost lost once or twice but never truly lost (to borrow the title of the autobiography of a noted Australian walker, Paddy Pallin). We saw few people - one of the few was, Jacob swears, a new star in a popular TV comedy. I am not sure. I thought he was a schoolteacher, like many cross-country skiers, but then teachers are performers too, Adele assures me. (She is well - sounds somewhat disillusioned with teaching but needs the money - is producing lots of paintings and has hopes of another exhibition). I hope to see her on her way through Canberra in a couple of weeks.

The ski trip with Jake was the one prefigured in the previous email. The solo trip is one of my happiest and yet most poignant memories. I was following in the tracks (literally, sometimes) of Graham Scully and some friends, who were on the longer 2-week trip mentioned in the letter. As it turned out the snow was deep and the weather perfect, so I covered a lot of ground and had little need of snow caves or good books. The memory of this trip is one of those that carries with it sadness and a sense of loss - of youth, my own and the youth of my children, of fitness and the capacity to travel in the wilderness it made possible, of my first marriage and its end.

There is more snow this year than any year since 1936, so I am planning to range far in the four days I will have away on the coming trip. This time I will be by myself - Jake is good company but I also enjoy the occasional solo trip. If the weather is bad, I will be unable to range far and am planning to dig myself a large and comfortable snow cave and settle down with a good book. Snow caves, by all accounts, are comfortable, quiet, and weather-proof, providing the snow is right which it is at the moment. Alternatively, I may find some friends who are out on a 2-week trip at the moment, in which case I will trail around with them. I rather fancy the snow cave, except it will not help me to lose weight which I need to do.

We are not entirely well. Debbie has a persistent sore throat, never quite turning to a full-blown flu but sapping her energy. She was the midwife at a home birth the other day - the tenth child, nine still at home - it went well. Debbie says the house is not tiny but smaller than ours. When they ring up it sounds like a public place in the background.

Jake has a job in a laundry which he hates but he likes having some money. Ella and Zoe are well and have been fighting a bit less than usual. Ella is very keen on her basketball - her team is undefeated after half the competition. She is now quite blasé about scoring baskets. She plays in a flash pair of pink and white reeboks which I was able to get cheap from a friend whose daughter they tragically did not fit after he had them brought in by someone coming back from Hong Kong. Which reminds me - we might get you to do some importing for us when you come over - if you can carry anything other than baby clothes - assuming Miranda is still here.

Spring is here - officially. The wattles are in bloom everywhere and the magpies are beginning to swoop. I am trying to teach myself to draw, with mixed success. Spent most of the morning and the local "trash and treasure" open air market trying to sell some junk in company with a friend who has just sold her house. Tiring

We used to sell at the Trash and Treasure in Jamison every now and then, and buy at it regularly. Like practically everything else, it now has [a web site](#). Zoe may have developed her eagle eye for a bargain in an Op Shop on those visits. You had to start very early if you were selling. As with garage sales, the first visitors were always the professionals, negotiating hard for a bargain. I have never been good at deal making so usually ended up feeling I had got the worse of the negotiations.

Thanks to Chinese demand for minerals, the Australian economy seems in better shape these days. I am not sure about the balance of trade, as our appetite for foreign goods has no doubt also grown. But the national mood has certainly shifted to complacency about the economy, rather than the self-flagellating apprehension of the 70s and 80s.

Jake was always willing and helpful at home. My clumsy sarcasm is historically unjust. Everyone needs reminding now and then.

- we got up at 5am and were only just in time to get space for a stall. It is very popular. However, successful enough - we sold enough to liberate a bit of storage space. I could also do with several more days of weekend. Feeling rather jumpy and discontented at work with a sore knee and an irritable stomach.

More gloomy news? well - Zoe does have a rather unpleasant rash which she may have to put up with for a few weeks. Not dangerous but itchy - evidently part of a "retroviral syndrome". Ella acutely dislikes her teacher. Jacob's smokers cough is persistent - oh and Australia's balance of trade remains adverse, and its sovereign debt ie exceeded (proportionately) only by those of Brazil and Mexico.

