

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2005**

February 2005

For those of you new to Borough Green, let me tell you about a brief but unnerving period in the history of our village

Perhaps it was the autumnal gloom of gutters choked with leaves, porridge stuck to the saucepan or damp misty mornings, I don't know but, whatever the reason, I felt depressed. So I telephoned Linda and, sensing I was sad, she invited me round to join her in one of her legendary suppers. "Blinding" egg sandwiches, washed down with bottles of Chardonnay Mmmm!...

I arrived at Linda's and was surprised at having to pick my way through mountains of furniture piled high on her dive, with Mitzi purring regally atop a wardrobe. I was intrigued, then following my knock, after much stumbling and exasperated comment from within, she eventually opened the door.

"Come in", she said, and I followed her over an assault course of what seemed like a house clearance until finally we reached an empty kitchen. There the wine flowed, eggs skated on hot oil and at last the chaos was explained. Linda took a huge swallow of wine, bit into her sandwich, anointing the chin with egg yolk and ketchup then said dramatically, "Feng Shui, Muriel. Feng Shui."

She gestured at the furniture with a sweep of her arm and went on, "That's what all this lot's about. Out with the clutter, sleep with your feet facing an open door, paint everywhere bright colours. Air and light but, most important of all, magnets. Yes, energy giving magnets." And at this point she strapped two magnets to her forehead, with gaffer tape, drained her glass then shook violently to ecstatic expression before passing out.

I dragged her so her feet faced an open door, Feng Shui fashion to ensure a good night's sleep, covered her with a blanket curiously marked "Hilton Hotel Hong Kong", then staggered back to Western Road. Wondering en route where she had gained her Feng Shui knowledge and, incidentally, the hotel blanket?

Amazingly the very next day, in the charity shop, Daphne was in there with what appeared to be a magnet rash on her forehead and coincidentally there was a Feng Shui video for sale which perhaps she had just donated?

Suddenly I recalled the last WI meeting and the number of girls who had marks on their forehead and appeared rejuvenated. This coupled with so many adverts in Shakti's window offering furniture for sale, all at once made sense.....

Having left the charity shop I saw, in the bank, at the Co-op, the

bakers, everywhere, women with masked foreheads shamelessly cavorting and flirting. And if conclusive proof were needed, Kent Aluminium had completely sold out of magnets and gaffer tape.

I quickly ran back to the hospice shop to buy the video, just in time to see Betty slip it in her bag and wave bye-bye to Joan and Jean who smiled at her knowingly.

Several days later I saw her obviously energized but, being shy she wore a balaclava to hide tell tale blemishes on her forehead. Of course, this ingenious method of disguising their inspiration soon caught on and before long nearly all WI members and shop volunteers were spotted wearing balaclavas or yashmaks, while at the same time engaged in youthful activities accompanied by young men. Even Joyce, normally chaste, finally succumbed and was seen cycling up Wrotham Hill with a man on her crossbar. And no lights!

It seemed the whole village had gone mad but, just as sure as it began, so it ended and until now no one ever mentioned or alluded to that strange period. Finally just let me say to the schematics among you, who may not believe this strange tale - Look no further than the foreheads and those those who bear the scars surely have a tale to tell.

March 2005

A favourite time for me has to be when I was little, playing with my friend Caroline in her father's shed.

There was carpet on the floor, electric light, a small gas ring, shelves and drawers filled with shed things but, best of all, a bakelite radio that buzzed and crackled and glowed light through vents in its back. We laughed at the comedy, sang along to the music and puzzled at the strange voices invited into our shed by way of the dial set at "short wave". And for fun Caroline and I would copy those voices and continue a conversation in fluent short wave until our sides ached with laughter.

Then one day Caroline moved away and the shed fell silent, leaving its panels to rot and windows cracking until, at last, some men came and took the shed away. So then, fifty years later, time to buy my own shed. Try to relive those magical times. And I did!

It arrived and was erected in the morning, I laid carpet in the afternoon and ran electric wire from the house. But I knew that Marie, my nosey neighbour, would complain and say the wire was dangerous, so I made it look like a washing line by hanging clothes along its length. From the charity shop Daphne made up a bag of clothes for ten pounds, but not until I had pegged them all out did I realise they were men's clothes. Not to worry, they filled the line and disguised its electricity.

