

That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom

OTHER BOOKS BY MARIAN F. SIA AND SANTIAGO SIA

From Suffering to God: Exploring Our Images of God in the Light of Suffering

From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life

The Fountain Arethuse: a Novel Set in the University Town of Leuven

Those Distant Shores: A Narrative of Human Restlessness

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Ethical Contexts and Theoretical Issues: Essays in Ethical Thinking

Society in its Challenges: Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society

That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom

*A Tale of the Human Thirst
for Knowledge*

By

M. F. Sia and S. Sia

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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A Tale of the Human Thirst for Knowledge

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To

the memory of

OUR BELOVED PARENTS

*at whose fountains
we first drank
the waters of life and wisdom*

Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well,
That from beneath the seat of *Jove* doth spring,
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string,
Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,
So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.

...

O Fountain *Arethuse*, and thou honour'd flood,
Smooth-sliding *Mincius*, crown'd with vocall reeds,
That strain I heard was of a higher mood:"
—John Milton, "Lycidas"

"Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere."
—Chinese Proverb

"A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again."
—Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism, Part II"

"Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers."
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

"I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."
—W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion"

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PREFACE

Among the fundamental cravings of humans is the thirst for knowledge. In keeping with their rational nature, they search for whatever will bring them closer to wisdom. A particularly powerful symbol of that goal is the fountain of wisdom, well-known in literary and various other kinds of writings.

This tale follows the pursuit of fictional characters for what will fulfill their respective goals. Set mainly in the fascinating university town of Leuven, Belgium, it revolves around the personal, social, political and academic aspirations of visiting scholars in the town. Richard Gutierrez from the USA needs to get tenure at his university. Jennifer Sydney from England is determined to advance her career. Aisling O'Shea and her six-year old son Philip from Ireland have different expectations of their trip. Piotr Malachowski wants to understand a life rooted in the bitter experiences of the internment camp of Majdanek in Poland. The nationalistic Fr. Miguel Fuentes from the Philippines wonders what he can learn from a Western university to enable him to deal with the social and political challenges in his country. What starts as an academic sojourn for these individuals becomes a life-changing experience as their paths cross in Leuven, and they learn about each other and themselves and about life itself.

The story is set in the spring of 1993 when we spent a wonderful and fruitful semester in Leuven working on our book, *From Suffering to God: Exploring our Images of God in the Light of Suffering*. The present book first appeared under the title *The Fountain Arethuse: a Novel Set in the University Town of Leuven*. The response to the now-out-of-print original novel has strongly encouraged us to re-issue it in a slightly modified edition.

The tale is a work of fiction. The plot, the characters and most of the events are imaginary. The setting, however, is based on some real places. The reader is transported to various locations, listens in to the conversations, participates in the experiences of and—more significantly—shares in the thoughts and reflections of the characters. An important aim of this book is to show how thought-patterns play an important role in confronting the twists and turns of life. They may or may not resonate with

the reader's own experiences, but we hope that the tale will at least alert him or her to their importance.

The first essay in the Appendix discusses the theme of the tale—the pursuit of knowledge—in a more philosophical way. This essay sets out and discusses our understanding of the educational task in meeting certain challenges which confront the imaginary characters in the tale and all of us in real life. In the second essay in the Appendix Aliman Sears discusses another theme of our two complementary books; namely, the problem of evil as discussed in the original novel, *The Fountain Arethuse* and *From Suffering to God*. In addition to providing an enlightening interpretation of selected texts, Sears advances the discussion with his insightful reading of a possible philosophical response to the problem of evil.

The present work is part of a larger undertaking on our part to probe into philosophical themes in story form. The first book, titled *Those Distant Shores: A Narrative of Human Restlessness* narrates the life-journeys of three boyhood friends from the Philippines as well as of a young man from Spain as they set out to fulfill their dreams in life. It deals with human restlessness and explores a fundamental philosophical theme: human transcendence. A third, yet to be completed and tentatively titled, *This Deep Pierian Spring: An Account of a Human Pursuit of Meaning*, follows the different routes of fictional characters in search of a life that matters. They come to realize that humans are innately driven on a life-long search for a meaningful existence but that they have to drink deeply of the Pierian Spring to learn the important lessons of life.

In electing to pursue a philosophical theme in this way, we are continuing a joint venture which we had undertaken in our book, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life*. In that book we attempt to illustrate how literature can trigger off fundamental questions about life which need to be pursued further in a more philosophical quest. Examining a number of such questions which selected literary writers cite and describe in their works, we then turn to philosophers, past and present and from varying backgrounds, to continue probing into these questions more critically and systematically. With the present project, we would like to stimulate our readers to explore the world of imagination and thought through a more concentrated attention required in the reading of books and not easily afforded by the contemporary developments in information technology and the social media. We entertain the hope that readers will accompany the fictional characters in their activities and even more significantly in their thinking.