Otherwise, we are having beautiful autumn weather. Warm and clear, at last after much rain. Debbie is greatly enjoying her time off and has lost some of her symptoms of stress. I have lost some weight and at work will start soon on a new project which should be interesting for a few months. Zoe has settled in well at high school. Ella is enjoying her art classes. Jacob just did the washing up without being nagged and then threatened to go for a run. I put in a precautionary

call to the hospital to have the emergency ward on standby. I am listening to Carmen on the headphones and there is a glass of port at my right hand. I have two good weeklong wilderness trips in prospect in the rest of the year.

The open air market is fun. All sorts of people. But very much the non-yuppy end of Canberra - beer bellies, tattoos, old ladies with bulging plastic bags, a woman with a glasgow accent and four children all around the same age, an oriental with a countable number of long wispy beard hairs and a determination to bargain me down from \$1.56 to \$1.00, kids clutching pocket money and calculating how far it will go, pallid bikies of both sexes in boots and leather jackets lugging their helmets, italian grannies rummaging ferociously through boxes of old clothes, youths clustered around old trucks full of heavily rusted car parts.

Australia's ethnically diverse culture is one of the things I love about it. My friend Ihian Mackenzie spoke movingly about it at his 70th Birthday Party. I choose to say "diverse culture" rather than "multiplicity of cultures" in part because of how it felt to be at that party, surrounded by ethnically diverse people who all considered themselves to be Australians.

"To-re-ador" coming over the headphones. Elsewhere in the house both televisions are on. One on the football - ie, rugby league - the Canberra Raiders, hoping for a big win over a Sydney side - and the other probably on Neighbours which I understand is running around in Britain too. Zoe comes in and I put the phones on her ears. "Hardly my kind of music, Dad" Not really typical of my kind either - the only opera I have ever really listened through. The dog

whimpers outside the window and attempts to bite her tail. I was supposed to have bathed her this weekend but neglected to do so.

Alastair sent us some lovely photographs of Pete and a dog, with the odd parental limo in the background. Makes me feel old, that my brothers are still breeding so to speak while I am preparing for the girls to tie the knot. Wonderful - and enviable - that they are going to build in the field. I look forward to seeing their house, and Florence's. I am sure both will be beautiful - if not quite up to the standard of the big house up on the hill which by then, Dad, will probably have twelve bedrooms, nine bathrooms, thermonuclear heating etc.

If building and gardening and (by report) recovering your dog just before it crosses the border ever flag, Dad, here is a suggestion. Have you ever thought of writing - or maybe taping - some memoirs? Your parents, siblings when young, old Ceylon, hunting and fishing, the hill school (or whatever it was called then), Glenalmond, the army, starting out as a planter - it would be fascinating not just for A, A M & I but later for the grandchildren. You too, Mum, after (if ever?) you retire - the family tree you did is by my side on the wall as I write - like Betty's memoir of Gran it would be a delight for your increasingly numerous grandchildren.

Dad never wrote any kind of memoir. So many questions I would like to ask him now.

Last night we watched a documentary about the Second World War in the Pacific. It made me remember how interested he was in the history of that war. I wish I had asked him about early days in Ceylon and Scotland. He would come out with stories occasionally. I remember him talking about shooting around the Black Isle. I believe the family were friends with someone who owned large tracts of it.

Miranda sent the girls birthday presents and some photographs of herself and other family with New Zealand in the background that gave the impression she is livening up the land of the long white cloud as she did Australia. Where does that gypsy blood come from? I have an image of her on the back of her friend's motorcycle, hung about with packages, heading for Melbourne and more distant ports. I suppose there are a few wanderers on both sides of the family tree.

My father never did write any kind of memoir, as far as I know. He wrote lively and entertaining letters, some of them late at night and after a few drinks (like some of mine).

