

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2013**

I had an appointment at the doctors. Just routine, with the nurse.

The waiting room was packed, like a crowd scene from "Les Misérables", but someone was called and I took their vacated seat. I reckoned I would be in for a long wait so thought I might seek a germ-free magazine, if that was at all possible. Now let's see, Practical Wireless, Allotment Fun, Rotherham in Winter. Hmm, hardly a distraction from the serious matter of why we were there. Then I noticed a publication, "Cinematograph". Reading through it I came across a feature on short film making and with it an invitation to compete in a five minute short film competition. The winner to receive £1000 plus a guaranteed showing of their work on a late night TV review programme.

The project excited me, ideas started to flow straight away. First I must tear the competition page from the magazine or take the whole thing. I decided to gently tear out the page but, as I was doing so, the magazine slipped from my grasp ripping loudly the page I was holding. All eyes were on me, all heads were shaking in disbelief and condemnation. Fortunately the nurse soon called "Muriel Rurial" and suddenly the prospect of a needle in my arm was more favourable than the waiting room lynch mob.



At home I rang Hilda who, I must say, has become a technowizard since her retirement. Put me to shame really. Anyway after a long chat she finally agreed we could use her digital camcorder, I think that's what she called it, but insisted she operated it. I said OK but stressed she would be strictly camera person only and that I would be directing. She wasn't entirely happy with that (she can be a bit bossy) but reluctantly agreed. She then went on to say she would do the necessary technical work to present it as our entry. I didn't challenge the words "our entry" but made a mental note. I told her I would contact her again when the script was ready.

Next step was the theme of the film. Easy! It would be one of those classic French films where nothing really happens. Moody, atmospheric. Oblique camera shots, passion in expression but no touch. The man playing saxophone by the bedroom window, rain running down the glass. His girlfriend laying on the bed, partially clothed, creating a charged atmosphere. It would have to be in soft focus, blurry even as Arthur is 82 and Judy 80. They are members of a well respected local drama group and consistently get good reviews. Apparently Arthur still receives fan mail from one admirer following the company's production, and his starring role in, "Spartacus". That was 1957 and she still writes to him.

When I phoned them Arthur told me he couldn't play the saxophone but he was musical and brilliant on the spoons. I asked him if he could play slow, 4am jazz style spoons, not "my ol' man's a dustman" type rhyme. He assured me he would practice and pull it off on the day. I told him not to shave, to grow a goatee beard for the shoot so he would have that sophisticated French air about him. Judy was really keen on the project and said "It must be fate, I bought a new lipgloss in Primark at the



weekend and guess what it's called? Yes, Midnight in Paris. A good omen if ever there was one".

I told them the location would be my spare bedroom. I would make it look rundown, tear some wallpaper, remove the light shade so just a naked bulb hung from the ceiling flex. Some black and white photographs on the dresser. I did have some somewhere, of me and Mum on a caravan holiday in Clapton. That would be good, the camera could pan on to the photographs and then back onto Judy laying on the bed. Don't know what all that means and I'm the director. Brilliant, typical French, no one's got a clue what's going on, film

Arthur is playing the spoons, he's mastered the spoons, he's mastered the slow jazz style for "Summertime". There would be a knock at the street door below. Long close ups of Judy and Arthur, their expressions displaying guilt, thereby hinting at what preceded Arthur on the spoons. Judy and Arthur are transfixed, guilt is now fear. They hear footsteps, they get louder, they go on for a long while, this conveys that Arthur and Judy are in an attic apartment, a garret. A place where love affairs take place in Paris. At this point Arthur drops his spoons, we hold a close up of the spoons lying on the floor, the threadbare carpet. They are symbolic. Don't know what they symbolise but that's good, more baffling French technique. The footsteps grow louder still as the camera moves to the solitary goldfish in his bowl. Even if you're not a film buff, here the message is clear. The goldfish is a metaphor for life. He is in love with the little diver wedged in the gravel but the goldfish's love is unrequited. It can never be consummated. Fantastic!

The footsteps stop outside the door. Judy turns off the lights. Barefoot, in the dark, she treads on the spoons and screams out. The door bursts open, there is a gunshot, we hear a body fall to the ground. In the Stygian darkness we do not know who has been shot. We hold that bleak empty screen for a long while, the tension is unbearable then, at last, the word in stark black and white appears on the screen.



I was excited, rang Hilda and, as they say in Hollywood, pitched the idea to her. Her reaction surprised me. Rather than say great, when do we start filming, she burst into almost hysterical laughter, which lasted for a full minute. Eventually she composed herself enough to say "Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous Muriel", and then put the phone down.

Now you see what I'm up against? Before my time again. Tortured genius!... I sat in the armchair dejected, looking at the torn competition page, details of what might have been. It wasn't the money, a thousand pounds, it was the thought of my own film out there, genius recognised at last. I was about to screw up the article, consign it to the bin, when the words in red print hit me.

Closing Date 8th July 2009.

The competition was nearly four years out of date. Y'know they really should improve the magazine situation down at the doctors.

They say "You can choose your friends but not your relatives". I would like to add, on the matter of choice, neither can we choose our neighbours. Yes I am having trouble, again, with my next door neighbour, Mary.

