

# **MURIEL RURIAL 2014**

After a desperate, painful struggle I just managed to reach my mobile phone. I punched in Stella's mobile number. Please answer, Stella, please answer. "Oh Stella, thank goodness you're in. Can you come over, I need your help. Let yourself in, the back door's not locked"....

Well dear reader you are probably wondering the reason for my desperate call to Stella. So let me explain... I acknowledge that I am too old to be having a mid-life crisis so to what do I ascribe my most recent change of heart regarding sport? Previously it held no fascination for me. In fact I found some disciplines utterly ridiculous. I actually boycotted the cheering of the torch passing through Borough Green and, instead of a poster of the Olympic rings, I painted a message on a white sheet and hung that out the front. It should have read "SAVE THE WHALE" but the paint had run to read "SAVE THE WHOLL". Suddenly from the swollen mob on the pavement a small, tanned gentleman, probably South American, did knock at my door and in broken English said "Eeze good dat yoos tinka offa da leetle Wholl". And with that, pointed to the banner, pressed a five pound note into my hand, gave me the thumbs up and melted into the throng that was the Olympic nutters.

Some days later I did some research in the library and discovered that the Wholl is in fact a small Mexican rodent but that knowledge came to me too late as I had already spent the fiver on sweets. Briefly I did feel a pang of conscience, but that was swiftly banished as I recalled a Latin phrase I thought was Pythagorean and perfect for such an occasion. "Ippei, Ippei mea cassa". Which my shaky Latin translated to mean "Your generosity is my good fortune". But Tim the scholar and library wizard informed me it is all just a load of mumbo-jumbo and doesn't make a word of sense.

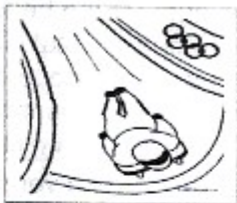


I took comfort from it anyway and, had he been there, ol' Pythag', I would have shared a Toblerone with him. And yes I concede he made a few cock-ups in his time but let us not forget he did turn up trumps with the old theory of the hypotenuse and triangle lark. But I've digressed so let us return to sport and some of the meaningless disciplines. The high jump! Throwing oneself backwards over a strip of plywood to land on a mattress the other side of the strip? The strip is set at over two meters so why not walk under it? That's what I would do, then stroll round, pick up my medal and bunch of flowers and I'm set up for life. Endorsing make-up, footwear, health supplements and Shredded Wheat. Sorted!

The hop, skip and jump? What is the point of that? Different if they livened it up a bit, perhaps having to dodge custard pies as they land at the end. And what about running events? All distances from 100 metres to 26 miles. Where's the danger and excitement in that? Listen, I might be interested or partially impressed if Messrs Bolt and Farah had some skip lorries and motorbikes to contend with but they closed the roads on the marathon route and the other pansies, who only run for ten seconds anyway, they do that in a stadium with not even a moped in sight... The javelin and that cannon ball thing they launch over their heads, that's not dangerous either. The people placing the markers where those things land, stand too far away, they're never going to get hit. Make them stand nearer, within range, perhaps even blindfold them.

That's drama, that's spectacle, that's entertainment, surely the ancient Greeks did it. Live chariot racing with sharp things on the wheels. Blokes fighting lions, armed with just a slingshot. Now that's what you call Olympics.

But then, eureka, I changed my attitude, I came to realise that some modern sport is exciting. So why the change of heart Muriel? Well it was pure serendipity. One evening I was watching television, shouting at the screen, as usual, witnessing one of those oily bloke politicians refusing to give a straight "yes" or "no", when I got so angry I threw the remote into the armchair opposite, causing the channel to change. Sport! A woman hurtling down an icy run on a tin tray. The "skeleton" to give it its correct billing. Utterly pointless but perilous. And the extreme danger more than compensated for its pointlessness. Then guess what? At the end of this amazing, death defying run, they interviewed her and she came across as a gentle, modest Mary Poppins. My kind of hero, one of us, a woman, modest and magnanimous. Our skeleton champion hurtled down a terrifying road of ice, on a tin tray, barely big enough to house one of those Mary Berry sponge cakes, crossed the finishing line, glanced at the clock confirming her record breaking time and smiled briefly. No riotous celebrations, just the merest hint of a smile. Unlike those football prima donnas and their exhibitionist antics. What a woman, what a role model ...



I have to confess this skeleton thing was new to me but I thought it was fantastic. Then the excited commentator interrupted my wonderment when he announced they were going to show the full re-run of her amazing descent. I quickly ran to the kitchen, grabbed Mum's old tin tray, the one showing the Queen's Coronation, returned to the sitting room and positioned myself on the tray, laying face down, moving left and right as if I was negotiating the winning run on screen. At last, perspiring and exhausted, as I crossed the finishing line I shamelessly punched the air in celebration and my back went. I was stuck, couldn't move. It was at this point I phoned Stella.



