

MURIEL RURIAL 2010

It was a Sunday morning. I had eaten breakfast and was sitting in my favourite armchair, lost in reverie. I fancied I was in that most wonderful store in the whole wide world - Kent Aluminium. And there was Richard, font of all knowledge, dispensing advice, humour and the occasional half inch elbow, or Phillips's screwdriver.

He is the modern equivalent of the revered genius Socrates. Only this in not Athens it is Borough Green and mugs of tea, not wine, are quaffed in continuing symposiums throughout the day at KA's glorious counter or in the aisles. Little knots of people debating, reflecting, gossiping. The sandpaper, hammers or raw plugs, privy to confidences whispered there in...

Enter Karl and Roger Burrlock, local plumbers, looking perplexed and somewhat troubled. Karl is holding a strange shaped copper fitting; it is clearly old and damaged. "Help us out here Richard, water's coming through the ceiling, it's old pipe work, we can't strip back any further, and no room to insert new coupling."

Richard takes the damaged fitting from Karl, studies it intently for perhaps 20 seconds then his expression changes to a smile that signals solution. Without comment he walks off to the plumbing section near the door. Briefly he is lost from view, we can hear him rummaging through the fittings and then he reappears, triumphantly carrying what will be Karl and Roger's salvation.

At the counter he explains "Insert the sleeve here, run a solder joint there to the new compression fitting, there's your answer. That'll be, er, eight pounds sixty please."

Observers almost feel moved to applaud, Roger compresses his lips, gently shakes his head in awe and they leave; men in different attitude to those that entered.

Distant bumbles of conversation are faintly audible through out the store, in perfect harmony to the buzzing rasp of key cutting, the soft scrape of footwear on floorboards, welcoming like old friends. The rattle and rustle of screws and hooks, brass and chrome, as searching hands sort then tip into bags, according to folks' needs. And then another in what will be the day's long procession of troubled tradesmen. He is tall, his hair appears to be almost standing on end. He is an electrician and, like the plumbers before him and most certainly the professionals after him, he displays impatient expression and is carrying the source of his

problem. It's a white bakelite electrical fitting, discoloured by heat. He hands it to Richard, speaking as he does so, like most tradesmen apportioning blame to an inanimate object. Almost as if it has the power of reason but no conscience and has deliberately malfunctioned. "Wired it all up, switches each end of the hall and independent third for porch light." A short pause for effect followed by "Keeps blowing". Richard smiles as he hands the offending item back to the electrician. It's not a smile borne of arrogance, it's knowledge, enlightenment.

He wonders off, returning shortly with a complicated looking fitting. Setting it down on the counter, engaging the electrician with a glance, he explains "Two way three gang with independent circuit breaker for the porch. Oh and good idea to up the fuse rating for increased load."

The electrician feels a whole jumble of emotions. He is grateful the problem is solved, he is humbled by Richard's superior knowledge dispensed with modesty but, more than that, he is annoyed as he has just been given a parking ticket for parking on the zig-zags outside the dry cleaners.

Then in my wild imaginings I see myself in that gorgeous mauve livery that is Kent Aloominum's and I am standing behind the counter ready to serve and impart knowledge. The joy of joys I'm at the spinning, cutting wheel; Chubb, Yale, Union, little fountains of brass and chrome shards as I replicate keys to open doors, padlocks, windows world wide. And the ultimate accolade, standing along side Richard et al, with my own mug of steaming tea. This is a moment sublime, dashed unfortunately by sharp, almost spiteful, knock at my front door. I am roused from my reverie and the delightful thoughts and images are banished in a trice. When I eventually respond to the knock and open the street door I discover they have gone, whoever it was trespassing upon my dreams.