At the weekend I bought a double burner camping gas ring and, joy of joys, from the village antique shop, a Bush bakelite radio ... Hooray!

But all the while as I fitted out my shed, I noticed Marie behind her flickering net curtains, her eyes tracing my every move. I could see the reflection of her binocular lenses, her silhouette against the light behind her as she stood atop her step ladder. Then I saw her fall, heard the crash, as she hit her head on the wardrobe. And all this was confirmed next day when we passed in Western Road, her cranium swathed in bandages...

Anyway, back home, perusing the Radio Times I noticed that starting on Monday and running for the week, BBC Radio Four were serialising Lady Chatterley's Lover. Excited, I decided I would listen to it each day in the shed and stocked up with chocolate biscuits to enjoy whilst listening... Having read D H Lawrence I knew, when Tuesday's broadcast ended, Wednesday's episode must include Lady 'C' succumbing to the charms of her gamekeeper. And sure enough, on Wednesday, it did, but at that most sensuous moment of the proceedings, as I dipped my chocolate digestive in the tea, I was shocked by a loud bang on the shed door, followed by Marie's booming voice, "Muriel Rurial you are depraved. You have a man in there and you can be heard as far away as the Co-Op."

My chocolate digestive collapsed in the tea cup as Marie continued, "He's a huge man, I've seen his clothes on the line. His socks, his shirts and, and, his UNDERRR_WEAR!".....

The BBC actors were convincing in their passion as the gas ring caused steam to cloud the windows, creating an over all effect of total debauchery in my luxury shed. Little wonder Marie was moved to cry out hysterically, "Right I'm coming in". And true to her word, barged the door open, sending a bottle of white spirit tumbling on to the gas flames which, within seconds, turned the place into an inferno. Marie and I fled the blaze but she was unrepentant as she made her way home, calling over her shoulder, "You've no shame Muriel Rurial. No shame!"

All I could do was retreat to the safety of my bedroom and through the window watch those flames devour my dream.....

In the morning, standing by the burnt out remains of my shed, I found it hard to believe that Lady Chatterley once cried ecstasy through those radio valves I discovered in the ashes. And as I turned my back on the smouldering debris I thought I saw Marie's curtains move, thought I heard the ghost of Lady Chatterley, thought I felt Caroline's hand upon my shoulder....

Ah well, perhaps the shed wasn't such a good idea after all.

Western Rd echoed to the footsteps of those walking by. I saw them, I heard them and even some of them I knew, passing through this thing called life.

Then naturally, I got to pondering that old chestnut, "life's meaning", and came to the conclusion we must try to contribute something to the human race, while we are here. Fleming, Columbus, Tolstoy, Van Gogh.... Rurial! Ah yes..." And this year's winner of the Nobel Prize is, Ms Muriel Rurial, for her contribution to relaxed, safe breakfast and tea with her glass sided toaster."

No guessing if it's done, popping up too pale or clouds of black smoke 'cos you pressed it down again and forgot. So step forward Muriel and receive your prize and enjoy the plaudits for your magnificent contribution.

Hoping to realise this dream, I rushed off to Kent Aluminium to buy the necessary bits, confident of success in building the world's first glass sided toaster.

Later, at my kitchen table, I worked through the night, into Saturday then Sunday. Monday I rested only when fatigue consumed me until at last on Wednesday I was ready to test my invention. I bought special tea and fresh jam and a fresh leaf from our bakers. It would be the perfect tea, all that was required was golden toast.....

Apparently for someone with a weaker heart the shock from my new toaster could have proved fatal. Furthermore I will have to keep the bandages on my hands for at least three weeks.

I imagined this a small setback compared to those suffered by the pioneers I mentioned but, reluctantly, I decided to abandon the toaster idea and think of other ways to enrich the lives of others.