The books in this project are related to one another not just in their literary form and themes, as indicated in the subtitles, but also in the association with water in their titles and in their settings. The human need for water in order to survive is obvious. But humans have also found water to be a source for learning about themselves and life. *Those Distant Shores* is a suggestive way of describing the restiveness of humans and their struggles to reach the “other side”, as it were. Life, like the sea that separates the shores, can be calm but is often choppy and threatening. It demands from human beings much attentive reflection and purposeful action. The restlessness of their nature impels them to search for fulfillment. *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom* indicates the fluidity of the goal of human endeavours. Yet humans who by their very nature thirst for knowledge continue to seek it. Continuing that theme and taking its cue from one of Alexander Pope’s poems, *This Deep Pierian Spring* directs humans to the source of meaning and to the importance of “drinking deeply from it”. Final fulfillment can only be attained when the deepest human longings are attained.

The different time-settings of the three books in this project indicate that the human quest, described in story form, for fundamental answers is a life-long one. *Those Distant Shores* starts with a boyhood escapade and with childhood dreams of a better life. The narrative follows the journeys, literal, metaphorical and philosophical, undertaken by the fictional characters into young adulthood. Their questions reflect their youthful stage in life. In the tale of the second book, *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom*, the questions and pre-occupations of a different set of imaginary characters, who are in their adult years, take on a more serious tone. They are somehow focused on work, careers and life-goals. *This Deep Pierian Spring* follows the concerns of another set of fictional characters as they and others face up, in their more mature years, to the pressing issue of whether life has any meaning at all and to the extent that one can nurture hope in the future.

Although the basic questions about life arise because of our nature as human beings, the specific trails each of us follows in pursuing them are somehow coloured by our respective backgrounds, particular concerns and unique personalities. Thus, we have opted for different sets of imaginary characters from diverse backgrounds in each of the books. Moreover, rather than follow the same characters as they advance in years, we show instead some narrative continuity in the entire project by taking a minor character in one book and transforming him or her into a major one in another and vice versa. In this way, we hope that the continuity of the

three books—in narrative and in theme—becomes somehow more apparent.

Each of the three books in this project has essays in the Appendix discussing the theme or a related topic of the relevant book. The first book contains essays which clarify and defend the literary-philosophical approach which we have adopted in the entire project. It also contains an essay on the relationship between morality and religion, a topic taken up in a lecture by one of the characters. In the second book, the two essays discuss in a more philosophical way the two themes dealt with in that work: quest for wisdom, and the problem of evil. The essays in the third book discuss in a philosophical way the main topic covered in the story: the search for meaning and significance as well as the reality of hope. It may suit more philosophically-minded readers to read these essays first before taking up the narrative/tale/account contained in that work while other readers, having read those, can then turn to another opportunity and method of dealing with the topic or theme of the book. Our hope, of course, is that the reader would avail of, and benefit from, both sections in each book for a fuller understanding of the theme/topic under consideration. There is an inevitable repetition in the two sections of the book, but this is intended to retain the integrity of the treatment of the thematic concerns in each section.

Our project would not have been possible without the full support of our publishers, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. We have benefitted from their professionalism right from the start. We certainly appreciate their confidence in all our writing endeavours in the past and in the present. Our special thanks to Sam Baker, commissioning editor, for his encouragement and support as well as to Amanda Millar, David Luscombe, Sean Howley, Elfreda Crehan and all the staff for their expertise and assistance. We happily acknowledge our continuing indebtedness to our families and to numerous individuals, organizations and institutions for accompanying us all the way in our writing ventures. Of these it is particularly appropriate to express in a singular way our gratitude for the memories and the inspiration given to us by those to whose memory we have dedicated our work. We would also like to thank graciously all those who reviewed and commented on our work at different stages for their assistance and endorsement. It has been our privilege, which we greatly treasure, to experience as educators and writers the relevance of a version of Seneca's maxim: "*Docendo discimus, scribendo cogitamus*".

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SOME COMMENTS

ON *THAT ELUSIVE FOUNTAIN OF WISDOM*

“Philosophy has often been described as the quest for wisdom. In the halls of academia sometimes philosophy does not seem like that but as perhaps very confusing language about the most challenging questions of life. *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom* is an attractive novel that invites the reader into an exploration of fundamental philosophical questions about life. Those questions, however, are engaged through the existential situation of the fictional characters, their circumstances, their conversations. ‘Academic work should not be an escape route,’ we are told, ‘but one’s academic work should come from one’s experiences.’ Even as we enjoy the story line, this novel shows us just how to do philosophy from one’s experiences. I recommend it very highly.”

—**Dr. Owen Cummings, Regents’ Professor of Theology and Academic Dean, Mt. Angel Seminary, Oregon, USA**

“This is a wonderfully wise book that obliges us to rethink, from the inside, our sense of the nature and purpose of the academic world. At its heart is the age-old problem of theodicy—the place of God in a world of suffering and evil—but in addition it carries its philosophy, its literary discussions, its learning lightly and yet utterly seriously. It offers a humane voice to the world, and especially to academics caught up in the world of contemporary universities as they struggle to sustain their deepest commitments to truth and integrity. I thoroughly enjoyed it!”