The comments on Graeme Torrance's lifestyle are, of course, also about my own choices. I didn't quite do "work to pay the bills", and, it now occurs to me, Graeme may not have done it at all. He may have found his work as a psychiatric nurse more satisfying than I did mine as a public servant. Which implies, mistakenly, a high level of discontent with my work as a public servant. I enjoyed some of it, but never quite gave it my all, not seeking further promotion after a time because I wanted at least some of the time to be left alone

I wonder if she ever visited the Torrances. Which reminds me I owe Graham a letter too. His last suggested, I think more than half seriously, that we might collaborate on a book of photographs with text about some wild place. I am not sure if I ever told you how much I enjoyed my brief visit to him. After a long time, we found a lot in common and talk coming easily. He works nights and does a lot of wood turning, very well, although not then well enough by his standards to sell - I expect he will get over that as his standards are higher than those exemplified in much of the work I have seen in craft shops.

He has chosen work-to-pay-the-bills and the vital centre of his life is elsewhere - art, photography, music. Charm has the "career" - although

she has recently made a change and gone into consultancy - they are a balanced pair, as lively together as they ever were, and with a consensus, or at any rate a dialogue within a common frame of reference, about what matters. Their daughters, older than ours, made me optimistic about Zoe and Ella - remaining in touch despite not a few battles.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

It is only 3 months since I said goodbye to you in New Zealand. It seem longer ago than that. I am certainly back at work now - it seems I never was out of it and never will be. That sounds more of a complaint than I intend it to be. Work is demanding but not unreasonable or unpleasant. I need to get away from Canberra and find out what is happening out there. Indeed, I have wangled one trip, to Brisbane in a couple of weeks, which will give me a chance to visit Miranda. She sounds well and enjoying life (over the phone). She had some visa problems which unfortunately we were unable to help with as we would have liked to, but she sorted things out herself. We hope she will be down

We took my parents to the Brisbane world Expo and to Fraser Island. It rained at the Expo, very hard, but warm rain so getting wet didn't bother us. I remember cutting neck and arm holes in black plastic garbage bags to make rain jackets, and struggling with collapsed umbrellas. We had to line up for the popular pavilions and appreciated the quality of the entertainment provided to the queues.

We hired a Toyota Troop Carrier to go to Fraser Island, the style with rear seats parallel to the sides of the vehicle (now considered unsafe). Driving off the ferry onto the sand made me a little nervous but we didn't get bogged. Driving along the beach felt like an illicit pleasure as it isn't allowed in much of Eastern Australia (there are more opportunities in the North and West).

We camped by a perched freshwater lake inland from the beach. [Here](#) is a link. We saw a couple of dingos and were nervous for the children because there had been recent attacks, but they offered no threat. The rain was still falling on Fraser Island, bucketing down to it collected in the awning of the tent and had to be released in great splash. My parents seemed to enjoy all this, or at least pretended to.

over Xmas.

Expo ended today - record crowds over the last couple of days. 18 million in total, of whom we were 7 (is that grammatical?). Brisbane will feel something of a let-down I fear - the prospect of going back to being an overgrown country town, as it seemed when I first went there 10 years ago.

It has been a warm spring, following a warm winter. The girls were in the pool half the day today, and even Debbie and I have been in. We have made some progress in the garden over the last couple of weekends - put down a drip irrigation system, spread the mulch, weeded and mowed all around. For the first time I have been able to bridge the gap in imagination between what it is and what it will eventually become. Debbie's enthusiasm, and plant purchases, tends to outrun my capacity to bust concrete and dig holes. However we have a modus vivendi - she doesn't usually buy more than a dozen plants at a time, and I usually get them in within a couple of weeks. She has also been pulling out hugh mounds of weeds, taking advantage of the soil still being soft and damp, not

without feeling some pain in her back as a result.

Next weekend, however, I am taking off to go bushwalking - a ridge and mountain walk in the coastal range I have had an eye on for years. If I stay home too long I begin to suffer from withdrawal symptoms - that is my story. It is a good time of year for

walking, teeshirt weather but not too hot. Oh dear - just checked the bushwalking club magazine to make sure of that walk only to find it just happened, this weekend. Have to wait for next year. Anyway, there are other walks on, and if the worst came to the worst I could always do my own or go motorcycling instead.