Again I sat in the old armchair and my thoughts returned to Kent Aloominum. Not day dreaming this time, but sensible consideration; me Muriel trying to get a grip. Honest introspection, heart on my sleeve stuff... Ok Muriel, this love affair with Kent Aloominum, what is it all about? In there most days, buying things you already have. No I don't, no I don't. Yes you do, just look in the cutlery drawer, go on, go on.... Eight tin openers, five corkscrews, seven, eight, NINE bottle openers. Right. kitchen drawer unit now. Random nick. Drawer number two. Oh

look, five three pin plugs, one, two, three, four, FIVE Phillips screwdrivers. Drawer number four. Ohhhh, eighteen backdoor keys, twelve mortice lock keys, six dog collars? You have never had a dog! Please, that's enough, that's enough.

I returned to my armchair, I am speaking aloud, but softly, to the clouds, that rolling infinity beyond my window. Rheumy eyes betraying the sadness I feel at those examples of my pathetic behaviour. It's a confessional, an explanation. Look Kent Aloominum is not just a hardware store, it's how England used to be. It's symbolic, not nostalgia! Morris Minors, policemen with whistles, seaside piers. No, symbolic of a time, a time when people had time, to stop and chat or, more importantly, to listen. Yes we are blessed with many shops like that in our lovely little village but, because of its sheer size, eccentric layout and relaxed attitude, Kent Aloominum is definitely our flagship store. And that's why I go in there so often, why I buy things I don't need, why I revel in the very smell of the place, redolent of a time gone by. Why I have fifteen watering cans, six yard brooms, seven hose...

At this point the symptoms of tears and as I reach for the tissues, vowing to come to terms with my Kent Aloominum obsession, I knock a wooden elephant off the side board. It crashes to the floor and breaks its trunk. I'll have to glue it back. First thing Monday morning I'll nip along to Kent Aloominum; buy some glue. Yessir!

Lately I have been inclined to melancholy. This does happen to me in winter but this year I was in the grip of a particularly bad bout of Well what would you call it? Sadness, hopelessness, despair. Perhaps all those things. Why? I don't really know why. Apparently it's not uncommon for people to feel this way in this the harshest of seasons and various explanations are propounded, the most widely held belief being the absence of sunlight. S.A.D, Seasonal affective disorder, to give it its full billing, but there is no definitive proof.

However, having read an article by a professor probably Polish, with one if those Scrabble names hardly distinguishable from the letters of qualification following his name; having read his findings I am given to subscribe to Dr Preczkywickyev's theory that the cause is indeed lack of sunlight. He suggests relief from such misery by way of a "light box". £187 plus £4.99 p&p. And to inspire confidence sufficient to have us reaching for our cheque book, the text of his article is accompanied by a picture of a glamorous tanned couple waving at us from the grounds of what looks like a stately home. £187 plus p&p. I don't think so; I'll make my own light box thank you....

Right, light box, light box, light box? I suppose it's just a box with lights in it. You put your head in and hey presto, winter blues banished, eezy peezy. Ok Muriel plan this carefully, your winter well being depends upon it..... Now, materials required. Large sturdy cardboard box (two head size) in case Daphne wants to share some time in there with me. I know she's a fellow sufferer. Electrical flex, on/off switches and, of course, bulbs. (Y)ellow for early morning sun effect, (R)ed the raging heat of afternoon and (B)rown for a nice even tan. Three bulbs, Y R B each side of the box, two heads in, and if ol' Dr Thingymabob is correct the brain is fooled into believing we are on a gorgeous tropical beach and this will persuade the parasympathetic nerves to imbibe the bulbs' luxury rays (100 watt), thus filling us with the joys of summer and banishing SAD. Exit SAD stage left, to hisses and boos in true pantomime fashion.....

Des at Kent Alumininum supplied the flex, bulbs etc, of course, and, just as he was about to enquire of my latest project, I pre-empted his enquiry by way of a conspiratorial expression that begged 'shtum'; a gesture he returned in mocking fashion, the way all folk do who perceive tortured genius as something else.

Off to Shakti News for a cardboard box.