—**The Revd Professor David Jasper, Professor of Literature and Theology, University of Glasgow, Scotland; Distinguished Overseas Professor, Renmin University of China**

“Once more, the Sias take us on a journey to the ocean of wisdom and meaning. A beautiful and sparkling novel for all God-and-life-searchers, and a homage to those thirsty for meaning in life! This creative and lively philosophical fiction invites us to meet fascinating characters—fictional and yet so familiar stories mirror our own longing for knowledge, fulfillment and reason. Leuven can be so close! I really enjoyed reading this book.”

—**Dr. Julia Enxing, Catholic Theologian, Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, University of Münster, Germany**

CHAPTER ONE

Richard Gutierrez had just retrieved his mail from the mail center of his university. As he scrutinized the contents of his rather stuffed mailbox, he noticed among the usual flyers, book catalogues, internal mail, the particular letter for which he had been waiting.

“I do hope it’s good news,” he muttered with some anxiety as he hurriedly tore the side of the airmail envelope which bore the seal of Mercier University in Leuven, Belgium. Richard had lifted the envelope from the rest of his mail and there and then proceeded to read its contents, ignoring the young undergraduate whose path to her own mailbox he was thoughtlessly blocking.

He had applied for a research fellowship at the renowned university in Belgium in the hope that it would provide him with the opportunity to finish his manuscript on the problem of evil, a scholarly endeavor that he had been working on for three years. Unfortunately, it had become somewhat of a Damocles’ sword. Every time he was asked about it he would reply that he was writing the last chapter. He found himself giving that answer repetitively. And it was starting to sound unconvincing even to himself.

As time sped by, he was also becoming painfully aware that his Dean was not really impressed. At his recent annual speech marking the beginning of the academic year, the Dean had remarked quite emphatically, “When somebody tells me that he or she is working on something, that’s fine.” Then with a rather serious countenance he had added, “But a time should come when that same individual comes to me and says, it’s finished. That’s when I am really impressed.” Richard did not feel that the remark (or was it a veiled threat?) was directly aimed at him since there were others in his college who were in the same boat, so to speak. Like him, his fellow academics were bumping into all sorts of obstacles. As they set out to sail on the sea of scholarship, prodded on by the administrators, they kept floundering and just could not land.

In Richard’s case it was particularly crucial because this year he was required to apply for tenure, the prized academic achievement that would give him job security at his university. While he prepared the file which would serve as the basis for the important decision—he realized that his publication record was abysmal: only three reviews in six years. Would

that be sufficient, he wondered as his stomach muscles tightened as if in warning to him? Indeed, he had good reason to be seriously concerned, because research and scholarship had begun to feature as the primary criterion for tenure and promotion at his university. Although his students regarded him as an excellent teacher (“the best ever”, “well worth the huge tuition fee we pay to this university” and other such comments in the students’ evaluations) he had been informed on the occasion of his second year evaluation by the department, four years ago, that this was not enough. He had to publish.

The letter was now in his hands. There was no doubting its origin. From the practically endless correspondence he had carried on over the past few months with one of the professors there, he had become very familiar with the letterhead of Mercier University in Leuven, whose academic seal featured prominently on the right-hand side of the stationery.

“But it’s in Dutch!” he groaned. Unlike the responses in English which he had been receiving from the professor in Leuven, the official notification was written in a language completely foreign to Richard. Involuntarily he turned to the bemused student behind him. “How the hell am I supposed to know what it says?” Richard caught himself expressing his sentiments out loud.

The student’s amusement turned into an awkward silence. Suddenly she decided that this was not the best time for her to insist on opening her mailbox, so she smiled rather coyly and beat a hasty retreat. She would rather return when the coast was clear.

Richard’s voice betrayed the frustration he felt. His knowledge of languages was embarrassing. Like so many others in the English-speaking world he believed that because English was almost universally spoken or at least understood there was no reason to learn another language. When he was accused of neglecting his Latin-American origins, he defended himself saying that he belonged to the second generation. His parents, who were bilingual, insisted that he spoke only English so that he would get on in America. They did not want him to speak English with a foreign accent like they did. They wanted him to learn the American way and be American. In that way he would be assured of success, of a better life than his parents ever had.

With quick steps Richard cut across the lawn to his office, which was a short distance away. Normally the few extra seconds needed to walk on the concrete L-shaped path to his office, rather than on the grass, did not bother him. But today he wanted to telephone a colleague immediately. In no time at all he was in front of his office fumbling for his keys. After unlocking the door and dropping the rest of the mail on top of his oak

desk, he reached for the telephone at the edge of the desk.

The newly installed telephones, equipped with Voicemail, as well as state-of-the-art personal computers, complete with indecipherable programs, were the brainchild of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs. "The working environment of the faculty should be first-class. Then we can rightly expect more from them," she had declared with that characteristic left-hand smile of hers. But the eager and highly motivated technicians of the Computing Central Office were always feeding new programs into the computers, confusing some of the less technologically-inclined faculty, like Richard, who did not believe that it was right that technology should dominate their lives. At least that was their excuse for not being able to master all the programs, never mind keep up with the computer programmers who seem to be regularly on the prowl.