Mary and Rex!

No Rex isn't her latest beau. A handsome cowboy, tall in the saddle, lean and tanned. Rex is a dog. A huge ugly brute of a dog. The body of a donkey, topped with a canine head from which emitted a blood curdling howl. Baritone, menacing, continuous. And from that sound, I imagine not for him tins of Chum for sustenance. I suspect Mary must feed him a diet of cats, geese, badgers and small children.

Recently, balancing on a chair, I spoke to Mary over the fence, enquiring "Why does he have to bark nonstop Mary?" She replied in a rather hostile manner "Well he's always hungry and he's a guard dog Muriel. He protects me and my property." I looked at Mary's now ramshackle garden, dilapidated house and threadbare clothes fluttering about her emaciated frame. Starved of food, fuelled on booze, I felt she didn't need a donkey dog for protection.

At that moment Rex spotted my head and shoulders above the fence and charged at me, hitting the fence with such force it knocked me off the chair. Fortunately the fence held. Frustrated, unable to get at me and tear me to ribbons, Rex began a terrifying howl that continued long after I was indoors....



I make a cup of tea and, I stirred the amber nectar before dunking a stick of kitkat. I considered ways to combat the menace from next door. Poison? Who, Mary or the dog? No, too extreme, and where would I buy poison anyway? Reason? Not possible, you can't with animals, or Mary. Then, as I sucked on the glorious melted chocolate wafer, Eureka!

I recalled seeing an advert in Shakti's window, offering a generous reward for information leading to the recovery of an unusual but beloved family pet. Ah ha. Could Rex possibly be a missing family pet? A slim but encouraging hope raised my spirits. I quickly nipped round to Shakti's and sure enough the ad was still in the window. I wrote the phone number down, returned home and rang in a cod Irish accent. "Hello I think I may have your beloved family pet. (PAUSE) Well he just wandered into my garden. Yes he was partial to Guinness, it seemed to calm him". Then I gave Mary's address followed by "OK I'll see you soon then. Goodbye".

So that was it, that's how Mary tamed him and gained his trust. She introduced him to what she considered the wonders of Guinness. While I'll be blown. Mind you it's not that surprising that Mary would try such a thing. I well remember, back in the Summer Mary's hour long discourse on the almost supernatural powers of the foaming brew. Passionately telling me over the fence, "It will heal you Muriel, educate you, empower you", before losing her footing on the



chair and slipping into the flowerbed, snoring long into the afternoon beneath the raging sun. A luxurious slumber, courtesy Morpheus and a master brewer. Soon after the phone call a huge new 4x4 vehicle stopped outside Mary's. There was a brief doorstep conversation with the vehicle's occupants who then followed Mary into her garden. Shortly after they all returned to the street. This time Rex was with them.

As they drove away Mary retreated indoors whilst counting the banknotes she took from her coat pocket. Of course she must have guessed it was me who phones the owners but could hardly accept the reward with such glee and then confront me.

At this point I would like to say "So all's well that ends well". Unfortunately, several days later, I assume with some of the reward money and revenge the motive, Mary purchased a parrot and a cockerel. The parrot, reveling in the acoustics of a hollow ready meal kitchen, screeches really early in the morning "Wakey wakey" and the cockerel retaliates with a piercing "Cock-a-doodle-doo". Hanging on to the "doo" for what seems an eternity. Now the quest has begun for reveillé supremacy. To be first with the rousing call. This morning it was 3am!

Come back Rex, all is forgiven.



They preface an insulting remark with "No offence but -" then go on to be really offensive. Or "Not being funny -" followed by damning insult. "Now don't take this the wrong way -" then crushing criticism. It's open season, carte blanche, say what you like as long as those get out of jail words are uttered first.

And what about that worst of all phrases applied on a different occasion. It's the blazer badge inscription of the selfish fraternity ... "Tell me about it". This is their shorthand for "Yes, yes, I've been there, done that". No matter how harrowing or heart breaking a personal situation you describe, their response is "Tell me about it, then let me tell you what happened to me". Capital "M", capital "E" - ME! Cos that's all I'm interested in, me, myself and I.

Yes I'm over there in the 4x4 Mitsubishi Warrior, Land Rover thingy, high up off the road, higher than everybody else, looking down on you all, vehicle. Illegally parked in the disabled bay, personalised number plate, princesses on board sign in the back. ME! "Must rush, sorry to hear about your, what was it now. Toe, throat, house fire, burglary? Remind me. Oh no, not to worry, I'll call you, bye." MWAH, air kiss both cheeks, wave as she walks away, hand in the air, without turning round. We have to return her wave to a retreating back.



She's in Shakti's next, waiting to pay, tutting loudly because she's behind an elderly lady having difficulty finding the exact coins from a handful of change she holds. The tutter cannot wait any longer. She leaves the newspaper and chocolate bar on the counter and storms out.

She needs to cross the busy high street, back to her colossus on wheels. Easy. Adopt an affected smile, stupid male motorist convince she has fallen in love with him, slams on his breaks allowing her to cross. She has forgotten him before she reaches the pavement. Stupid male motorist vainly tries to catch her eye as he slowly moves off... Next double parking to collect Sophie and Ellie then more chaos creation, stopping on bus stop while she "just nips in to collect some dry cleaning".