"Ahh Mrs Shakti, I wonder if you could help me, I need a cardboard box please. Sturdy mind you."

"How big d'you want it Muriel?"

"Er two head size if you could please"

"Hmm?"

Eventually, after some while out the back, she returned with the perfect box.

"Thank you so much, thank you."

As I was leaving she called after me, "Muriel why d'you want ..."

I didn't reply, simply waved and smiled as I left.

I laboured through the afternoon and evening, then on into the night until it was done. A dual control, triple light, double head size light box. Fantastic Muriel, fantastic. Then I began to wonder on Dr Scrabble's reaction were he to gaze upon it...

In the morning, after breakfast, I rang Daphne telling her the good news. I was in high spirits so I spoke to her in French.

"Ah bonjour madame, le box d'alumiere est completement.. Arriver à ma maison a huit heures s'il vous plait."

Daphne replied "I think you must have the wrong number; sorry" and put the phone down. When I rang later true to the following instructions in English, she arrived at eight o'clock.

"Evening Daphne, come in" and as we entered the living room I gestured toward the light box on the table and two chairs placed there ready for us.

"Now Daphne we've got to have faith, be patient and give it at least one hour first session. So, alarm set one hour, bulbs on, heads in, go"

The hour dragged, the heat from those old style bulbs was awful and conversation was muffled, inaudible with both heads in that box, but we persevered and at last the alarm sounded signalling our exit from the box.

I looked at Daphne and was horrified. She looked at me and was equally shocked. Three strange colour markings filling the side of our face. One side of our hair singed and brittle from the temple to the crown. Nose bright red and blistered. Eye nearest the bulbs, puffy almost closed, we looked like two old boxers who'd had too many fights. We screamed in unison and rushed to the balm of cold tap water. That was two weeks ago and I'm not sure how much longer the healing process will take. Meanwhile perhaps I'll place an advert in Shakti's window, Light box For Sale (Not suitable for Sensitive Skin).

April 2010

I was in the bakers, buying a loaf, having given up with the bread making gadget Hilda gave me. "It's no use," she said. "Here, you have a go. Present for you."

Well she was right, it was useless, so there I was in the bakers down the pasty end when I heard a booming voice ring out.

"Muriel, Muriel Rurial, I don't believe it".

I turned and there she was. Geraldine Parminter. A huge larger than life character, dripping in jewellery, carrying a bag of portmanteau proportions. She repeated, "Sorry, sorry", as she barged past people from mince pie to pasty section in order to smother me in an embrace.

"Well I never, Muriel Rurial and I'm blown if you don't look any different. Still stick thin and absolutely no dress sense; bless you Muriel." Then she held my left hand out for scrutiny, tapping the naked wedding ring finger. "And you never did marry did you. Not surprised. Not like me, I'm on my fifth now. Charles, rolling in money he is, totally besotted with me. That's him out there now, in the Jag." And with that she raised my arm to wave at a man sat in the the driver's seat of a car outside the bakers, on the double yellow line. He smiled and returned my reluctant wave, oblivious to the traffic jam he was causing, and I was about to mention that fact to Geraldine, or GP as she liked to be called, when the assistant enquired, "Can I help you?".

"Yes please, I'd like a large wholemeal loaf, thank you."

At this point GP ordered two fresh cream doughnuts and a French stick then continued hugging me, mumbling, "Muriel, Muriel, Muriel", before gathering her order, responding to the Jag's beckoning hooter and leaving me to foot the bill.

On my way back to Western Road I got to thinking about GP and how long since I had seen her. We we were at school together, she was a loud bossy boots then, but left Borough Green when her parents relocated to London and at the time I assumed that would be the last we would see of her; and for years it was until she resurfaces living in Platt. She returned little changed in appearance or attitude as her faint regard for reliability remained and, as the saying goes, "You can let all of the people down some of the time but you can't let some of the

people down all of the time". And so in desperation we gave up on her. After all, when you're waiting for someone at an arranged time and meeting point, for ages, in vain, the shrug of the shoulders and sigh of "Ah well that's GP for you", is just not enough.