As Richard rested the receiver against his right ear and heard his colleague's telephone ring, his eyes wandered around his office, a cozy working environment indeed. His books were properly shelved rather than stacked up, which is a more common sight in academic offices, eliciting comments on how neat and impressive his office was. Everything seemed in its proper place, he was told. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, flanked by other volumes in medieval philosophy, occupied a prominent place. On one wall was his laminated diploma testifying to the award of a Ph.D. from Loyola University of Chicago. Richard was lucky that his office was in Bergman Hall, a one-story building built in the style of the Missions and one of the most aesthetically designed buildings on campus. More importantly, the offices here were spacious, compared to other "compact" offices in the other buildings. Their occupants had made their concerns known to the authorities.

Richard was relieved that he did not have any of those concerns. Rather abruptly, his musings were cut short when a voice came on the line:

"Hello, this is Jan Vergote."

Richard immediately responded. "Jan, can I check something with you?"

"Fire away. What's on your mind?"

"I received a letter from Leuven, but it's in Dutch. Can I read it to you over the phone?"

"Sure. Just hold on a minute while I close the door." The corridor was rather noisy from the chatter of students who were visiting the office next door. "That's better," he said when he picked up the phone again. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Richard made a valiant effort at reading the letter, but he could hear Jan laughing at the other end of the line. Richard's face colored.

“Whoa, that sounds like, well, double Dutch to me. Why not come around with the letter to my office?”

Originally from Belgium, Jan and his family had immigrated to the USA. Fluent in Dutch, French and English, Jan had been energetically fighting for the introduction of international studies at the university and of a foreign language in the core curriculum. Lamenting the fact that the students were not being prepared for a global perspective, he carried—with the fervor and enthusiasm of a missionary—his message to his language and literature classes, to any committee of which he was a member, and to the Vice-President for Academic Affairs.

After rummaging through the contents of the top drawer of his desk, Richard picked out a small yellow note with a gummed edge, wrote “Back in a minute” on it and stuck it on his door. It was his office hour, and he did not want his students complaining on their evaluation sheets that he had been unavailable. Most of his students were aware that he was in the university most days, but one or the other student could come to see him in the office on that one occasion and miss him. The disgruntled student could louse up his percentages in question 1 of the evaluation which inquired whether the instructor was “available during office hours”. Rather than be sorry, he thought, as he rubbed his thumb over the note to make sure it would stick, I don’t have tenure yet.

Jan’s office was located in the same building as Richard’s. The shortest way between the two offices was down the corridor to the Department of Languages. On the walls of that corridor were noticeboards belonging to the Philosophy Department. One of these was constantly being updated since on it were the philosophy courses offered for the semester: Philosophy of Human Nature, Ethics, and History of Philosophy. The first two were part of the university’s core curriculum (the set meal, as somebody euphemistically described it), the third was a requirement for philosophy majors. This semester History was Ancient Philosophy and featured the popular Dr. Lawrence Goodman as the instructor. The elective courses, for the fall semester, the *a la carte* as it were, included Postmodernism, Asian Philosophy, Metaphysics, Lonergan, Philosophy of Art, and Philosophy of Science. There were also notices enticing students to study philosophy: “Did you know that the highest scores in the GRE, LSAT, etc. were achieved by philosophy students? Are you thinking of Law School? Then *study* philosophy since statistics show that Law Schools favor philosophy students!” On the same side of the corridor was a huge bulletin board, also a prize possession of the Philosophy Department. Pictures of various philosophers, in different sizes and degrees of eminence, were pinned to this board. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, of course.

Jan had cleared a chair for Richard. Stacks of newspapers had been sitting on different chairs in the room since Jan was running out of space for his fast-growing collection. “Forgive the mess. My student assistant was doing some work today for a change,” he said jokingly. “Anyway, did you bring the letter?”

“Is it good news? That’s what I really want to know.” Richard’s eyes were wide with expectation as he saw Jan skim over the letter.

“Yup. It says here that you have been awarded a research fellowship at Mercier Universiteit in Leuven”

He could not finish for Richard was already up.

“I’ve got it! Leuven, here I come!” With those excited words, Richard bolted out of Jan’s office.

Aisling O’Shea was picking up her son Philip at the parish primary school at Rathfarnham. She had just come from her university, where she had given a lecture on the metaphysical poets to the First Arts students. This morning she received a letter, and now she was anxious to know her son’s reaction to it.