## March 2014

You must have heard it. That advert on commercial radio, L.B.C. 97.3. For those of you who have missed it, it goes something like this. The sound of heavy footsteps on a pavement. The footsteps stop, to be followed by an ominous knocking on a street door. A silent pause, by way of introduction, building the tension, before a deep scary voice informs us 'H.M.R.C. are closing in on you. If you haven't paid your taxes we will find you. If you have, you have nothing to worry about. If not, we are coming for you'.

Well, true to their word, they came for me. Not a rap on the door, no this was a lot worse. The faceless brown envelope, containing four pages of bamboozling gobbledegook which in no way explained why I owed the amount displayed at the tail of a confusing set of figures. According to H.M.R.C. that's what I owed them but there was no explanation as to why. A helpline number was provided so, with telephone clamped to my ear, I waited. And I waited and waited. The return address on the brown envelope was Glasgow so it wasn't surprising when, after seventeen minutes, a broad Glaswegian voice said something? Several times I asked him to repeat it until eventually I managed to determine I was through to the wrong department and that he would transfer me. True to his word he did transfer me, to the number I rang originally. Back to square one and, after another fruitless twenty minutes hanging on, I hung up. But I didn't just hang up, I calmly replaced the receiver with a steely determination to 'take 'em on', the H.M.R.C. mob. Yeah I'm Muriel Rurial, top of the world ma, top of the world. I had done nothing wrong, I couldn't possibly owe them money. Could I?

So they were coming for me were they? Coming to drag me away and fit me up. 'Fit me up'. Notice how easily I've slipped into the crim's vernacular. I've watched Homeland, Silent Witness, Frost, Dixon of Dock Green. I've watched them all, I know the ropes. I'm practically a Don.... C.S.I., autopsies, forensics. You've got no chance H.M.R.C. Think you can scare me with a recording of some footsteps and a knock at the door. Bring it on I say, bring it on. And even if you did fit me up, then bang me up, I would thrive inside. I've seen the Shawshank Redemption, seven times. I know the ropes, Holloway would be a doddle. I would be the female equivalent of the Tim Robbins character, Andy Dufresne. Not Morgan Freeman, he did the full stretch. See what I did there, casual as you like, seamlessly slipped into the con's dictionary. 'Stretch'.

But I've just had a thought. A not very nice thought. Blast! I was in an upbeat mood, feeling positive, when that mood changed. The way a rogue cloud, dark and foreboding, eclipses a perfect summer sun. That feeling had enveloped me. Why? Well it doesn't take long for the gloomy thought to present itself clearly and explain my sadness. It's like this. I couldn't possibly be banged up in Holloway. It's not the thought of missing the girls. Daphne, Linda, Hilda, Jackie. Oh I would miss them and I'm sure they would miss me, and smuggle contra' in for me (that's crim for contraband).

But there is one sacrifice I could not make. Something that upsets me to even contemplate doing without. Yes you know don't you? You've guessed. Oh I could pretend it's OK, time to move on, I'll be fine, all those faint reassurances but, in truth, if I could not come to the mountain, this particular mountain could not come to me. I refer of course to Kent Aloominom. The fittings, the aisles, the gorgeous timber floorboards worn smooth by generations of tradesmen and women. The whiff of hardware, the knowledgeable assistants and the piece de resistance, that captain of industry and master of Borough Green's flagship emporium. All hail, Richard. And the thought of leaving all that behind led me to imagine an awful scenario where H.M.R.C. won the day and I'm looking at a three year stretch without even glimpsing Kent Aloominom, let alone going in there.

No! No! No! Ohh I can't go down, but I'm living it now, in my imaginings. They lead me into an interview room, the way they do in Homelands, Silent Witness. Leave me sitting at a table, watching through a two-way mirror, studying my movements, my expressions. Eventually a man comes in, sits opposite me. He studies a folder he's brought in with him, looks at me, throws the folder onto the desk in disgust, then speaks. "You know what you've done, don't you Rurial?" "No I don't. I gave up ringing Glasgow. Couldn't understand him and their letter didn't explain anything either". He put his face inches from mine and, in a threatening manner, growled "You know what you did, and we warned you, and your likes, we were coming for you". Again I asked him "What had I done wrong?" He replied, enunciating each word, his breath in my face, "You low life, thieving, scheming crim. You do know what you did. (Dramatic pause, expression registering disgust). You ticked the wrong box on your charity donations. You are not a tax payer. You owe us the amount on the demand you chose to ignore".

Of course I was imagining all this but I stopped to consider that possibly this was the answer. I had been forgetful of late and making some silly mistakes. Even more worrying, I always saw myself as intelligent, sophisticated but Daphne regularly beats me at snakes and ladders these days. I quickly went to the letter rack, plucked out the H.M.R.C. letter and rang them. Forty-five minutes later I replaced the phone on the receiver. The very helpful woman, whose accent was not quite as pronounced as the previous clerk, explained that, yes, I did tick the wrong box on each charity donation I made this last tax year. She then confirmed that, if I sent prompt payment, the charities would not lose out. Later that week, after posting the letter, I got to thinking. Google, Starbucks, Amazon and the likes, while I acknowledge they are avoiding, not evading, tax, I do think H.M.R.C. would be better employed closing the loopholes some companies crawl through, rather than someone who ticked the wrong box. PS Wonder how I would have got on in Holloway?