Later her mobile phone rings "Sorry mother can't talk now, really, really up against the clock. Ring you later. Oh yes today wasn't it? Your tests. Ok look I'll call you when I get home. Promise. Bye".

Later that evening the children are playing, most lights are on in the large comfortable home. She is ringing her mother, having paused the film when she remembered her promise to ring. "Hi Mum, sorry it's late, been so busy. No, Geoffrey's not home. Not heard from him at all. Must be working late again I suppose."

The short phone call ends. She doesn't press play for the film. She is considering the increasing number of times Geoffrey has been "working late", his phone turned off. She has concerns, she thinks about ringing a friend, one of the girls, but decides against it. "Tell me about it" is no comfort when life is this fragile.

MURIEL RURAL (is away this month)

Yes, but before Muriel went away she asked Margaret (Jeffery), the in-charge person of the magazine, if she would let me write something for this month's edition. Well I won't be able to write anything funny or smart, we're not sure yet if I am a genius, so I'll just tell you about some things, how they happened, I suppose.

My name is Michael, I am Muriel's friend. She is a very kind lady. A best person not a worst person. She has twenty-nine screwdrivers, thirty-eight front door keys, seventeen black buckets. She goes into Kent Aluminium everyday. She calls it Kent Aloominom? I met Muriel one day when I was eighteen, knocking at the houses in Western Road to see if anyone wanted odd jobs done. I was trying to save up to buy my big sister a birthday present.

I cut Muriel's grass and did a lot of tidying up. She was pleased and gave me five pounds. After that I did odd jobs for her for about three months, then me and my sister and Mum and Dad moved to Tunbridge Wells so I didn't see Muriel for nearly three years. Then for my twenty-first birthday my Mum and Dad bought me a bike. It had lights and my sister bought a padlock and helmet for me.



One day I decided I would cycle to Borough Green and see Muriel again to show her my new bike. So I set off really early, because it's a long way, but when she answered the door she seemed really cross and asked me what I wanted, and that she didn't need any odd jobs doing. I said "No, I've come to show you my new bike. It's called a Carlton, it's got ten gears". When I told her this she looked a bit funny, as if she wanted to say something but didn't. Then after a little while she said "You didn't tell me you were moving". I said I was sorry and that I thought it would be nice to show her my bike and that's why I am here now. She said that she could not let me in and that it was best that I went home, and closed the door.

When I said I was sorry I didn't really know what I had done wrong. It wasn't my fault we moved and I had only just got a bike. But I still said sorry anyway because she looked so sad. Then I had a good idea I had some money so I went to the shop and bought her some daffodils. I went back to Muriel's and this time she let me in.

Her eyes were watery, I had never seen her like that. I asked her what was wrong and she got angry saying "There are some things you just should not ask, Michael". After a little while though she was her old self, making tea, sharing out the kitkats and showing me some funny things she called brass fittings she bought from her favourite store. I told her "I'm writing stories now, Muriel", then went to my saddlebag to show her some I had written. There were three stories, they were only short, it didn't take her long to read them.



When she finished reading she put them on her lap and for a long while just stared out of the window. She had that funny look again but I didn't say anything, I remembered what she had told me about not asking. Then after a while she handed the stories back and said that they were good. "Not excellent Michael - good. But so sad". Then she gathered up the tea things and kitkat wrappers and went off into the kitchen. When she returned she spoke about some people who wrote things and how different they are and we call them genius. I asked her if she thought I was a genius. She smiled a little bit then said "Perhaps you are Michael, perhaps you are. Now I think you should go home before it gets too late". And with that she wandered off into the kitchen again...

Well, Margaret the in-charge magazine person did say I could write something this month and that was it, you have just read it. Oh just one last little bit. My sister is getting married soon and moving out of our house. Her boyfriend is called Ian, he has a beard. Dad says when Sally goes we are going to live in a different country. It is called Brittany. My aunt and uncle live there. Lots of people ride bikes in Brittany. It will be good.

When I told Muriel this she said "You should have never come back with those daffodils Michael". I didn't understand what she meant but, like I said at the very beginning, "She is a best person".

MICHAEL

Have you noticed how lush the grass is this year? Deep almost emerald green. The Wrotham field was brimmed with cows, a picture postcard view. They paid me no heed, drifting by in my little red Micra. Why should they, I am Muriel Rural of Western Road, they do not know me. I delight in the scene their presence conjures, I drink their milk, but we are strangers. I drive onto a garden centre in West Kingsdown, where I meet Julie for tea and Madeira cake. The picturesque scene that was Wrotham field lingers within my memory. That weekend I wrote this poem.



HOWDY PARDNER



They strung him up
It was a lynchin'

What did he do?

Rustlin'
I'm a thinkin'.

S'pose a man's gotta pay
If he's a stealin' your herd

Stealin' your herd?
Don't be absurd

T' were n't rustling cows
Was rustlin' paper

Unwrapping sweets in the
National Thee-Ater.