Parking her rather battered, slimy-green Ford Escort at the schoolyard, she headed towards her son’s classroom while glancing back at her car. She had baptized it Jiffy because she claimed that it would take her to wherever she wanted to be in a jiffy—provided she could get it started, of course, which was somewhat of a problem, especially during the cold early mornings in the winter. Aisling tried to remedy the situation by removing the battery practically every night and charging it. She often joked that her car ran on electricity! She also joined the Automobile Association of Ireland and certainly became a household name to the employees of that association, given the number of times she called for help with starting her car. Once when the same AA man answered her call for help twice on the same day, he duly informed her that satisfied customers of their service did not have to insist on using it so regularly. Rather sarcastic, Aisling thought; but she shrugged it off and instead offered him some hot tea to cure his poor humour.

Aisling also got some teasing on account of her Jiffy from her friends. They reprimanded her for parking her car beside theirs—just in case the rust in her car jumped into theirs! Another one remarked, winking in the direction of her not-so-new Jiffy, that some cars should carry a sign: “If stolen, please do not return”. It was all banter, of course; and she got her own back when one cold morning one of those friends living nearby asked

her for a lift. And the reason? Her own car would not start, and she had an important appointment! To Aisling's surprise and undisguised pleasure, when she started the car, Jiffy, without any of the usual chugging, roared to life—eager to go to the rescue of the damsel in distress, especially this particular damsel. When Aisling reached her friend's home, the distressed but now relieved friend had to admit that she saw Jiffy in a different light now. Beaming, Aisling patted her car, "Hear that, Jiffy?"

In contrast, the school building Aisling was now approaching was without a doubt new since it was one of those prefabs. But there was a plan to build a more suitable building once a grant from the Department of Education came through. The school had been opened only last year to cater for the rapidly-growing population in the parish. Several housing estates had been developed in the area in the last few years, and now the number of children ready to start school was increasing. Fortunately, the request for a new school in the area had been approved. Philip belonged to the very first group of the parish schoolchildren. Next year there would be another class and a second teacher while Philip's class would move on to the next level. However, Aisling had her sights already set on the junior school of Carmel College for Philip since that was Seán's former school. Proud of his education in that school, both he and Aisling wanted their son also to be educated there. It had good academic standing, spacious grounds, and a long rugby and acting tradition, staging a Shakespearean play each year.

The narrow corridor of Philip's school was cheerfully decorated with large attractive posters by the young teacher, who worked hard to provide some kind of a learning environment for her very young charges. The feedback from the parents had been enthusiastic, a response that was good for the morale not only of the teacher but also of the parish community since they all wanted "their school" to succeed.

Aisling joined the other parents in the relatively spacious classroom. It was their custom to go inside and wait at the back of the classroom so that once the children were dismissed by the teacher, the parents immediately assumed responsibility for their child. Aisling gave a short wave to the other parents whom she had got to know through this daily routine. The children had been strictly instructed not to break ranks even when their parents arrived until the teacher said so.

So when Philip saw Aisling, he pretended to look at the ceiling and then at the wall. But Aisling knew he had seen her so she smiled at him. It was always a pleasure to see her son at lunchtime; and unless her university commitments prevented her from collecting Philip at school, she always went home with him at this time of the day.

“Well, how was it today?” enquired Aisling as she and Philip slowly made their way towards the car. Ahead of them was a young mother with her daughter from Philip’s class stepping down from the concrete steps just before the car park. The young girl turned around to wave to Philip. He hesitantly waved back. The two mothers smiled at each other.

“We drew pictures. This is what I did.” Philip showed his mother the sheet of paper he had been holding in his left hand. On it was a rather rough sketch of an Irish countryside, in the centre of which was something meant to resemble a thatched cottage. Bits of shaky lines were supposed to be smoke coming from the chimney.

“That’s beautiful, Philip. Were you thinking of the cottage we stayed in during the holiday?” Aisling always tried to be encouraging, no matter what the outcome of Philip’s attempts was.

During the summer she and Philip had spent a couple of weeks in one of the cottages in Connemara. It was a most wonderful time, free from the concerns of academic life and a welcome opportunity to grow even closer to her son. It was not easy combining career and parenthood, but she wanted to succeed in both. Philip enjoyed the countryside enormously. It was a chance for him to roam around in the wilderness, chasing butterflies and experiencing another kind of life, so different from Dublin. Mother Nature had smiled at both of them and at all the inhabitants and visitors of Connemara for it was one of those warm, lazy summers, always to be hoped for but rarely granted in the west of Ireland.

She thought this was also an opportune time to break the news to Philip. “How’d you like to go on a holiday?”

“Another one?” His face lit up. He had been at school only a couple of months so the summer was still fresh in his memory. But then he became pensive. “What about school?” Philip liked going to school, and now he was probably wondering how his mother’s plans would fit in with his schooling.

Aisling had been relieved that Philip enjoyed school. She had dreaded the separation which it entailed, but luckily she had been spared the agonizing experience of the young child clinging to its mother on the first day of school and refusing to be left behind. Sometimes there would be that embarrassing moment when the parent dithers between running away with the yelling child or fleeing from the child. That did not happen with Philip and her. She had prepared him for that day, assuring him that he would meet many friends and do many new things at school. That seemed to have done the trick, and he never liked missing even one day.