## April 2014

I was in conversation with Rita. We were disagreeing on something, I can't remember what, and I happened to say "Oh you're such a Pollyanna, you don't see any wrong in anything or anybody. To you life is entirely positive but it ain't!". She replied, still smiling, "And you're the exact opposite Muriel. You see the negative in absolutely everything. Now let's not fall out, let me treat you to a coffee and a cream doughnut in the bakers". "We'll never get a seat in there, this is their busiest time" I said. She replied with "Think positive Muriel" and guess what, she was right, we got a seat, coffee and cake straight away.

At home, later on, I got to thinking about Rita and our positive, negative topic of conversation. Me focusing on the negative rather than rejoicing in the positive. I thought about it for quite a while, with the conclusion that I can't help but feel negative as there's so much of it around. It swamps the positive and I will prove that. How? Simple! Buy a paper in the morning and peruse the news. Which I did. The B.H.N. (Bah Humbug News). Wars, crime, hardship, riots. All manner of depressing items. Look at that. "Elderly couple cheated out of their life's savings". "Arsonist burns down youth centre". And then a two page feature, complete with pictures. A young woman has won a gold medal for her sporting triumph. Yes that's wonderful and she is to be commended but what about the others, the losers? Dozens of them training for years, making sacrifices, what did they get? NUFFINK!

Show biz pages next. Baftas, Oscars, Brit Awards. Self congratulatory affairs for multi-millionaires. Patting themselves on the back for strumming a guitar or remembering their lines and not bumping into the furniture. Meanwhile a nurse works through the night two pounds ten shillings and six pence an hour, plus shoe allowance. It's crazy, the world's gone mad. Where are our priorities?

Back pages next. Sport. Footballer signs a contract for five years, guarantees him £300,000 per week. Why stop there, why not give him a million pounds a week plus North Sea oil revenue if he scores a goal and throw in our gold reserves if he gets a hat-trick. Sorted! Coincidentally in the same north of England city a couple are forced to leave their home, victims of the bedroom tax. Where's the justice in that?

Oh no, look, page two, politician alert. Ughh. Another politician on the fiddle. No contrition, regret or resignation. Reluctantly, eventually, he surfaces to make an announcement. "It was an oversight, a regrettable mistake" announces the right honourable member for sticky uppy one finger to the electorate of Tweed on South. Mistake? Mistake? Take him down.

But don't stop me now, I'm on a roll, the papers are full of it. Ohh where are you now Rita? You're out there somewhere wearing those rose tinted spectacles. Pretending you can't see the potholes in Station Road. Or the cars illegally parked in the disabled bay by the chemist or outside the bakers or cash

point. Then there's the fun-filled Formula One race track, with added interest of eighty-five ton lorries thrown in. A track Bernie Ecclestone has eyed commercially, known locally as Western Road. (How many years is it now we've waited for a by-pass?).

But then, just as I am wishing that Rita was accompanying me on my "Tour de Gloom" that she may acknowledge the triumphs of negative over positive, what do I see? Across the road an elderly lady leaves the hairdressers and makes her way to the dodgy pedestrian crossing in Western Road. She looks vulnerable, frail, when a young schoolgirl, clearly a stranger to the lady judging by the woman's surprised expression, takes the woman's hand and escorts her across the road. The schoolgirl then returns to the other side and proceeds on her way. A simple act of kindness and consideration that touches this ol' rebel, curmudgeon, but deep down softie. Well not exactly a softie, perhaps caring. Yes caring, that's it and that's why the negatives and injustices press all my buttons.

And with that favourable opinion on my character I decide to buy a celebratory cream doughnut for coffee and cake when I get home. But as I make my way to the bakers, what do I espy? Look at that, one of those hideous 4X4 jeep things with personalised number plate, parked in the disabled bay. And I bet he hasn't got a blue badge either. Then further disappointment. "You've sold out of cream doughnuts already, surely not. No I don't want a jam doughnut. I celebrate with cream doughnuts. I always do. No I'm not celebrating a birthday I'm celebrating ----- Oh never mind, forget it. I'll leave it, I'll leave it.....". I knew it, I knew it .... Rita, Rita.

## May 2014

We, the girls, met up for a coffee morning at Daphne's. It was pleasant enough although, as usual, I seemed to have offered a different opinion to the others on most issues discussed.

Hilda remarked "oh you're always having a rant about something or other Muriel. Why don't you just let things wash over you. Take it easy, find some form of relaxation." The others agreed with Hilda and toasted her suggestion with cups of tea and chocolate biscuits. Later, walking home, I got to thinking about Hilda's comments and suggestion I find relaxation.

Well I didn't tell her that long ago I discovered something that calms me perfectly. It comforts me, pleases me, more than tea and Kit Kats. It is a luxury that surpasses even Richard serving me with items of hardware purchased in fabulous Kent Aloominom.