It's time, once again, to face my demons. Chocolate! Dark chocolate, milk chocolate, flaky chocolate. Chocolate biscuits, chocolate cake, Choc-choc-a-choc-choc-choc-chocolate. You may tut and look to the heavens in disgust, those of you who are not touched by this constant craving but, let me tell you, I don't feel good about myself, a slave to that demon confectionery. Can you possibly know the shame I felt, a lone figure on the pavement outside Shakti newsagent at five o'clock in the morning, waiting for him to open. Peering through the window, willing movement from within, that the doors may open, access granted to pick of that sugar rush emporium. Oh where is Mr Patel, why doesn't he open, please.



I have one emergency Quality Sweet in my pocket. It's that awful orange cream, the Boxing Day last to go centre. The only reason I still have it is because it's so horrible. I will suck the chocolate off and throw the sickly cream centre in the bin. No I won't, I'll be strong. I take the sweet from my pocket and hurl it towards the Baptist Church graveyard. It doesn't reach, it lands on the opposite pavement to torment me. The shiny orange wrapper mocking me, gleaming, splendiferous, tempting. For distraction I look at the window adverts. Everything and all sorts there but no out of hours confectionery contact hours.

It's five-thirty now, I lean heavily on the door but it won't budge. Think I'll go home but then, turning into the High Street, I recognise the black Mercedes van. It's Wicks Gas, I'll flag it down. "Hello Muriel, you're out early?" I have no time for pleasantries. I'm desperate. I rush straight in with "Hello Gerald, have you got any chocolate on board, please?" I know he carries chocolate lunchtime treats. He opens his lunchbox, I spot a Twix in there. I can't help it, I blurt out in excitement "A Twix oh brilliant". He hands it over to me with a smile and a "what are you like" expression. He pulls away, I wave at the departing van until he's lost from view then slash open the Twix wrapper. I try to make the contents last but I've waited so long for this, it's gone before I reach home in Western Road.

Indoors I am faced with the addict's worst nightmare. The first fix does not assuage one's craving, it merely excites it. I want more chocolate. I check fifteen tupperware tubs, five cake tins, six biscuit barrels. NUFFINK! Where to look next? I know, bedside cabinet. Emergency night-time longing. I run upstairs, fling open the bedside cabinet. Paperback book, "A Chocolate Life", five torches, six window lock keys, eleven radiator bleed keys (brass) and seven packs of AA batteries. I am distracted briefly as those items remind me of my other craving, Kent Aluminium. I run my hand lovingly over the various items and at once I am transported to that fabulous Mecca of things hardware. Oh look there's Richard, imparting knowledge, wisdom and risqué jokes to tradesmen. They're all there Richard et al, in glorious mauve livery. But the longing returns, prompting me to wrench open the cabinet drawer. Oh look, Twix, Crunchie, Bounty, KitKat... Wrappers! Empty wrappers, testimony to previous longing, weakness, greed. The three step failure programme. I'm racking my brains now, have I hidden a treat and forgotten I hid it? Yes? So where did I hide it? Does it even exist?



Yes, yes, yes. I did hide something. In the loft. A chocolate advent calendar, I remember now saying to myself, you'll never be that desperate Muriel, where you've got to clamber into the loft. But I am and I will climb up there. As I'm arranging the loft ladder it all comes flooding back to me, in glorious chocolate technicolour. It's a Cadbury's luxury advent calendar and it's bursting with chocolate from the first to the twenty-fifth. Twenty-five fabulous chocky treats, small but delicious. I'm in the loft now, I turn the light on and there it is, on top of the cardboard box housing decorations, cards and rubbish presents from Linda and Daphne. I pick my way across the loft, careful not to fall through the ceiling. At last I'm there and I have the calendar in my hand. I'm stunned, I can not speak, I feel the tears welling in my eyes, there is a tremendous silence, that unique quiet that follows a catastrophe. The only sound a faint buzz from the bulb in the rafters. I'm staring at the calendar, at the little windows the mice have chewed through. Twenty-five empty windows, and yet the little trays of poison have not been touched. There isn't any chocolate left, it's all gone. I descend the steps and close up the loft.



I'll make tea and, last resort, break open the emergency biscuits. Boring Rich Tea, Gulag biscuits for comrade Rurial. But as I'm dipping those worst biscuits in the whole wide world into my tea, my mood lightens at the prospect of early start in Kent Aloominum. Mouse traps, more mouse traps. All manor of traps. Lethal spring, humane, eco traps, everything. Sounds cruel but maybe I'll change my mind later when I've been to Shakti's. Hmm, six am now, not long to go. Ahh, perhaps things aren't so bad after all.

August 2013

Yes it's true. I watched "Question Time" and spent at least forty minutes shouting at the television. But then I thought to myself, don't just rant at the TV Muriel, do something constructive in any of the situations you're not happy with. So first thing I did, wrote to Dave (Cameron) asking him to recognise the folly of arming the rebels in Syria. Then I cautioned him against his continued criticisms and threats issued to North Korea. Lastly I raised the thorny issue of people parking outside the bakers in Borough Green High Street. He hasn't replied yet; he probably won't, that's his style. I will chase him up though, I won't let it drop. These are important issues, cars blocking the High Street all the time.