“Oh, we’re not going immediately. After Christmas. And we’ll bring

your school things with us so you can continue having fun with your drawings, learning your words and so on. It'll be a different kind of holiday, I promise." Aisling was not sure how to explain to Philip that they would be away for several months since she would be doing some research at Mercier University in Leuven.

"What about my friends at school?" asked Philip as he climbed into the back seat, having cheerfully greeted Jiffy.

"We'll think of something." Aisling settled herself in her seat, put on her safety belt and checked her rear-view mirror to see that Philip was comfortably seated.

Philip would indeed miss his newly-found friends at school. Clearly, it was not going to be easy since she realized the importance of peer interaction for her young son. How would her six-year-old Philip react to the scholarly world of Leuven?

"Did you hear about the research fellowship that Richard Gutierrez got from Mercier University in Leuven?" Jan turned to Raissa Dimitrovich, from the Department of Russian Studies, as he poured coffee into his rather fashionable mug sporting the words "I've had a hard day". The two professors were in the Faculty Commons, taking a break from their academic work.

The Faculty Commons was a welcome meeting place for some of the faculty. As one of them rather tactlessly put it, it was some kind of haven "to escape from the pressures of constantly being confronted by the students". It was the one place that was specifically reserved for the non-academic activities of academics, like drinking endless cups of coffee/decaf/tea of various flavors/drinking chocolate, reading newspapers, chatting, plotting various strategies for any kind of projects that only academics are capable of concocting, criticizing the administration (a favorite pastime for some of them) and so on. The complimentary refreshment was much appreciated and so were the subsidized donuts. Sometimes a kind-hearted individual would leave cakes to celebrate an event, or at times leftovers from a social event would be found on the counter.

"No, but when did he get the news?" Raissa was curious, her eyes now closely focused on Jan. She was personally interested in this bit of information because she too was feeling the pressure of having to apply for research grants.

"Just this morning. I had to translate the letter for him. From Dutch. Funny, how some people get the good news in a form they don't under-

stand.” A swipe at the non-linguistic abilities of the monolingual members of academia. Having made his point, Jan stirred his coffee with the small red-and-white plastic strip left for that purpose.

“What’s all this about?” piped in the Chair of the History Department.

Dr. Zimmermann, the new arrival, had overheard the conversation as he was passing through the Faculty Commons on his way to his office in Bergman Hall. To the utter annoyance of the students who were in charge of cleaning the place and of Seamus O’Brien, the Proctor of the Faculty Commons, some faculty members-used the door into the Faculty Commons as the entrance into Bergman Hall. If these people helped themselves to the coffee or tea and sat down, like decent lads and lassies, and chatted with the rest of us, that would not be too bad, complained the Proctor, who despite the 20 years in LA never lost his Irish perspective on things. Instead, they are wearing out this part of the carpet by the constant traffic, he complained. Sure enough, that part of the carpet between what was really a side door into the Faculty Commons and the kitchenette which had an exit into Bergman Hall had taken on a worn-out look.

Jan brought Maximilian Zimmermann up to date on this morning’s event. Dr. Zimmermann’s imposing figure towered above the counter.

“Hmm. That’s interesting.” The history professor nodded his head gravely. Dr. Zimmermann was proud of his opinions; they were always taken seriously. He had also a special status in the university since he was a member of the prestigious Alpha Sigma Nu. Normally Dr. Zimmermann would just fill his cup with coffee and then disappear from the room without even a word of greeting. But this time he was staying for a longer chat. So he put his briefcase down beside him. He wanted to know more. And he wanted to be reminded of Europe.

“That is exactly what I want to know.” Raissa’s personal interest was undisguised. “How did he get it?” She knew that Richard was a neophyte in the scholars’ world. “Probably knows a professor there who pulled strings. That must be it.” Then with a shrug of her shoulders quickly followed by a dismissive sweep of her right hand, she declared, “It’s like this publishing business. It is not what you write but whom you know that gets your article accepted by journals.” She had a chip on her shoulder. And who could blame her? She was the unhappy recipient of several rejection slips from editors and publishers.

“I disagree,” Jan was quick to retort. He put down his mug on the counter so he could make his next statement with greater emphasis. “Whenever I submit a manuscript to a scholarly journal, it’s always done with my name on a separate sheet. Blind refereeing. Any respectable journal would do that.” He did not want the others to think that his article

which was recently accepted, his first incidentally, was going to be published in suspicious circumstances. He was thinking of his merit pay this year, and the Vice-President for Academic Affairs had insisted that scholarly work should be “evaluated by one’s peers”.

“Oh, come on. This whole thing about peer evaluation is not really true.” Raissa did not want to give in. But she was not interested in providing examples in case the conversation turned in her direction.

“This damn business about scholarship and research again.” The three turned around to find out who the culprit was. John Peters had come in, unknown to the others, and had seated himself in one of the cozy armchairs in the Faculty Commons, seeking refuge from the day’s activities.