And that luxury is? Poetry.

So this is my humble "thank you" for what has been a calming influence and coping strategy over the years, to deal with what I perceive as life's injustices.

### POETRY

This

Be an emergency poem

It was written

Light failing

Dogs howling

Afraid time

Keep me safe, fine poem,

Comfort me

More than cudgel, torch

Or stick ever could.

Sooth me

With your words

I wandered lonely

As a cloud.

Stop all the clocks

Cut off the telephone

What is this life - If.

There, I feel better now

Thank you to the poets

Who passed before me

Not waving, but drowning.

Bent double, like old beggars

Under sacks.

Thank you



June 2014

The great global warming debate rages. But I, along with millions of other non-recycle rebels whose clarion call is "Viva la Cardboard in with the Plastic", do not believe in the concept of G.W. (Global Warming). The floods, the strange temperatures were experienced as long ago as when dinosaurs roamed the earth or when it was sixpence to go to the cinema and they threw in an apple and an orange. Perhaps even further back than that in time when Cliff Richard did his first Christmas calendar. These are not new phenomena, things go in cycles. But us rebels get the blame for those natural occurrences and shame is heaped upon us. Nasty!

So I soon realised that, to back my denial when questioned by some of the smart alec G.W. zealots, I would need facts substantiating my negative attitude towards G.W. Trouble is, fact finding is boring, so much so I fell asleep in the library only four chapters into "Facts in a Landscape" - zzzzz, by Professor Kennely Edwards (bushy beard, leather eye patch, knitted cardigan) of Boston University. When the librarian woke me (I think I was snoring), I abandoned the idea of trying to remember lots of facts and instead employ a tactic I learned whilst watching Question Time type programmes. If confronted with a tricky question, you can always wriggle out of it by quoting statistics. I thought I would try it out by opening a debate with Daphne. She is a committed G.W. believer. Her green bin is cardboard and grass, her black bin yucky stuff, and for socks, glass, cutlery, children's toys, it's off to the recycling plant. Borrrring!



Anyway I was having tea at Daph's when I blurted out "I'm thinking of changing my little Micra for a Volkswagen Gulf diesel". Horrified, Daphne dropped her petit four in her tea and screamed out "Diesel emission particles are a major pollutant Muriel. It would be irresponsible of you to buy such a vehicle". I immediately countered with baffling statistics "Fifty seven percent of the average figure of nineteen percent is the overall equal percentage of Brazil's twelve percent per capita percentage percent. You can't argue with that Daphne". There was silence as she tried to make sense of what I had said, whilst attempting to fish out the petit four from her tea. I had her on the ropes, I wasn't going to give her time to discredit my figures. I went on "And don't forget Daph', with the economic downturn

coinciding with atmospheric pressure seventy percent lower than a decade ago, putting cardboard in a separate bin from an old cardigan ain't gonna save the planet.

Daphne looked totally bemused and did what she normally does in situations such as these. She took a photograph album from a cupboard and started to show me photographs of her grandchildren, whilst giving a running commentary of their development. So engrossed was she, I let myself out and don't think she was even aware of my parting.

Later, from the comfort of my armchair, I reflected upon the weird events reported daily from around the world, and concluded they are all part of a natural evolution, nothing to do with so called global warming. For an obvious example, look how much taller people are now compared to that of generations ago. Imagine this: a short bloke is at the theatre, he is stuck behind a bloke who is over two metres tall. Short bloke starts tutting. Tall bloke turns round and says "It's not my fault, it's cos they never put stuff in the right bin years ago". Short bloke thinks tall bloke is making excuses and blaming someone else rather than simply apologising for being so tall and perhaps buying him a choc ice in reparation. So short bloke tuts even louder. Tall bloke conquers short bloke with tall bloke type uppercut. Short bloke lays on floor.

You see, people are more aggressive nowadays but that's not the result of folk smoking a pipe or throwing old sandals on a bonfire, supposedly polluting the atmosphere. It's because we are so crowded life has become a rat race. Two year wait for a doctor's appointment. Fights breaking out over village car park spaces. Cream doughnuts sold out by ten o'clock. Four million new homes at Quarry Hills. And it's not just Borough Green, no we are simply a microcosm of a macrocosm. Yes it's all the cosoms.

"But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?". Well it's the light that dawns, that tells you I'm right. Green bin, black bin, paper, scissors, stone, all present and correct, suhh! Glass, plastic, electricals, on and on and on. It's all hopeless, like Canute vainly challenging the tide. But ultimately one day the G.W. fanatics will roll over in defeat and us sceptics will also perish, while resisting, "I told you so". And then, in time, new life will throw a six and the counter will start moving round earth's new board.

In the meantime I'm off to build snowman.