Another topic that was raised on "Question Time" was our concerns regarding the possible influx of Romanian Gypsies in 2014. It was quite a heated debate but in the end we were none the wiser. Then two days later I tuned into one of those radio phone in programmes and my fears were allayed. A gentleman from the Romanian Gypsy Cultural Society described a typical family heading to England in the new year. Anchrasnia is twenty-eight. She is a professional lady. A highly regarded, experienced - fortune-teller. She predicted Verenka's twin boys, Gradubya's moped accident and the three day drought of 2008 which devastated the fig crop that year.



Her husband, Wallyozk, is a first class motor mechanic and part-time restaurant crooner in the summer season. Anchrasnia and Wallyozk have a son, Stemnez, he is six and training to be a doctor. He plays "Operation" all day. His sister, Mollyeena, wants to be a ballet dancer or princess. She is eight years old. The family have a goat that gives them milk but their proudest possession is a Qualcast 14inch blade petrol mower, with a Union Jack transfer below the manufacturer's name.

I am happy now I know the facts. Not only that, I can't afford to get too involved in politics at present as I am extremely busy as a volunteer in a very important project. We are a splinter group (euphemism for nutters) that aims to repatriate the delightful chaffinch, displaced by wind farms along the once beautiful Kent coastline.

The chaffinch is a lovely bird whose song is a particular joy, and we are hoping to tempt it back to its natural habitat, here in glorious Kent. How do we intend to do that, I hear you ask. Well, we will wear camouflage and lay in the damp marshlands of the coast, blowing ocarinas (small bird like musical instruments). These ocarinas reproduce exactly the mating call of the chaffinch. Camouflaged volunteers will also supply food, encouraging the birds to stay after their initial disappointment that the mating call is not really the song of a wanton feathered nymph but really an ocarina, available in the village toy shop in the High Street.



We already have seven volunteers including myself. Four definite, one probable (if she doesn't have to cover for sickness in the charity shop) and two unreliable. I hope my excitement and enthusiasm last. Up till now I have been practising the ocarina for several hours a day but I might be blowing it wrong as the people next door do not throw bread on the the lawn, they bang on our adjoining wall, crying out "Ok Muriel that's enough now". They must know it's not a chaffinch. I asked Cath if she would join us volunteers but she declined, saying "I used to do all that stuff when I was a girl guide. Besides, as you know, I'm painting now at every opportunity". She then persuaded me to view some of her artwork, and practically every room in her house was littered with canvases. They were of indeterminate style. A sort of cross between Salvador Dali and B&Q.

I looked quizzically at them all. She seemed to pity me for what she saw as a lack of understanding of art. "Come on now, honestly Muriel, what do you think?" My ambiguous reply was "I've never seen art like it". She pressed me further, obviously soliciting praise. I couldn't help it, I blurted out "I think it's rubbish, all of it. You maybe a dilettante Cath." She looked upset "No, I'm on the cusp but I am definitely a Capricorn" then threw me out. Walking home I knew I had gone too far again. Leaving Cath with her artwork, her hopes, her dreams, her aspirations dashed.

Later I arrived back at Western Road, full of self loathing (I think that's a Scottish football team), angry with myself. For distraction I made tea, I studied the RSBP chart but could not help recalling how cruel I had been to Cath and in temper I grabbed the ocarina and blew it wildly. And guess what? Next door did not bang on the wall, they threw bread out of the window.

Hooray, I am a chaffinch at last.



September 2013

The occasion was a Monopoly Championship between me, Linda, Daphne and Judy. Linda spotted a trophy in our Charity Shop. It was originally a darts trophy but she adapted it for Monopoly, snapping off the arm of the figure throwing a dart and filing away a brass inscription "Dave Roberts, Winner 1984, Blue Anchor Darts Champion". It was plastic but marbled effect. Linda said there is a shoe repair shop in Strood that sells trophies but the cost is prohibitive and as Daphne is not flushed with funds at the moment - . Well she is having some financial difficulties that have come as quite a shock, considering she originally felt her cup runneth, spillesh, knocketh clean over, as sole winner of the Nigerian lottery. To claim her winnings she had to send a cheque to register as a bona fide contestant. Then a further cheque to register she registered. Followed by an amount to cover administration charges, then the most recent cost for an anti voodoo insurance certificate. This prevents evil spirits corrupting whatever she purchases from her winnings.



We drew straws as to who would host the Monopoly Championship. Daphne drew the short straw, a day was agreed and, on the due date, we all arrived at Daph's. Dotted about the house, on postcards, were proverbs, maxims that were so designed to help Daphne to cope with the loss of funds through that Nigerian lottery scam. She had written those cards herself, combining famous quotations with popular song lyrics. As she later explained age old wisdom and modern thought. A sort of Descartes meets Dylan. But to us it was more a case of Mumbo meets Jumbo. On the living room window ledge boldly displayed "What should it profit a man, if he should step on my blue suede shoes?" Then Judy pointed to another postcard on the dining area coffee table and then inquired "What on earth does that mean Daph?". "It is a far, far better thing I do, than mister tambourine man?". Daphne was clearly upset, feeling she was being mocked and, feigning accident, pushed her forefinger up to the second knuckle in Judy's strawberry cupcake.