I needed new ideas and they would only come from inspiration, but would inspiration visit me? Then I remembered that great Victorian innovator Brunel and how he gained inspiration. Apparently he stimulated his brain by inhaling from an enamel bowl filled with boiling water, a marvellous cocktail of Creosote, Lily of the Valley, Marizipan and Swarfega. This set the endorphins racing and the next thing you know he had built the Rotherhithe Tunnel, the Great Western Railway, a steamship and various bridges. In fact, if the truth be known, he was becoming a bit of nuisance cluttering up the place with his various inventions. So much so, it was rumoured that Queen Victoria was once heard to complain, "Isambard why can't you think of something small, that fits into the handbag, instead of all those great lumbering eyesores?"

Anyway, emulating Brunel, I emerged from my bowl, red faced and breathless, but bursting with ideas for the good of man/woman kind.... Chickens to be fed Teflon, enabling them to lay non-stick eggs..... A waterproof sponge that won't absorb water, for people who hate cleaning their car.... The humane blindfold for cows, causing them to bump into fences whilst grazing, thus eradicating the need for tenderising before cooking And finally the amazing - cordless cord!

I was so excited and began to understand how those greats from history must have felt on the eve of their discoveries when, at that moment, the telephone rang. It was Linda telling me, "It's gout Muriel, but no way am I giving up the Chardonnay." And by the time the phone call ended I had completely forgotten my inventions.

So those fine lofty ideas of mine had merely faded away, along with the footsteps beyond my window that set me thinking in the first place. And sadly I was forced to acknowledge my place in history would, one day, only be recorded by a few lines etched simply on a common headstone. Ah well for the meantime the world's toast is doomed to pop up imperfectly and the Nobel Prize is once again up for grabs.

Tucked away between an advertisement for surgical hosiery, "Banish blue legs forever" and an advert for welding goggles, there was a little ad that said simply, "Fifty pounds will introduce you to a whole new world of excitement, discovery and untold wealth. This item is unique, there is only one of its kind in existence. PO Box 489, Croydon, CR3 7RJ."

I was curious and, acting on impulse, sent off a cheque for fifty pounds and, much to everyone's surprise, within two weeks my parcel had arrived. I carefully opened the box, like a midwife bringing a child into this world, delicately prizing from the bubble wrap and polystyrene a silver and black metal detector. I felt disappointment and was sceptical peeling off the warning that advised, "Danger this is no ordinary appliance."

Standing in the kitchen surrounded by packaging I put the earphones on and plugged them into the detector before flicking the switch to "ON". Immediately the magnetic cat flap slammed shut, almost decapitating Tibby, the kitchen radio came on and the washing machine started up. I thought perhaps these might just be Uri Geller type coincidences so dismissed them all and decided to test the thing properly. Locking the back door I went into the garden then buried the key in the flower bed, forking it thoroughly so I would not have a clue as to its position. Several hours later that nice chap Derek, from Kent Aluminium, climbed through an upstairs window and let me in.

Anyway all was not lost because I discovered that evening, for the first time since my TV remote broke, I could change channels from my armchair, this time using my detector. Just point it at the television and presto I was channel hopping again. It also switched the kettle on and off and the lights. This was great fun so I went to the window and aimed it at the TV in Eddie's front room opposite. Sure enough it was running riot through the channels and within a short while Eddie was thumping the top of the set with his fist.

That night in bed I lay awake thinking of all the fun I was going to have tomorrow, Saturday, with my rogue detector.... After breakfast I set off and drove to our car park in the High Street for a test run. There were quite a lot of vehicles in there and within minutes the detector had set off dozens of alarm systems, creating a fairground atmosphere of flashing hazard lights and intermittent sirens. Ohh brilliant and it was just beginning.

Next step that big supermarket just off the motorway, to cause havoc in retribution for that nasty Mr Norris's attitude towards me. "Madam we can't refund for these slippers, they are not a dangerous design it's your own fault you fell over in them. No one else has returned that particular line. Perhaps Madam is a little.... Clumsy?" "Of course no one has returned them, all victims are laid up in Maidstone General you fool. But have no fear Norris, I'll get you."...

I parked up in the superstore car park and from my car zapped the whole line of check out tills, reducing the store to chaos as people abandoned their full trolleys or stood remonstrating with till staff half way through totting up. I calmly strolled into the store and soon found Norris, perspiring, agitated and surrounded by irate shoppers. He spotted me eyeing him with an expression of "Gotcha", before I slowly turned, leaving him to it.