Aside from the suite of furniture in the center where John Peters had settled himself, the Faculty Commons provided for different groupings. The various chairs were arranged so that two or three could have a corner to themselves.

Right now in one of those corners Dr. Lu was seated, minding his own business, with the front page of the *New York Times* covering his face, and his balding head, clearly visible above the paper, looking like a stage floor illuminated by the wall lamp. The few wisps of hair sticking out on top were vibrating like ballerinas. Dr. Lu was scanning the inside pages of the paper to catch up on the latest goings-on in the world.

Beside the door into the room a round table had been placed. This was the student’s station. It was also a study desk. After all, one of the perks of the job of ensuring that nicely-brewed coffee was always available for the hard-pressed faculty members was being able to spend hours studying and be paid for it. It was a much sought-after work-study appointment, sometimes even better than being a T. A. since one was not landed with all those photocopying jobs and running back and forth to the library for the professors.

The most popular spot in the Faculty Commons, where the original trio had been standing, was the counter where the coffee machines were, particularly on Fridays when gourmet coffee was also served, probably to remind the hardworking faculty that it was almost the end of the week. But John Peters, of the Department of Business Studies, did not bother with coffee. His daily routine was to pick up the newspapers, skim through the pages while planting himself in one of the comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace. He had overheard the conversation of his colleagues and could not resist making the remark. Obviously, his colleagues expected him to defend his position. But they could come to him if they wanted more. So the trio took their coffee with them, obliging their colleague, as it were.

“What’s bugging you, John?” Dr. Zimmermann asked, clearing the center table on which John Peters had laid his newspaper. The two had sat on various committees together, and he guessed what was on John’s mind. He knew that John was not happy with the direction that the university was taking.

“This university was known as a teaching university. When I joined twenty years ago, it was that. And we were expected to be excellent teachers, always available to our students. Now the faculty are reluctant to hold extra office hours, advise students, prepare new courses or offer independent studies. It’s all going into research.”

John was obviously hurt. He was an exceptional teacher, but he was finding it difficult to engage in research. Somehow he had lost the discipline required for a protracted investigation of one topic. Or perhaps he realized that there were more important things to do, like giving his time to the students and to the community. As a result, he was not getting the salary increases he was used to receiving because he could not produce article after article.

“But this *is* a university. No university worth its salt can exclude the commitment to scholarship. How can we be effective teachers if we’re not up-to-date?” replied Jan, who had joined the university a mere two years ago. He hunched over in John’s direction. “In my case, what attracted me to this university was precisely the balance between teaching and research. I would not have liked to have gone into a high-flying research institution, but I would not have been interested in an exclusively teaching college either.” With that he reclined and took a small sip from his mug.

John did not respond. He had heard that argument several times before, and he found it ill-informed because it assumed that professors like him did not update their knowledge of the subject.

But Dr. Zimmermann defended John’s view. Although he was a noted scholar in German history between the two World Wars, he did not like the criterion being used for scholarship. Since merit pay was being tagged on to scholarship, he understood this to mean that a faculty member had to produce some published work every year.

“Well, what does scholarship really mean? Must I have an article, a paper and a review every year? But do you know what is happening? Faculty are now reluctant to write a book—now that is real scholarship for you!” There was no doubting the sarcasm in his voice. “It appears that it is better to write an article once a year since one could get merit pay every year. A book could take one several years to write. It would be more solid research, of course, and yet one will benefit from merit pay only when it comes out.”

Raissa could not believe her ears. Dr. Zimmermann was one of the top scholars at this university, yet here he was, griping about the distribution of merit pay. Jan, on the other hand, was taking all this in. So there is a technique to this scholarship-merit pay situation after all, he thought to himself. There is method in this academic madness. Without his knowing it, Dr. Zimmermann had given Jan “sound” advice: he should aim for articles rather than a book.

Dr. Zimmermann continued; he must have been giving this issue a lot of his attention. “What do I say to the editor who accepts my article? Do not publish it next year because I already have two lined up for that year? Could you wait for two years because I don’t think I’ll have one for that year?” Despite the sarcasm, the logic of his questions was evident. And there was no stopping Dr. Zimmermann either. “Let me tell you this,” he said as he shifted the weight from one side of his buttocks to the other. “Did you know about Joseph’s experience?”

The others shook their heads. “Well, five years ago he submitted an article to a university’s journal somewhere in Turkey. Since it was regarded as important enough the plan was to translate it into Turkish. It was translated all right two years later. It was scheduled to appear that year. But the journal is so far back in its publication that it came out only this year.”

“Well, what’s the problem?” inquired Jan rather naively. Once more he took a sip, not wanting his coffee to get cold.

“The problem is,” stressed Dr. Zimmermann, “that it came out this year but it was backdated! So he can’t report it for merit pay this year nor include it in this year’s faculty service report since technically, going by the printed publication date that is, it came out three years ago. *Now* do you see the problem?”