We thought things might turn ugly but Daphne then surprised us by calmly, in measured tones, misquoting Socrates "I know more, knowing I know the way to San Jose", before retreating to her study to gather the Monopoly set. In a little while we were seated at the table in the dining area ready for battle to commence, that we may decide the Monopoly Champion. At this point Linda reached into her bag, proudly produced the trophy and solemnly said "May the best woman win". We all applauded and, for the briefest of moments, a unanimous peace was upon us. But then an hour into the game and things were so different. Tempers were frayed, disputes were plenty, remarks were

cruel. Daphne won £35 - with a Community Chest card, beauty contest, prompting cheap insults from Judy. Then, when I accidentally knocked one of my property cards, Bond Street, on the floor, Linda said it was mortgaged and that I had returned it to the table face up without mortgage. I looked at the other two for support but they took the side of Linda, because I was winning the game.

They were accusing me of cheating. I was incensed and threw the board in the air. I called that the Czechoslovakian move. I used to employ that in chess, when I was facing checkmate. Incidentally I was thrown out of the Sevenoaks chess club for resorting to such a move. Linda returned the Dave Roberts trophy to her bag, said we were all a waste of time, before storming out, closely followed by Judy clutching two cupcakes for Arthur.

The door slammed, leaving me with Daphne, Monopoly items scattered throughout the dinning area. I started to pick up the pieces, feeling ashamed as I always do following my temper tantrums. Daphne placed a conciliatory hand on my shoulder and gestured for me to leave the tidying up to her. She then took up one of those postcards and, with passion, read aloud the script "The moving finger writes and have writ, moves on, pinball wizard". She looked to the heavens, gently shook her head in appreciation of such wisdom, then handed another card to me that I may keep for guidance.

Walking home I got to thinking; I know the Nigerian lottery does not exist but, if it did, there is one person who surely deserves to win it. My good friend Daphne. Then I remembered the card she gave me. I took it from my cardigan pocket and read aloud "All the world's a stage, but I am a Witchita lineman". This set me thinking, I really should check the date on Daphne's tablets.

October 2013

A few days ago I was sitting on a lounge in the garden, enjoying the warm summer sun, when I heard a rustling in the undergrowth. I was intrigued as to the source of this rustling and wondered what would eventually emerge from the foliage. At last the lumbering creature showed himself. It was a tortoise. I didn't know at the time the creature's gender; it was later, as it tried to mate with one of my trainers, I determined it was a "he". He amused himself for a while but, when I put some lettuce and fresh water down, he gave up on the trainer. Typical male I would say so, gender confirmed, I named him Roy. Why Roy, I don't know, but Roy it was.



As I watched Roy tuck into the lettuce, tomato and carrot, I started to wonder about him; speculating as to his thoughts and dreams and, if tortoises have them, his aspirations. I often do this, have deep philosophical debates with myself, never arriving at any firm conclusions. Considering so many narratives and possibilities for situations. For instance, some weeks back I saw a man in Sevenoaks High Street begging outside Waitrose supermarket. He was perhaps in his fifties, shabbily dressed but clean. He had placed a small sign in front of a beret on the pavement inviting donations, with a touching request "Forgive me for asking but please help".

It lead me to ponder the reasons for this man's situation. I pondered motionless amidst the throng of supermarket shoppers hurrying from the store, oblivious to me and the seemingly broken man beside his empty beret. I had fine, lofty ideas of rescuing him from his wretched life, the emotion welling up in my eyes, when he suddenly stepped forward and addressed me. "Do me a favour lady would you move along. Are you donating or gonna burst into tears? Only make your mind up cos you are obscuring the beret." I reached into my purse, filched out a pound coin and offered it to him. As he extended his arm to accept the coin, he exposed a rather expensive watch on his wrist. I hastily withdrew the pound. I should have known he was a charlatan but I had allowed my emotions and sublime imaginings to cloud my judgement.

And on that day in my garden, discovering the tortoise, I was doing it again. Speculating wildly, probably way off the mark once more. But Roy was Roy, was Roy, was Roy. A tortoise who had simply wandered into my garden. A tortoise who likes salad, fresh water and the occasional romp with a trainer. He is happy with his lot and I must not pity him his existence. In fact it's as well he is not capable of higher thought. What with lugging that huge shell around and all. So Roy is a simple soul and he is happy and let's not forget, if he does sometimes feel inclined to melancholy, he can always take comfort from that legendary victory over the hare. Yes all things considered Roy was doing fine, absolutely fine. And so my mood lifted, prompting me to celebrate and return to the kitchen and cutting more lettuce for him.

Then, as I was washing a lettuce, the phone rang. It was my friend Stella having another one of her crises. "Oh Muriel, you're in, thank goodness. Blah, blah, blah. Waffle, waffle, waffle". Eventually I got a word in edgeways "Sorry

Stella, I can't come round right now, but you must try and calm down. It will be fine, I promise you. So you say the mouse set the humane trap off. You took it into the garden, released the mouse and it ran off? Well that's how it works. You did everything as per instructions. No, no, the mouse won't be traumatised. Oh come on Stella, crying isn't going to help. Now put the kettle on, make a good strong cup of tea and dip in a KitKat. Never fails! Ok bye, I must go, Roy is waiting for his curly kale. Who's Roy, oh I'll explain when I see you ".