So where to next? Bluewater! Yes Bluewater, that hideous fluorescent monster that lacks the charm of villages with their chatter and eccentrics, Joyces and Judies, Daphnes and WI, their charity shops and churchyards, songbirds and fresh air, Post Office and Kent AluminiumBluewater? Phhh! And before long I

was swaggering through those gaudy malls just off the A2, the detector strapped to me, zapping Goliath stores like some OAP on a mission.

I was the Terminator as chaos reigned, tills froze, electrical goods broke down and some places were plunged into darkness. Amazingly in the panic and upheaval that ensued I calmly returned to Trevor my Fiesta and made my way back to the genteel world of Borough Green.

A good day's work for the underdog and yesteryear, I thought. But in Western Road the police were waiting for me. Some smart Alec must have seen me drive off, took my number and informed the police who got details for the DVLA mob. Only one thing for it, I would have to play the confused, dotty old dear card... "Oh come in officers, we'll have a nice cup of tea and some cake" They followed me in, carrying the detector they had confiscated. I found a very old stale fruit cake I meant to throw out and knew they would force it down themselves rather than offend this, silly old thing.

I smiled as they ate it whilst trying to disguise their disgust, then they began to quiz me about the detector. I told them I bought it mail order, I showed them the box and the manual then suddenly, quoting from the manual, the young PC said, "Look Sarge, it says here, "Made in Iraq." Phew this could be one of those weapons of mass....." The sergeant cut him off sharply, "Right Jones gather this lot up, we're on to something big here. Something very big." As they were leaving they paused at the front door and warned me, "You'll be hearing from us lady. Oh yes"

Do you know I never did hear from them, or find that key buried in the flower bed.

September 2005

I was listening to the radio and a commentator describing a snooker player as GENIUS! Well if he perceived a snooker player as genius then he probably didn't rate too highly some one like Leonardo Da Vinci "Oh yeah Leo, you've captured her enigmatic smile all right, that Mona Lisa woman, but d'you reckon you could pot that difficult red then screw back for the green, middle pocket? No!.."

But they do it all the time now. Footballers are geniuses, country and western singers, racing drivers, dart players, dart players? One hundred and forty-four required. Treble eighteen, bull's eye, double top. Game. Genius.

Crazy world we live in now and more and more I feel I am what they affectionately call, "A Grumpy Old Woman". Simply because this bizarre time continues to confound, irritate, bemuse and sometimes fill me with despair.

I followed a car recently in Gravesend and out from the passenger's window came coca cola tins, chip wrappers and cigarette packets. It was like a mobile spring clean they were having so, when the lights went red, I thought here's my chance, I'll confront them. But they ignored the light and just sailed on as I sat there watching a newspaper thrown from the car, its pages separating and floating to earth like paratroopers.

And how many times have you been held up in our high street, while someone gets cash out of the machine at Nat West and parks right outside. Or at the take away while they go in for food? Never mind the disruption to traffic or danger to pedestrians. Also how often have you been in a department store at the till, waiting to be served, while two assistants, totally oblivious to you, have a ridiculous conversation. "Oh yeah we wen' out for a drink. I wore me new denim skirt, y'know the one will the frayed 'em. An guess wot, I only got it caught in 'is door. Embarrassing or wot? Yeah ees got one ovem new BMWs. Yeah ees 'lektrishun' werf a fortune"

"Excuse me could you take for this item please, I'm on a meter and ..."

And what about badly behaved children in supermarkets? Badly behaved children in restaurants, on planes or in any public place? Badly behaved children in general. If I was naughty, my Mum threatened to take me to see "The Sound of Music". That usually did the trick. Don't suppose you'd get away with that these days. Human rights and everything...

Middle aged men with shirts hanging outside they trousers. Personalised number plates, what's the point of that? Oh and here's a thing, modern graffiti. Gone are the days of witty captions felt penned

on hoardings. Now it's mysterious shapes and letters sprayed in paint big and bold, defacing shop shutters, railway carriages or etched on the glass of bus windows. I've seen buses in London where every single window has been "tagged" by prolific graffiti artists. Swirling arabesques on a number 36, a sight for sore eyes from Paddington to New Cross Gate. "Hold very tight please, sorry no dogs, push chairs, buggies or luggage. Aerosols and glass cutters only this one ..."