I blame Alan Titchmarsh. What for? For everything. Everything? Yes everything. Syria? Well not Syria no, maybe not. Palestine, Israel? Not entirely sure about that. Middle East, tricky one that. Crime figures? NHS? Tube strikes? Alright, alright, maybe not everything, but definitely gardening. Making gardening look too easy, not as time consuming as it really is, or as expensive. He presents lots of programmes but one production in particular was very misleading. The format is, he sends householders away for a couple of days to discover, upon their return, he has transformed their fly tip garden into a RHS standard delight. Incidentally he does this often wearing a blazer, cravat, Saville Row shirt and hand-made shoes. He has two, young, female assistants who obviously wear outfits from their "dressing up box" and the detail is completed by some beefy blokes who must be members of the magic circle because one minute they are nailing a couple of bits of wood together, the next shot they are posing outside a summer house they have supposedly built.



Ok Mr Titchmarsh and your co-conspirators, you may have fooled half the nation with your weekend make-over but not this street wise Western Road maverick. Oh no. So I am going to trump A.T. , at the same time offer consolation to those of you taken in by him. I give to you short cuts to a brilliant garden. Very little knowledge or labour required and minimum expense incurred. "Gardening with Muriel" (sans blazer and cravat).

Golden rule number one. Do not be too ambitious. If you what you see in your mind's eye looks fabulous, then it will probably cost a fortune and be lots of work. Acknowledge this mistake from those who passed before you. Michael Angelo discussed his vision of the Sistine Chapel with his mates down the pub. He drew a brief outline on a beer mat, worth a fortune if it every turned up on the Antiques Road Show. But he made no secret of the fact that, once the project was up and running, he wished he'd never started it. You'll feel the same too. As if you had been laying on your back for five years, painting nymphs, cherubs and blokes with beards blowing trumpets. You'll feel it as you wobble on top of a step ladder, trying to train and tack a wisteria to an elaborate trellis. When all you needed to do was bung a plant in a pot. Something tall and brightly coloured, perhaps a Lubolia, and you're sorted. Lubolia is an inexpensive fast growing plant. Plastic pots are cheap, do not crack in the winter and are not heavy. Perfect marriage twixt plant and pot. Pots, pots, pots but don't squander hard earned money on compost. Here is a genius two in one tip. If you have any grass in your garden get rid of it. Dig it up, or get boy scouts to dig it up cheap in their "bob a job scheme". And use the soil to fill the pots. You save on the compost





and never have to cut the grass again. Scatter packets of the cheap Lubolia seed in the freshly turned soil and sell the mower. Quids in, grass out. Hooray!

So remember history, a gallery of people whose downfall was their ambition. Their misguided visions put into practice. Autocrats with no one close enough to articulate their misgivings. Napoleon, Hitler, Louis. Louis? Well not sure which one. I think there were fifteen of them, but you get my drift. Now let us return to the garden. Gnomes are back in fashion. Recently they were featured at the RHS Chelsea Show no less. But do bear in mind the one holding a fishing rod is still out of favour in some quarters, where fishing is seen as barbaric. So stick to the cheeky chappy with the lantern and the one with the toadstool.



Bird stations seem like a good idea but in reality are a costly nuisance. The base, the pole, the feeders, the seed. The mess! Oh yes the mess. Birds are incontinent and what with that and the seed everywhere definitely scrub the idea of a bird station. People next door will probably have one anyway, so you'll hear bird song. If not you must have trees near you and, as the old rhyme says, "if you're near a tree, a bird you'll see". If on the other hand you are not in close proximity to a tree, all is not lost. To add to the wonder of your garden various pound shops sell a selection of swans, geese, robins, ducks and are of a life like plastic material which allows you to position them on a shed, a window ledge, nook or cranny. To quote the accompanying literature "Adding beauty, interest and spectacle to any garden".



So let us recap. We've got Lubolias, plastic pots, free compost, gnomes, life like wild life and haven't spent much money or done any heavy work either. So bearing in mind the cost so far have been kept to an absolute minimum, I think you can allow yourself just one extravagance. That extravagance is obviously of your own choice but I will, being the voice of style and taste, offer a suggestion. It's an item unique to Kent Aloominom. Not available anywhere else in the country. A coup for Richard, C.E.O. of that wonderful store. A full sized, uncanny likeness, inflatable model of Mister Alan Titchmarsh. Blazer, cravat, Saville Row shoes, the full monty.

Position him with pride in your new garden. A garden you transformed in a day. And smile as you reflect upon Michael Angelo et al. Their wasted years.

## August 2014

I stood in the kitchen, at the sink, gazing into the garden, lost in reverie. The white rambling rose was in flower. It reminded me of my Mum, it was her favourite... "MUM", that's a lovely word isn't it? Of course it's what it means, the sound those three letters make, spoken out loud. Say it softly now then recall time spent in her company; your Mum.



Suddenly a huge ugly cat appeared in the garden and immediately spoiled the mood. With piercing green eyes, brown rust coloured fur and a demeanour one could best describe as menacing; my affectionate recollection of Mum was banished.

I do not like cats. There, I've said it and, I reckon, immediately lost half of you. Now you are throwing your hands up in horror and with one voice demanding to know "How can she possibly not like cats?", closely followed by a litany of reasons to enjoy the company of those feline fiends. Well in defence of my attitude towards cats and dogs in particular and animals in general, let me state my case.