I put the phone down and returned to the garden but couldn't find Roy. I looked everywhere for him, even places he could not have possibly reached, but it was hopeless, Roy had gone never to return. I thought then perhaps there was a higher meaning for all that had happened but I couldn't fathom it, then realised neither should I try. No I must not speculate it often leads to wrong conclusions. Ah well, good luck out there Roy, and on your travels keep your eyes open for a traumatised mouse



It's that time of year again. Winter! But let us not despair. Instead we should focus on the positives, banish monsieur gloom. Rush to the wardrobe, select a plaid, check shirt. Rush to the tool shed, select the sharpest axe, then from your rolling acres choose a tree that you may chop, lop, then plop into the grate. Soon a fire is raging and, as your and companions' faces glow, you can not help but burst uncontrollably into song. Old sea shanties, early folk songs, Elvis. Much slapping of thighs and the flinging of chewed chicken legs into the fire.

Yes, imagine such scenes. Our very own Borough Green antidote to winter. Look there's Mr Patel of Shakti News fame, wearing one of his trademark pump up shirts, and extra eye make-up for the occasion. He has rightly assumed the role of master of ceremonies as assembled guests take it in turns to perform their party piece with all the passion and excitement one associates with six numbers and the bonus ball or a parking space outside the chemist.

First up is Richard, that doyen of Kent Aloominom with his pièce de resistance. It's a sea shanty that tells the tale of a young Scottish widow, lonely in the glen. His impeccable tartan accent holds us spellbound for many a verse until, at last, on his knees, perspiring profusely, perilously close to the fire, emotionally drained, he collapses full length, spent, oblivious to the calls "Encore", "Bravo" and "A-loo-mi-nom, A-loo-mi-nom".



Then the mood changes as our MC, with a twirl of his moustache, introduces those game octogenarians, Judy and Arthur. They take to the floor and we are transported to Andalucia, as flamenco and sangria are the order of the day. Judy has mastered the castanets and her headdress, a crash helmet festooned with crepe paper, is fabulous. Only the surgical stockings dim the illusion but Arthur more that makes amends with his stunning portrayal of an impassioned Spanish lover, conveyed perfectly through his skill on the ukulele and amazing flamenco footwork, which is not diminished one jot by his wearing of the Adidas trainers.

The standing ovation for Judy and Arthur is so loud it wakes Richard, just in the nick of time as his hair is on fire. He doesn't seem to feel a thing though, fuelling the speculation that those thick silver locks are really "a piece". But Mr Patel is not just MC, he is fire officer too and swiftly throws a blanket over Richard to snuff out the flames and, thankfully, more shanty.

A lull in the room ensues, then an air of expectancy. The tension is unbearable. Who or what is up next. All eyes are on our MC. At last he taps his temple with a forefinger, then moves the finger to his lips in a call for patience and quiet. The door is opened, a chill November wind precedes the entrance of Daphne! She stands with her back to the fire, milking the

atmosphere a silence has created. Finally in the nick of time, before a stamping of feet, she speaks. Introducing her act as an avant garde fusion of football results and shipping forecasts. Then visibly moved, as if it were a Shakespeare soliloquy, we see that her tears are real, her pain palpable. The tragedy, the drama builds to a crescendo. She battles on "Sheffield Wednesday four, Millwall nil". Stop Daphne, stop. But no she perseveres, her voice barely audible. "Winds light to variable. Fisher, Dogger and Bight". If it were boxing, someone by now would have thrown in the towel. Mercifully Mr Patel steps in. Leading her away with his arm about her shoulders, she is comforted somewhat by the sympathetic rather than rapturous applause.



Soon our excellent MC returns, more logs are thrown on the fire, flames briefly lick the walls before returning to the grate as Mr Patel addresses the gathering. "Now ladies and gentlemen, the highlight of the evening, the finale to an occasion we hope has gone some way to banish the melancholy of winter. I am proud to announce the delight that is Linda and her modern interpretation of the dance of the seven veils". After much whistling and ribald laughter, our MC

gamely continues "Linda tells me she was, in the fifties, a ballet student at the prestigious 'Ballet Catford' above Burtons in Lewisham High Street. And, during her time as leader in the girl guides, was awarded badges for ballet, tap, mime and growing watercress".

At this point, sensing people were getting restless and he was "losing the room", Mr Patel whipped out a mouth organ and bravely attempted to replicate the melody of "The Dance of the Seven Veils", exactly as Straus intended. Somebody dimmed the lights to almost off. Straus was beginning to sound more like the theme from Harry Lime when, at last, Linda appeared. Sadly the thick level of veils she wore gave her the appearance of a Michelin man rather than Salome, and her attempts at seductive movement suggested only her watercress badge was credible.



At veil number five disaster struck. Attempting to divest herself of the Primark hoodie, she knocked the MC's mouth organ out of his mouth and into the fire, sending him reeling backwards, trampling on Arthur's ukulele. The drama and emotion was immediately lost and Arthur, "sans uke", could not, once again, save the day. Linda rushed off into the night, calling loudly "Amateurs, amateurs".