Of course she wasn't hurt by our reaction, she simply moved on to other people who, in turn, she let down. Not deliberately, but almost unconsciously. And if you ever broached the subject she would be slightly shocked and simply say, "Oh sorry, but Peter rang and wanted to show me his new toy, an open top MG. Or give some other piffling excuse, as if a better offer was mitigation enough for reneging on an arrangement. Well she eventually left Platt and, so we learnt, a few disappointed suitors too, whose hopes she raised at the moment then forgot in time. And that was too many years ago to remember clearly...

At home, while I drank tea and ate toast, I looked through a couple of photograph albums to glimpse GP through the prism of years. There she was, laughing, arms draped over mine and Valerie Cortze's shoulders, in our school uniforms. Then years later, on one of our walks, smiling at Shirley and Daphne. And there, another photo of Geraldine, posing alongside Alan, husband number three at one of Stella's garden parties. And as I returned the albums to their drawer I wondered just how many photo albums had GP in them. She's kissing someone or has her arms draped about them but really they mean nothing to her. She probably never thinks of them, only if she stumbles across them would she give a thought..

One of my favourite adages is, "There is no debt between friends", and for any of my 'friends' I would have gladly paid for those two doughnuts and French stick, but I felt cheated picking up the tab for Geraldine.

Good luck Charles, enjoy it while it lasts and, incidentally, please don't park outside the bakers. It causes chaos in the High Street and it's one of my pet hates, too.

"Murphy's Law". A proposed law of nature declaring "Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong"....

"Oh no", I was watching closely the milk saucepan then, just I reached into the cupboard for a jar of coffee, the milk boiled over, flooding the hob and gas jets. I got angry with the saucepan, the gas and the milk; didn't actually blame myself. No, I was the victim in all this. That is if there really is such a thing as Murphy's Law.

Ok Muriel let's put it to the test. Keep a diary for the week of all the things that go wrong, if they could. First experiment, Co-op trolley. I hold the handle to disengage it from other trolleys, pretend to pull then stop. "Ah ah, oh no you don't get me like that Murphy. Your trolley is the one with the wonky wheel isn't it? Well unlucky Mr M" I say as I abandon the first trolley and take one from the second row. I set off in the direction of the entrance but the defective wheel sends me into a car parked opposite. The driver leaps from his vehicle, traces a finger along the scratch I have just inflicted and verbally abuses me "Blah, blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah". Well you know how precious some people are about their cars.

Eventually I go back to the original trolley which glides along like a little Rolls Royce. But you know what I'm thinking don't you? Would it have been so had I taken that trolley in the first place. Well I'll never know, and I know that I'll never know, which it makes it even worse. Anyway, got my bit of shopping, gathered my change, walking to the doors when the handle of one of the bags broke. Egg box flipped open, two eggs smashed. Dohh! So that's four things gone wrong already, if I include the saucepan incident.

Now would that handle have broken for anybody or was it just me? Hmm, this is a question I pondered while waiting ages for the automatic doors to open. Yes you've guessed it, they were stuck. "Been alright all day. Never gone wrong before really" the manager said, and eventually they opened. So had they deliberately packed up just as I wanted to leave? Well I gave them a bit of a kicking as I left, just in case.

Walking back to Western Road I thought about the slip road as you come off the M20 for Borough Green. It could be 4 o'clock in the morning but I guarantee you'll meet a car coming on to the roundabout at the exact moment you do; and after you have stopped for them it's clear until the next roundabout at the A227 where you

meet another car. What are the odds of that happening? But it does. And why do traffic lights always go red for me? Everyone else sails through I come along: Red!...