John butted in, breaking his silence now that he had a very competent supporter in Dr. Zimmermann but ignoring his latest narrative, “In my field the difference between the material at undergraduate level and at the scholarly level is so great that I cannot use material from one for the other.”

“Isn’t that true of all fields, John?” Jan asked, hoping to make a score.

“I can only speak for my field,” quipped John, more or less brushing aside Jan’s point.

Raissa wanted to have her opinion heard on this matter. “Are we not forgetting where our priorities lie? The students are paying very high tuition fees to this university. They expect to be taught. Otherwise, they could go to the state universities, where the fees are much lower. But then they claim that they do not get there the attention they need. Not only that....” With those words, she thrust her leg out front.

Poor Dr. Zimmermann did know what to expect.

“Have you noticed that the faculty are now spending more time chasing after grants and writing proposals?” Raissa continued. “Look at the amount of time that goes into writing those proposals. How many are really successful? Would we not be better off making use of that valuable time to read more up-to-date material for the courses we teach?”

Jan was beginning to feel that he was on his own. He looked at the other three, who were much older than he. Did age have any bearing on one’s position on this matter? he asked himself.

“But look at Adrian in the English Department,” he blurted out, oblivious of the significance of Raissa’s last observation. “He’s close to retirement. But instead of complaining about the expectations of research, he seemed to have got a new lease of life. He gave a well-received paper at an international conference in Bogota last year. He’s now finishing a book and received a fellowship to do that.” Jan was aware of the comment that had been made that if those who were complaining about having to engage in research applied their energies to doing it, their time would be better spent.

“What criteria do they use anyway for awarding these fellowships?” snapped Raissa. She had returned to her original question. Her own unsuccessful bid left her bitter because she thought she had a fair chance since she was completing the translation of an important book. Her friend informed her that perhaps it was because she did not have a track record in publishing. A sore point, and her friend should not have been so tactless. “How do they determine who should get it or not?” the rather defiant Russian professor persisted.

No one in the group answered her, not wanting to provoke her further.

From behind came a new voice, however. It was Matthew Perry. He had been standing behind them eavesdropping.

“A free discussion, I presume?” He checked the faces of his colleagues for reactions to his intrusion.

“Sit down, Matthew,” suggested Dr. Zimmermann, moving so that Dr. Perry could take the space beside him. “Give us the benefit of your wisdom.”

“Raissa, you’ve a reason to be annoyed. I myself feel very frustrated over these research awards. I was finishing a book a few years ago, and I applied for a fellowship.” Instead of answering Raissa’s question, however, he proceeded to air his own grievances. He angrily placed the blame on others, including the administration, for his failure. Dr. Perry’s face looked flushed and his voice was increasing in volume. “You know what I was really tempted to write? Instead of acknowledgements, a list of those

who didn't deserve to be thanked! I can provide you with names.”

There were no takers. Instead there was a sudden hush in the room. The unobtrusive Dr. Lu gently lowered his paper and adjusted his spectacles to get a good look at the speaker. Oh yes, it was Dr. Perry; oh, well, he is tenured. So Dr. Lu resumed the reading of his paper. The student decided it was time to replace the decaffeinated coffee even though the container was still half-full. She coughed a bit. But no one spoke, no one was prepared to add fuel to the Perry fire.

Clearly, research and scholarship was a hot issue. Richard's fellowship was forgotten in the lively conversation. But Jan knew that he had a suitable lunchtime conversation topic for his colleagues who munched with him here at the Faculty Commons.

He could not wait for lunchtime to arrive.

Richard, of course, had not forgotten his good news. And he was glad that Jan, who genuinely liked sharing the good news of his colleagues since he believed in collegiality, had been the first to hear of it as it saved Richard the trouble of telling others. It would appear in the university news bulletin later on; but a couple of colleagues, who must have received the news from Jan, had already congratulated Richard. One of them had called him up to express her delight over the award. Not surprisingly it was Dr. Maribel Araya. When good news travels fast it is fantastic, but it is even better when a generous heart, like Dr. Araya's, responds to it.

Richard thought he had better inform his Dean as soon as possible since he would have to discuss his plans with him. On his way to the Dean's office at Aloysius building, he passed by the Hideout, the university's cafeteria. Inside he could see through the glass wall a group of students, two of them from his class, huddled together, chatting, with books strategically opened in front of them. One of them was desperate to catch Richard's attention. When he succeeded, he pointed to the opened book—apparently evidence that he was keeping up with the reading. Richard merely smiled.

The day's outdoor culinary offerings were being prepared by one of the catering staff, who was lighting the barbecue. The tempting smell was making Richard hungry. But the aroma was actually coming from another part of the eating arena. Some students' clubs, competing with the university's officially-appointed catering firm, were cooking ethnic food. Regularly, the Chinese Club, the Filipino Students Association, the Chicano/Latino Students, the Indonesian Club and others would showcase their ethnic origins in this way. It was also a practical way of raising funds for their clubs. Since several students were unhappy with the alleged high prices of the catering firm, students were only too glad to avail of these offerings. Rich-