So it was left to Mr Patel to lead applause for the turns and give us our cue to leave. The cue was a pound collection, a sure way to empty a room, but all things considered it had been a success. Yes briefly the cold and damp of winter was lifted. Ahh perhaps it will happen and the living rooms in our village with echo to the sounds of music and laughter. Just like they did in Victorian times. And if it does, well what larks then, eh Pip?

THE ROLEX I

Snow had lain for several days. Now it was messy, untidy, matching perfectly the impoverished environment it fell upon. Thomas Ellis emerged from the stairwell of his flats, into the courtyard, cursing the terrain as he made his way slowly to the pavement of the busy Old Kent Road. He hailed a cab, his outstretched arm holding a large shopping bag bearing the name of a prestigious Bond Street store. "Bond Street please, driver", and soon he was comfortably seated and they were on their way. As they crossed Westminster Bridge, Ellis politely asked the cabbie if he would mind, after a brief stop in Brook Street, to then go on to Liberty Store in Great Marlborough Street. He quickly added, as re-assurance, "I'll leave my bag in the back", and at that point held up the Bond Street bag which reflected in the driver's rear view mirror.



"Not a problem" the driver casually replied, even though he would sooner not have waited. But glancing at the meter already showing eighteen pounds, he was suitably mollified. When they reached Brook Street, a smart street in the heart of London's West End, he asked the driver to "Stop just past Lancashire Court please" then, alighting the cab, added "I'll be two minutes, my bag's in the back, please lock the doors", before walking away and into Lancashire Court. The cabbie activated the central locking system, a dull click confirming the doors were locked, then he opened his newspaper.

After five minutes Ellis had not returned to the waiting cab. Five minutes is not a long time but with twenty-three pounds already on the meter and no sign of his passenger, The taxi driver started to feel a little anxious, five minutes later, ten minutes in total, the cabbie climbed into the back of his cab and discovered the worst. The shopping bag was empty, it was merely a "bilker's" prop. Ellis had emerged some while ago from the other end of Lancashire Court, into Bond Street, and was safely on his way to Regent Street by now. Our taxi driver looked wistfully at the thirty-two pounds showing on his meter, reset it to the "For Hire" mode and eased into the traffic. Meanwhile Ellis was on his way to Carnaby Street and rich pickings amongst the tourists and innocents. There was no triumph or celebration with respect of duping the cab driver. Ellis was a master con-man, pick-pocket, fraudster, and so the free cab ride was simply part of his day, his way of life. In his mind his needs justified his actions. A common philosophy amongst the criminal fraternity.

He was barely into Carnaby Street when he spotted a potential victim. The woman in front of him. A gift! The Mulberry bag hung over her shoulder, the zipper tag foolishly at the back, easily slipped forward and the purse lifted. Smooth as silk, in one action, then the contents and purse discarded. Easy! And this is how his day progressed, until he was assured of his stake. A stake to support his passion. The mug's game, gambling. The turn of a card, the spin of a wheel that saw him hours later, at 2am, step into a silent street,



dejected, penniless. The rank of empty cabs outside the casino doors was a melancholy sight. Drivers lost in reverie, occasionally inclining towards the casino doors willing movement from within.

Steve Roberts was on point, first cab on the rank. He was the exception to the rule. Unscrupulous, dishonest, the one bad apple that contaminates the barrel that poisons perspection of an entire profession. Ellis gave him instructions "Old Kent Road, I'll tell you when to stop". Then slumped into the back of the cab, re-living his night's misfortune, never once considering the plight of his victims..... Normally a ride to the Old Kent Road at 2am would be anathema to a cab driver, but for Steve Roberts it was ideal. He lived in Blackheath, just ten minutes on from the Old Kent Road. "Result" he mumbled as he calculated the fare. Throughout the journey neither party spoke, until Ellis called above the engine's noise "Next left driver". Roberts obliged then, when stationary, applied the footbrake not the handbrake. This kept the rear doors locked. Ellis tried to alight. "I can't get out, mate". "No you have to pay first" Roberts replied. The meter showed a thirty-two pound fare, an expensive ride at the night rate. Ellis said to the cabbie "I've got to nip indoors for the cash. I live at number 42. I won't be a minute, I'll be straight back".

But Roberts didn't trust him, he didn't trust anybody. Wasn't it every man for himself? Strangely enough Ellis did intend to pay him. Too close to home to pull any strokes. Still Roberts would not let him leave the cab prior to payment. Eventually the situation was resolved when Ellis offered his watch as security while he went for the money. It was an expensive Rolex Oyster. "Look I'll leave this with you 'til I get back, alright?" Roberts responded "How do I know it's genuine?" Ellis could hardly tell him he knew its origin because he stole it in the first place, but to convince him he passed it through the partition window "Look driver, there's no way that's a fake. That is one hundred percent genuine".



Roberts coveted such a watch and immediately formulated a plan. Feigning reluctance to the agreement, he agreed with a passing shot of "OK but make sure you come back". Ellis handed over the watch more readily than if he hadn't been drinking or dwelling on his run of misfortune at the tables. And Roberts had been convincing in his priority of the fare over the watch... He smiled as he watched Ellis cross the courtyard then make his way up the stairs. He glanced at the watch in his lap and, as Ellis entered number 42, he drove off.