Debbie's health fair finally happened - a great success. She was under a lot of pressure and showed some symptoms of stress. She will be taking a bit of time off over the next few weeks - working 50% - to recover.

Jake has just about finished school. He went down to the coast for a snorkelling camp this weekend and fell asleep immediately on arriving home around 5pm. Not much sleep last night, I imagine. Zoe had a friend staying overnight Saturday but they faded out around 10.30. We hired a video - "The Princess Bride" - see it if you get the chance - or hire it - a gentle parody of romantic adventure stories that also works well as a romantic adventure story.

Love

Kenneth

Dear Mum and Dad

Wonderful news that you may be able to come out next year. We were all so excited to hear of the possibility. Jake in particular was thrilled. Zoe doesn't know yet as she has been over at a friends and then went to bed. We will not say it is a certainty but will keep our fingers crossed. July would be fine. We could take somewhere in Queensland for a while, and go down to the South Coast here which tho' a bit cold for swimming at that time is mild and pleasant otherwise. We could also take you skiing, assuming we get a bit of early snow. The kids may even

As will have dawned on anyone who has read this far, these letters are out of order. The visit from my parents anticipated here is mentioned in retrospect in the previous letter. I have left them out of order, lazily no doubt, but also to make the point that one year is very much like another, and one year is very much like another

have some holidays then - they have not in the past had any at that time but next year the schools are shifting to a four term year and there will probably be a winter break.

We are financially not entirely recovered from last year's trip but we should still be able to make some contribution towards your fares. Let us know more details when you have them so I can make some bookings etc. I should be able to arrange time off for a good bit of the time you are here, if not all of it. I am also tempted by the thought of coming with you to NZ and

seeing the Torrances as well as Barry et al. and Cleo, but might not be able to afford it.

I do not remember James Martin, at least not yet. He must have been a couple of years ahead of me. I do not have much recollection of my seniors, except a golden youth named

Lushington, and a "school bully" whose name might have been Brown, and two rather sexy sisters who I think lived over near Murray. I expect more will come back if I keep my mind on it. I could probably get the lot under hypnosis.. I have one of those school photographs too somewhere but a quick search has failed to turn it up.

A little rain has been falling here, not enough to satisfy the land's thirst or the mind's., as the year has started dry, but better than none and we may get more tonight. Jacob., who is out camping in it., has probably had more than enough to satisfy his mind's thirst. He has been gated for a month after an unfortunate episode involving the police outside a local watering hole very early one morning, and this is his first real outing.

He has started the school year quite well considering his long break - has been doing a bit of homework and making an effort to keep ahead. He is pleased with "his" car - did I tell you about that? He and I bought one together instead of the motor bike he could have afforded by himself - but is so impatient to be able to drive it. He might be ok as a driver - seems better than I was when I started. I remember endangering the life of a garden coolie once when I tried to back out of a garage in Ceylon.

My parents were the only people with whom I shared my thoughts about work. Perhaps with Debbie a little, but not as here. The immediate reflection is that I needed to justify those choices to my parents, because I had some feeling that I might have been disappointing them. I didn't brood about it, but it came out in the letters.

I also talked to them about my religious life. My mother was an active member of her church with a strong spiritual life. I recently attended the funeral of a man with a strong spiritual life, and it was interesting and inspiring to see how many spiritual friends he had and how lovingly they spoke of him.

I think of my father as a wise pagan, a man who made real connections with people and who strongly valued truth and justice. I wish I had known him better. He made an effort to get through to me, and I to him, sadly not much, and we proved both not too skilful at getting through to each other, I painfully remember my incapacities.