With the exception of guide dogs, the fidelity of an animal can easily be tested by either food, fisticuffs or amour. To a certain extent this does apply to humans too, but unlike animals we do have the power of speech and therefore reason, thus the ability to achieve peace through negotiation. Now I can hear those among you who are animal lovers, screaming at me what you consider to be the magnificent qualities of your companions from the animal kingdom. But I'm afraid your words fall on deaf ears. For I have stood in the Recreation Ground off Maidstone Road, heard you vainly calling Prince, Rover, Rex. Dogs ignoring you; obeying their natural instincts for brawling, romance, call to nature or all three. And on one occasion at Stella's home, I held her in my arms, consoling her as she cradled the remains to Joey the pet canary mauled to extinction by Butch the mastiff. I've seen horses refusing at a fence, somersaulting their rider into agony and ignominy. Thus proving the countless sugar cubes, carrots and pampering meant "nuffink".



Animals do not have the power of aforethought or intelligence either. Bring me the cat, dog, horse or giraffe capable or reading even Janet and John. Show me a monkey, the smartest of



the animal kingdom, who could sit in on a game of Monopoly and be wise enough to hang on to Park Lane and Mayfair. Hmmm, I don't think so.

But I repeat, the clincher must surely be the animal's inability to communicate via the power of dialogue. We have only to study the panel of any current or past members of BBC's "Question Time". I may change my mind if ever Monsieur Dimbleby is heard to utter the lines "And on tonight's panel we have the right honourable Korky the cat Q.C. and Terry the tortoise, deputy leader of the green party"....I don't think so!

Are you still with me out there? Have you changed your mind? I'm getting through to you aren't I? Good! Think of the money I have saved you on vet's bills. On treats for pets. On soppy toys and coats for them. I have liberated you, the converts who have now seen through the mists of sentimentality. Throw away that lead and collar it hates wearing. The ball it tires of retrieving. Take your animal to the front door and say "Go, you are free to roam the earth as your ancestors did. You are returned to the wild". What an amazing image that conjures; animals the world over roaming the earth, fending for themselves. But what do you think would happen? Would they settle down, get a job, learn to play the banjo and drive Ford Focuses? No! It would be the old "D" thing again; Darwin/Dinosaurs. And inevitably humans would prevail.



So in conclusion, by all means lavish gifts and affection on your pets. Admire exotic species brought to you through the medium of flat screen, H.D., super, hyper, popier, topier 86inch television, but look below the surface and remember as my wise ol' Mum said, when I threw a tantrum because I couldn't have a puppy, "All that glitters is not gold Muriel. Have a four finger Kit Kat instead".



## September 2014

I was in one of my tortured genius moods. I wondered, had I reached rock bottom, then something happened to prove that I had. The sun was shining, the patio doors open to the garden and a fly came in. He circled the living room, then the kitchen, just once, then promptly flew out through those open patio doors. I was so angry. What an insult. Didn't think either room was worth a second look. An ugly bluebottle snubbing me. When I mentioned this to Linda she tried to reassure me by saying "View this as a compliment. The fly thought your place was too clean, too sanitised, to offer the sort of delicacies it was looking for". I tried to convince myself that she was right but deep down I knew; I knew the fly's once round the kitchen and front room said it all. He did not wish to stay any longer despite there being no deterrent swot or aerosol visible. No sign of a spider's intricate trap either. So why did he swiftly leave? Well he left because he felt my heavy heart. The atmosphere was too much for him. It was a warm sunny day, he had his pick of homes, happy friendly homes. Why linger here?

But how do I know this is true. I know because of the knowledge I acquired, persevering with a book by Professor Stravinsky of Moscow University. A little paperback picked up in our fabulous charity shop, along with a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle which I will set fire to. A therapeutic act designed to help me manage my dread of these hideous inventions that mother tortured me with every Christmas as a child and through to adolescence. But let us return to Stravinsky. He talks in his book, fully and passionately, of atmosphere and its affect upon not only humans but most life forms. "Of course there are exceptions" he boldly states. In fact he devotes an entire chapter to that finding (P.36 Chapter 3 "The Hamster's Oblivion. Q.E.D.").



Stravinsky convincingly argues "The hamster is totally oblivious to the atmosphere of its environment and will happily tread the wheel in its cage with the same application whether it is blindfolded, for example, of music is playing [SEE NOTES P.81]. Stravinsky concludes "The hamster is a sad, useless creature and we should in no way allow it to prejudice our work in creating a positive atmosphere".

And with that in mind, that's what I set out to do. Choosing the sitting room and kitchen to be first for sake of experiment. Out with the old. The old tired ornaments and curtains. I was determined to lift my mood and thus create that positive atmosphere, re-ignite my passion for life, enliven my very soul. I would be Van Gogh painting his sunflowers. Margaret Thatcher leading the country to prosperity. Martina Navratilova dominating Wimbledon. Enid Blyton, through her imagination, giving birth to the character Noddy. Yes sir !...