Oh yes, "Please and thankyou" are now triple word scores. "Sorry" is the new one-four-seven maximum break and "After You" is six numbers and the bonus ball, so rare are these words and phrases nowadays.... Hundred pound call out charge. Petrol, pound a litre. Two new tyres and an exhaust system, three hundred and eighty-four pounds. "Paying by card Madam?" Chip and pin to prevent fraud. House burgled, car stolen, handbag pinched. Chip and pin couldn't save me. Sorry sold out, waiting for a delivery. Thirteen weeks delivery. Can't carry stock, not cost effective. Jam on M25, M20, A20, A25, the A227 road closed, road works, road ... going nowhere.

Oh no, don't get me started on this one, too late I've thought of it now. Junk Mail! It's a brand new car, a holiday, double glazing with UPVC soffits and spragets, bargeboards and noggets. No deposit, interest free, nothing to pay, amazing APR Bamboozle Plc. Take it away, it's yours, it's easy, simply Simply read the tiny print describing in unfathomable jargon just what these pin striped gangsters are up to and all at once that cynical Americanism, "No such thing as a free lunch", springs to mind....

But then I wander into our charity shop and the lovely volunteers confute that Americanism. For there is such a thing as a free lunch and it's in their smiles and kindness, their generosity, their time for others. And it's there across the road in our village hall in all the charitable events it stages or stroll on a little further to our churches. So much goodness, it's all there.

And in that knowledge as I stand outside the charity shop, laden with bargains I'll never wear, use or read, I no longer feel the need to be a Grumpy Old Woman. Then I spy what looks like a tree cycling down the high street. Yes it's Joyce, with a three foot Leylandii in the front basket of her bicycle. She can't see round it, she's wobbling all over the road, there are several shopping bags hanging from the handlebars, her mackintosh is being shredded in the back wheel, the tyres are flat, but she somehow defies gravity and remains upright.

How can anyone cycle under these conditions? Well it's obvious. She's a genius.

October 2005

On my window ledge is a small framed photograph of my mother. She is a young woman, smiling blissfully unaware. Her clothes then, look so old fashioned now, but her smile is timeless, portraying a love unconditional. And then I look beyond the window where she stand in her wooden frame. Look beyond the roof tops and trees, beyond the rolling clouds, in to the distance, that place of memories and dreams. And there I am as a little girl, clasping her hand. She bends low to kiss my forehead and whisper, "I love you Muriel but today I must leave you here, in this place of learning, so that you might one day make your own way in the world. And to that end you must have knowledge and in there you will gain that knowledge."

I didn't really understand what she was saying but of course it was as much for her as me she said these things, beginning that painful process of "letting go".

She releases my hand and motions me towards the school building and for a few paces I am fine, then pause to look back and suddenly feel the symptoms of tears. I stare at her across the playground and want to run to her embrace but, knowing my intentions, she shakes her head and I resume my way to that old red brick building. The aroma in there is one of floor polish, radiators, old books and all things different to that carefree way of No ... Western Road. Those were my first steps on that journey we must all undertake. A passage that travels through joy and pain, love and loss, expectation and disappointment. A journey we call simply, life.

That day came and went and many more such days until the hand that once clasped mine became frail and finally let slip its grasp. But over the years she shaped me, made me what I am today, and for that I thank you Mum. For my humour and oblique way of viewing the world. For the luxury of her company through all the years we shared. Times I never weary of recalling...

Isn't it a wonderful thing, memory? A kaleidoscope of images, events, songs, voices, colours, smells, from half a century ago or even longer. And yet now we can't even remember why we went upstairs, or where we left our glasses. But that's because these events are current, where as we've had a lifetime of reminding ourselves of particular moments.

Over and over again we regale others or privately relive times special to us. And almost on cue, as I am writing this, I hear in the distance the chimes of an ice cream van and immediately I can see myself on tiptoe reaching up to the counter with half a crown, asking for "two cornets with a flake please". And my mother could remember word for word a poem I once wrote to thank her for a birthday party she arranged for me. She often used to recite it, saying it was her absolute favourite verse. So for no particular reason I'd like to remember her here with that poem she loved so much.