Reaching home from the Co-op there was a note on the mat. "Hi Muriel, popped round to see you. I made a lemon meringue for us to have with a cup of tea. Thought I would surprise you, not to worry, I'll ring you in the week. Hilda x". Amazing, I've been in nearly all day, popped out for half an hour and that's when Hilda came round. Lemon meringue too. My favourite... The rest of the day passed reasonably well but the next day proved that there is such a thing as Murphy's Law.

It started early with the phone ringing as I stepped in the shower, then later, toast under the grill filling the kitchen with smoke while I signed for a parcel at the street door. The smoke alarm screamed at me and, as I tried to fan it with the broom, to make matters worse I accidentally smashed the alarm's plastic casing.

Later while I was eating breakfast (sans toast), convincing myself nothing else could go wrong, there was a terrific crash in the garden as a vase smashed to the paving. Earlier I had opened an upstairs window to clear the smoke and a billowing curtain had liberated the vase from its sedentary perch, flying through the air for a brief, fantastic, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang moment. The thing is I had only recently moved it to its "safe" position, fearful it may be knocked over where it stood in the living room...

Then there was the incident at the baker's. "After you" I said, letting someone laden with shopping enter in front of me, only to see them go on to buy the last cream doughnut - leaving me to walk out empty handed. I know there were lots of other cakes to choose from but, well, it's not the point...

Well I decided I wouldn't continue the experiment any further, keeping a record of how often I fell foul of "Murphy's Law". Instead I would carry on as normal and simply smile as the egg yolk breaks, the dropped £1 coin rolls gently down the drain, the toast lands butter side down, and, from a large stock of identical items, I chose the one that doesn't work. Yes I'm determined to smile, look into the distance in a mock theatrical way and, in a cool Irish accent, remark "Oh you're a little devil so you are Murphy".

And with that, gently walk on, oblivious to the chewing gum left there for my new shoes.

I sat in the garden, heard the rattle of trains, the singing of birds; watched them take flight into the blue and it reminded me of an old cowboy film I saw some years ago. I closed my eyes to recall clearly the images on that big old screen in a Gravesend cinema and I suppose it was at that point I must have nodded off and a dream like state took over, and all at once I imagined I was that cowboy. There I was riding into Borough Green, tugging lightly at the brim of my hat in acknowledgement to folks in the village.

It was a hot day, the sun was high in the sky and a cowboy gets kinda thirsty in the dusty byways that thread their way through the towns. So I dismount and tether my horse outside the saloon, "The Aloominom Arms", push open the swinging saloon doors and walk slowly to the bar; spurs jangling to my tread on the old wooden floor boards. And there resplendent in a silk waistcoat, complete with gold watch and chain and small bowler hat, is Richard: only he is not dispensing $\frac{1}{2}$ " elbows and carpet tacks, he is pouring whiskey into a small glass and smiling at me in recognition of an old friend returning.

In the corner, Des is at the piano, not cutting keys at the spinning, sparking cutting wheel but playing honky-tonk while several cowboys are seated at a round table in a game of poker. The poker players look familiar, remarkably like Karl and Roger Burrluck, local plumbers, Mike Taylor, electrician, Mr Shakti the newsagent and Doc Dyer. The table's green baize softly accommodates the dollar bills pot.

Doc Dyer is clearly on a winning streak and things are hotting up as Mr Shakti contemplates pledging the deeds to his shop as security for his hand. But ultimately the plumbers fold, Shakti slips the deeds back into his pocket and the Doc, with a sweep of his arm, gathers the kitty to him. No one is really sure if he was bluffing but the game's etiquette dictates they should never know and accordingly the cards are returned to their deck.

The Doc leaves a few bills on the table for drinks and he's off to attend a gunfight in Wrotham; even though on such occasions there's little he can do in the wake of the damage a .38 calibre can inflict on a person. But it's his job so he goes anyway. That life or

death arena, the terrain he walks; and perhaps that's why he's such a darn good poker player...