The large shed at the end of the garden would house all the junk. I would have to justify each item's existence or it would be banished to the shed. I worked like a demon, a woman possessed. Chairs, who needs chairs? Off to the shed with them. Microwave, cutlery, teapot, crockery. Table, radio, television. Gone, gone, gone. Curtains, pouffe, rugs. Everything! By 2a.m. the shed was full and half as much again was on the grass. I was exhausted but my task was complete. Open windows and doors downstairs, an area deserted, it was a vacancy created for what Stravinsky described as my "joie de vivre", which would flood the empty space with positive atmosphere in a way no gimcrack ornament or gaudy curtain could ever hope to achieve.

I took a last look round at my handiwork and climbed the stairs to bed. It was a hot sultry night and heavy morning, difficult to sleep but by 3 a.m. I slipped into the arms of Morpheus, dreaming a dream of a life fantastic, thanks to Professor Stravinsky. The rigours of the previous day meant I slept in until nine in the morning. Awake at last I quickly put on my dressing gown and, in a state of high expectation and optimism, made my way downstairs, eager to imbibe the atmosphere that surely now exists chez Muriel, Western Road. I would celebrate in typical Rural fashion. Large mug of tea, four finger Kit Kat, possible Walnut Whip. Brilliant!

But then on the way downstairs I realised I had no kettle or biscuit barrel. They were either in the shed or on the grass. Not to worry, I told myself, tis but a small sacrifice for the pleasure that must surely lay ahead. At last into the sitting room to bask in the positive atmosphere. But no my dreams were dashed. Through the open doors and windows, a fox in the kitchen, a sitting room swarming with flies and gnats. Pigeons pecking at the kitchen work top. Magpies squabbling over a mouse they had dragged in. Oh Stravinsky. Stravinsky. What have I done....



Well it took nearly a week to restore some sort of order but I did it and it was a lesson learned. You just can't trust the existence of a Russian professor who quotes French phrases and why was the book in the charity shop in the first place? If you suffered a similar fate at the hands of Stravinsky then donated the book, please let me know via our editor. Thank you.



Regular readers of this column, that is if there are any left, will know that I have very little knowledge or skill for gardening. In fact not just gardening but many other things too, but - and here's the huge but, but I am genius and therefore blessed with the vision for invention and innovation. Unfortunately I have very little aptitude for putting into practice those ideas bestowed upon me but I do try to cobble together a prototype where necessary or investigate the possibilities of a particular brainwave's success. Those brainwaves are a gift I am eternally grateful for and, I feel, should I ignore them they may never be bestowed upon me again.

Can you imagine the consequences of Christopher Columbus ignoring the notion that the world is round and instead of setting sail on a voyage of discovery he went off to play table tennis? Or Archimedes sniffing his tee shirt and deciding he wouldn't have a bath that night. Despite the "Archimedes' Principle" urging him to take the plunge. While those are just a couple of genius, of discovery. Unfortunately of all the wonderful ideas given to me so far none have borne fruit but I will never stop trying, or believing, that I am a receptor for ideas of genius. And one such idea came to me the other morning.

I was eating my breakfast, planing my day, when it tiptoed into my consciousness. That's sometimes how it happens. A disembodied voice, but not words, a vision. Yes that's it, a vision. But if articulated to others I am ridiculed or, if it be a simple but effective idea, it would be stolen, adopted by charlatans as their own. On this occasion the genius idea, a gift to the populace through me, was a hybrid vegetable. Rich in iron, the fabulous floret of broccoli erupting from the magnificent orange red body of a nutritious carrot. A carroccoli... Well gardening is not a favourite pastime of mine but I must not discriminate as to which vision I respond to so I set to work, but I was working blind, I had no idea how to cultivate such a vegetable.

In desperation I wrote to that gardening guru lady presenter. I didn't reveal what I was attempting, I merely asked for advice on growing carrots and broccoli. She wrote back saying she could not enter into correspondence but perhaps the answers to my questions could be found in the books she writes. She enclosed a £5 voucher valid at garden centres. £5? What can you get five quid in a garden centre nowadays. A piece of cake and a latté costs you more than that. What an insult. So I responded by drawing a moustache on the signed photo of herself she enclosed with the voucher and returned it to her along with the voucher. And so, with the absence of professional guidance, my efforts to grow the amazing vegetable were doomed to failure and thus, after a month of hopeless experiment, I abandoned attempts to produce the fabulous carroccoli.

Perhaps one day it will emerge somewhere in the world and prove to be the crown prince of all banquets or, like the unicorn, it may remain a mythical thing that excites and stimulates but is only ever in the mind. Ah the mystery of genius.



## December 2014

### A CHRISTMAS STORY

Alan Williams, fifty-eight, employed by Grant Engineering for forty years, lost his job when the company closed down. His lack of knowledge of modern technology and an age that sat uncomfortably on any job application condemned him to the ranks of the unemployed and, for the past year, there he remained...