BIRTHDAY

The cards have arrived
There's ice cream in dishes
A knock at the door, I wonder who this is.

What did they bring?
A pen, a torch, a never fly kite
A scrapbook my heroes sleep in at night.

Yes that's my mother, her voice is quite loud
She keeps me in order now Dad's not around.
She tells me she loves me and shouts 'cos she cares
Sometimes I hide under the stairs.

But today is my birthday, she won't spoil the fun
I can spill drinks on the carpet, eat sweets till there's none
Make a mess of my room, leave my laces undone
Today is my birthday I'm fifty one.

November 2005

I was reading an article about the possible bird flu epidemic and the more the piece informed me the queazier I became until, when I'd read it, I decided I would no longer eat eggs.

This resolve lasted for about two weeks, by which time I began to pine for omelettes, scrambled eggs, poached eggs and all eggy weggy things. It was then I had one of my amazing brain waves. "Why not farm my own eggs?" Yes! Free range clucky-clucky, wander about, nonchalant type chickens, producing the finest, healthiest eggs. Double decaffeinated, friends of the earth, save the planet, Greenpeace style eggs

Right, the first thing required was a coop for my chicken to live in at night, safe from the foxes, where she could lay to her heart's content. So off I went to my good friends at Kent Alooominom. "You're in luck Muriel," Richard said, "Cos I've still got my old Alsatian's kennel". He then went on to say how much he missed him and got all sentimental and d'you know the only time I had ever seen him cry like that was when he once gave someone too much change. Anyway true to his word, within a week Richard delivered the kennel complete with hinged front door, wire grill window and walk in ramp. "No charge Muriel, just give me a dozen eggs", he said, smiling as he waved and pulled away from the kerb.

I was thrilled with the kennel but for a finishing touch I put a straw filled cat basket in there for her to brood over and a couple of mirrors and a little bell. So everything was ready, all I needed now was a chicken...

I got hopelessly lost but at last found Mr Pomeroy's Luxury Poultry Farm, East Grinstead and, wandering in through the five bar gate, I was at once surrounded by hundreds of chickens. There, head and shoulders above the rest, not moving in the jerky clockwork gait that chickens have but gliding majestically across the grass, was a magnificent specimen.

Mr Pomeroy approached me, "Ah I see you've spotted the North Dakota Red. A wonderful creature, extremely rare and expensive, but I can tell you're smitten".. Several minutes and two hundred pounds later I was loading Milly, that's what I named her, into Trevor my Fiesta. The carrying box Pomeroy provided was very small and Milly seemed unhappy in there so, before we set off I wound up the windows and released her into the car.

On the journey home I was so excited I didn't really appreciate the dangers, swerving and careering across the road as Milly flew and hopped about nervously, always returning to the dashboard in front of me. And by the time we arrived home I was smothered in feathers and bird's mess. Not only that, I realised mine was the first windscreen I had ever seen with bird droppings on the "inside".

A couple of weeks elapsed and Milly still seemed a little nervous, either gliding about the garden or sitting in her kennel, but I imagined she needed a while to settle in and before long there would be a bumper crop of eggs.. As time went on though, she grew fatter and fatter but still no eggs. Worse still she was sad now and spent hours quietly sitting in her kennel, never gazing in the mirrors or ringing her bell, the millet hanging there untouched. I even bought her some chocolate buttons but they just lay there. It was hopeless.

I thought perhaps I needed to know more about her, to encourage her to lay, so off I went to the library... "THE NORTH DAKOTA RED": A very rare, almost extinct chicken, lays a prodigious amount of eggs but only one day in her lifetime. That day is never determined nor possible outside her native North Dakota.

Ah that's it, Milly won't lay until she gets home. That would explain why she often looked wistfully towards the rattle of trains at the bottom of our garden. That was the North Dakota railway line she heard. It reminded her of home.

I rushed from the library, planning our future. I had some savings, we would travel to North Dakota, she would be repatriated and lay dozens of eggs, hundreds of eggs. Eggs, eggs, eggs...Ah Milly. I ran into the garden but she was not gliding about the lawn. I looked in her kennel but she wasn't there either. And at that moment as a train gathered momentum in the distance I thought I faintly heard the call of a bird. Then somehow I knew Milly was making her own way home, to the wilds of North Dakota. For that one special day in her lifetime.....