I have been a bit erratic and moody. Acting in a more senior job at work which has been interesting and in a way tempting but has also made some of my defects (as a bureaucrat) clear, to me and probably to others. I have been having wild plans for leaving the public service and going into business, or moving to another house, or going on a long expeditionary walk or ski trip, or writing a book. I have written a few poems. I feel I have some facility that I am not using. All this is normal and I suppose to be regarded as an opportunity. I often feel a kind of irritated boredom that a Tibetan teacher named Chogyam Trungpa says offers opportunities to see the true nature of mind. Indeed!

I went for a walk down some remote coastline on the south coast a couple of weeks ago. A bit south of Pebbly Beach where we stayed when you were last here. A day of headlands, rivers, beaches, classic south coast country, then trudging along 20 kms of beach with a

I remember that walk. In Nadgee, it was, and with the Canberra Bushwalkers, of whom I was a member for maybe 10 years.

high sea on the left and big moving dunes on the right. We camped on a freshwater lake behind the dunes and burnt some cow dung on the campfire in homage to Tibet and the yak dung all the travelers praise. Burns hot with a clear blue flame, says Lama Angarika Govinda. Burns a bit smoky, the cow version, untreated by the dry air of Tibet.

Three of us, a tall young Victorian with a long stride who overshot the changes of direction, a tiny gnome-faced old Canberran who knew the way and refused to be hurried, and myself who sought to keep in touch with both. By the third day we were an harmonious party but the second day I kept rushing up dunes and waving at them both and feeling put upon. But not all the time - the trudging was a meditation, with sore feet and a head wind, and the sea was the sea.

On my headphone cassette Tom Waits is singing his version of Waltzing Matilda in his later voice. Are you familiar with Tom Waits, and his later voice? He is an american "piano man" and his later voice is a classic whisky-and-cigarettes voice, only gone a bit over the top so you feel like calling an ambulance to stand by. It is a very melancholy version of Waltzing Matilda. Matilda

These letters sometimes read as if they were written late at night, after a few drinks or in some other mode of altered mind. In talking to my parents about Tom Waits I am essaying a bridge between their cultural worlds and mine. My impression of my mother was that she thought all forms of music other than classical were intrinsically less worthy. I have no idea what kind of music my father liked. It is a gap in my knowledge I would like to fill. In the second paragraph alongside the bridge I am building is between my parents' social life and my own. Having lived apart from them from an early age, I have only a partial knowledge of their social world. In so far as it was family-based, I knew it, at least in outline, but otherwise not so well.

is some kind of barfly. The dog is licking my toes. The dog is a success - or, to say the same thing another way, we have not yet killed the dog. She digs holes and rips things to shreds in the garden and eats the compost and submits, submits, submits, and walks fearlessly up to other dogs to play. We all reveal our true natures in our dealings with her and she comes back all the time with tongue licking and tail wagging.

We went to a party the other night at the house of one half of a couple who have since broken up. It was odd and sad to be there with only one of them. We thought it was a fancy dress party and had dressed up as heart surgeons complete (in my case) with a bloodstained kerchief and a pruning saw on my belt (It was a Valentine's day party). Unfortunately no-one else was in fancy dress. I gritted my teeth and kept the gear on for half an hour during

which time I got through the best part of a bottle of red. Actually, I suppose the hostess was in fancy dress too as she does not usually wear quite so tight a body stocking, with little silver straps.

It continues to rain, despite my expectation that it will all go away and the entire country will revert to desert within the week. There is a funny charred smell in my nostrils which I have just

realized is not the smell of overheated computer but rather the smell of wet dog. Tomorrow I take the girls to the local show where they will insist on buying show bags full of cheap toys, and I will insist on spending much too long (for them) watching the wood chopping and the shearing competitions. If it keeps on drizzling the crowds will be down too. Debbie will be out riding with a friend. The day after I go out with the local walking club on a day trip into a lovely wild coastal gorge with big sandstone cliffs and deep clear pools for swimming. I am confident they will go even if it is raining. These are your serious walkers who would be ashamed to cancel a trip for anything short of the apocalypse.

Debbie has been a bit depressed, but is still enjoying work. The girls are well. Their legs get longer and longer.

Love

Kenneth