Monday lunch time, same as any other lunch time in the Williams' household. Freda Williams, his wife, returned home from her early start cleaning jobs. She knew Alan would have lunch ready for her. She had something for him this particular day. It was a job application form. He hardly ever applied for jobs any more; companies rarely bothered to reply. He found that soul destroying. Freda eat her meal, Alan placed a cup of tea in front of her. She reached into the handbag beside her chair then offered Alan the form she was holding; the job application form. A large sign on a shop front window had caught her eye. "Carter and Son, department store, welcomes enquiries for the position of Father Christmas, in store, for this coming Christmas period. Application forms available within". Alan perused the form, took a long swallow of tea, and spoke. "But I don't like children. Well I don't dislike all children, but you've got to admit Freda, a lot of the kids these days are, shall we say, challenging. No, no, they can be downright horrible". A long silence ensued and Alan thought that might be an end to the matter, when suddenly his wife blurted out "Well if they're rude to you, give 'em the same back." Another long silence while Alan reflected on Freda's words before replying "Right, if they take the mickey I'll dish it out too, and if I get the sack, I get the sack". At this point Freda rose from her chair, went over to Alan and kissed him on the forehead. Alan stood up and embraced her, secretly wondering what on earth he had agreed to let himself in for.

And so Alan did apply and after several days he received a letter from Carter and Son advising of an interview date. Soon after the interview a further letter arrived confirming he had got the job and giving a start date. What Alan didn't know was, his was the only application such was the low esteem that Carter and Son was held in. Since Grants Engineering closed down, along with other once established companies, the area bore all the hallmarks of a small town in decline. Carter and Son having been in decline for longer than most, the general consensus was that the old landmark store surely could not survive for much longer. But for now, according to his letter's instructions, on the due date Alan reported to Carter and Son to take up his position as their official Father Christmas. He was met by the owner, Tony Carter, who led him to Santa's grotto where he ran through some details with him. There were curtains the kids would walk through into the grotto. A throne type chair where Santa sat, surrounded by sacks full of presents, Christmas wrapped, with a discreet code on the wrapping so Alan knew what sort of gift he was giving each child. At nine o'clock the store opened. Midday Tony Carter called in on Alan for an update. Alan didn't speak, he simply shook his head in a "no". And for the rest of the day still nobody came. It seemed the only business done there was in the store's little cafeteria.



That night Alan told Freda of his day and that he felt the job would not last until Christmas. She said, "We'll see but, regardless of the outcome, well done for trying, Santa". Alan gave a wan smile. The next few days followed the same pattern at Carter and Son, then on Friday afternoon it happened. A boy, probably thirteen years old, was literally shoved through the curtains into Santa's grotto. Boy looked behind him and growled at the shover. This boy, who clearly had an attitude, turned and scuffed up to Santa. Alan and the boy stared at each other, in silence, mirroring contempt. The boy cracked first, addressing Alan "Ain't you gonna ask me some dumb questions like how old am I and what's my name. Y'know, the corny script?". Alan responded "Alright if that's what you want" and at this point he affected a deliberately sickly, patronising voice "Oh and what is your name young man. This is exciting isn't it?". The boy interrupted Alan "Look Santa, I don't want to be here. As if I believe in this Father Christmas lark. If you must know, it's a punishment being here. I've been out of order so this is my punishment. They said, right you're going to see Father Christmas and when your mates find out you went to Santa's grotto in Carter and Son and got a present, you will be well sick". He then thrust out his hands to receive the present his parents demanded he took, and continued enunciating the words Santa. "So Santa just give me my present, I'll be on my way". Alan reached into a sack and, identified by the code, picked a girl's dolly, but before handing it to him said "Oh forgot to ask you how old you are". The boy stood up straight to be as tall as he could "Well if you must know, I'm thirteen". Alan scoffed and in reply said "You're not so smart, when I was your age I was fifteen. Now, you've got your little present,



get out of my grotto or I'll have you thrown out". The boy was stumped, angry he kicked a sack of toys over then turned to exit. As he did so there was the boy's father who, through the gap in the grotto's curtains, had captured the whole episode on his phone and, unbeknown to the boy, was about to go viral.

When Alan arrived home that evening his wife greeted him with a huge smile. "You're famous Alan, on the internet". She then went on to show the piece the boy's father had posted. After he watched it, Alan said "Well I suppose I'll get the sack but that kid did deserve what he got". Next day, half hour late, expecting the sack, Alan arrived for work. He was met by Tony Carter, in a panic "Quick Alan get your gear on, there's a queue at the grotto. I've spoken to them and some of the parents, they all want to see the Santa with attitude, and get a naff present. Capture it on their phones. It's gone crazy". And for a couple of weeks nearly, that's the way it was. Kids heckling Santa and Santa giving as good as he got before handing over a truly awful, rubbish present which they would rip open in front of Santa for all to see.

But after Christmas Alan returned to anonymity and the dole queue and in February locals saw the shutters come down permanently at Carter and Son. Alan Williams and Carter and Son, thrown together in failure, briefly partners in success.