Bon Voyage Milly. Bon Voyage.

December 2005

I know they bring pleasure to a lot of people, filling those people with a sense of pride and achievement, especially when they complete the more intricate and complicated. In fact a fierce rivalry exists between fans of those dreadful things, a rivalry to discover the most fiendishly impossible of its species and conquer them. But to me they are my worst nightmare. Thousands of pieces, millions of pieces, their shapes and pictorial designed by sadistic tormentors, and by now you'll know to what I'm referring. Yes, Jig-Saw Puzzles. But what is the reason for this pathological aversion to jig-saw puzzles?

Well I'll tell you, but I hope no children are reading this because I'm about to shatter an illusion, so hide them away, cover their eyes and ears for I will now reveal the culprit who is to blame for my pain and suffering through jig-saw puzzles. He is none other than Father Christmas... Jolly Red Face, North Pole, Up and Down Chimneys, Half a dozen Mince Pies, Father Christmas, to give him his full name. But why is this, I hear you ask?

Well it all began when I was six years old and Mum said I had been so good she would take me to London to see Father Christmas. So we travelled up on the train, then by taxi to Selfridges and with wonderment I was soon passing the elves and pixies on my way to Santa's Grotto!.. He asked me several questions and then finally, "And what would you like for Christmas, Muriel?"

My response seemed fairly natural to me as I preferred the rough and tumble to dollies and prams but Santa appeared a little surprised when I replied, "I would like a box of soldiers please. Definitely not bandsmen, I prefer men throwing grenades or with machine guns and flame throwers. Not trumpets, piccolos and". It was time to shut me up so he hastily handed me a present and said "Bye bye little girl and Merry Christmas to you"

Well imagine my disappointment on Christmas Day when I discovered, instead of a box of bloodthirsty commandos; he had given me a jig-saw puzzle. Three cocker spaniels in a wicker basket in front of a vase of flowers. 1000 pieces. Yuk!

Next year was the same. I had my heart set on a catapult, but what did I get? Another 1000 piece jig-saw, this time depicting fluffy wuffy sheep hopping about in a field while children gazed gormlessly at them through through a fence. Ughhh!

The following year was the catalyst though. I was eight years old and beginning to doubt the whole Father Christmas concept when Mum took me to Harrods, but I was determined not to be a pushover for the Knightsbridge Santa... I stood opposite the old fraud and could smell alcohol and tobacco on his breath, clearly a legacy of the pub lunch he had just enjoyed round the corner. I noticed also the thin strip of elastic that attached the false beard to his face. This man was probably a porter seconded for the festive season, and it showed in his voice and demeanour when he enquired, "And what would you like for Christmas, little girl?" I fixed him with a stare that held as much menace as I could muster as I

replied, "A sheriff's outfit, with badge, gun and holster and caps please." He didn't speak, just reached in his sack and handed me a present, which I shook to betray its content. I could hear billions of bits of cardboard rattling about inside, waiting to drive me mad, to tip me over the edge. It was now the time to confront Santa rather than thank him and meekly walk away so, there in front of him, in one bold move I ripped open the wrapping paper. The words on the box struck me immediately, 2000 pieces, and its picture added insult to injury. Ballet! Emaciated women prancing about in little skirts, together with blancmange men defying gravity, and all in front of an enraptured audience.

I confronted Santa. "THIS, is not a sheriff's outfit. THIS, is a jig-saw puzzle." There was a commotion, Mum's money was returned, we were asked to leave the store and we travelled home in stony silence. That hush prevailed until morning when I apologized and once again we were friends, looking forward to Christmas day...

When that day finally arrived and we had opened the last of our presents, Mum said, in mock surprise, "Oh I almost forgot," and off she went upstairs to return with a present. Its shape suggested jig-saw puzzle and that Mum was about to repay me for embarrassing her in Harrods. I slowly peeled off the wrapping.... "Chad Valley Authentic Wild West Sheriff's Outfit." Includes chromium badge, gun and holster and two boxes of caps. Mum embraced me and whispered, "Merry Christmas, Muriel".