I finish my drink and exit into the brilliant sunlight of Borough Green High Street. Sheriff Wiles waves to me as I stroll across to the Village Hall where Arthur is standing in an open wagon, holding a bottle aloft extolling the virtues of his concoction, exhorting us to purchase "One small bottle of this miracle liquid. Why, it can even restore hair". Judy stands by the wagon, occasionally calling out "Yessir" in confirmation of Arthur's extravagant claims, ready to receive money in exchange for the elixir.

"It can make you taller, you can lose weight"... "Yessir"..

.. "Look younger, healthier"... "Yessir"..

Judy glances at me, we exchange a knowing look and the briefest of smiles as I turn and push through the knot of people and make my way to the coffee house for cups of coffee and blueberry pie.

I take a window seat, it's busy in there. I enjoy the ambience, the babble of voices, occasional laughter and, best of all, the aroma - that perfect harmony of coffee and freshly baked bread.

Tim and Cath stroll by and tap on the window to rouse me from my reverie and abstract gaze. Ralph is with them, older now, the arthritis in his hind quarters reducing him to a slow crawl and making it difficult for him to stand upright, paws on the counter in the "The Aloominom Arms" for his biscuit from Richard.

And ol' Ralph will always be with them until, well until that day that parts us all; sometimes slowly, sometimes all of a sudden. No order or logic. Non negotiable. Non negotiable... Tim is kinda crazy but when he works in that little greengrocers it's the best day of the week there. Laughter is the currency, dollar bills merely a formality: Tim and Cath, lovely people, typical Borough Green folk...

I leave the coffee house, stroll back to my horse, give him a huge red apple and climb into the saddle. We move off to the Four Wents Crossroads and it's at that point I wake up. Not with a start from external interruption but gently in the same way we slip into to sleep, never really sure at which point it occurs.

The sun's gone down, it's a little chilly even. And my aching joints remind me it's time for a new lounge. And then I get to thinking

about my dream. Me as a cowboy in a small town way out west and
memory suggests a poem I wrote some years ago

“SHERIFF”

So long ago, the fun I had
In a cowboy suit, with a Sheriff's badge
I rode the plains of fantasy
A small cap gun protecting me.



Dodging cars and motorbikes
Rattlesnakes, cactus spikes
Hailed a hero from the saloon
Ignored by jostling bus stop queues
Who once were cowboys just like me
Basking in naivety....

But I wonder what became of that cowboy suit and badge
Lost I suppose, with the magic of an age.

Oh wouldn't be wonderful to wear that badge again
To resurrect my faithful horse and once more ride the plains
That vast expanse of childhood that held no pain for me
Maintaining law and order, 'til Mum called me in for tea.



August 2010

I had fallen asleep in the armchair; it was late, the half drunk cup of tea beside me was cold and I was annoyed with myself, the way we are on such occasions. Muriel Rurial, firebrand, rebel, righter of wrongs, spinster of this parish, nodding off in a soft armchair, nohhh surely not? 'Fraid so.

And look, telly blaring away, some soppy cookery programme. Marco Pierre somebody or other, cool French accent. Why he is no more French than Richard from Kent Aluminium... Ah bonjour Richard, je desire un petit ½" elbow pour arretez d'leau au jardin. I DON'T THINK SO!

What is he messing about at? There's a wobbly thing in the middle of the plate, he's stuck a leaf on top and; and what's he up to now? Oh no, he's squirting patterns all round the plate and the wobbly; a sort of brown syrup. He said it's an omelette!

I'm angry now, shaking my finger at the television, bating him. "That's not an omelette, Pierre, you're wrong there mate. An omelette is frisbee shaped but fluffier. You've messed up and you're trying to get out of it by decoration. Oldest trick in the book. I'm no chef, Pierre, but that is not a bona fide omelette. AND, you should be wearing a hat.

Ohh yes cleanliness in the kitchen is so important. I remember we learnt a little rhyme when I was a girl at school studying domestic science. Not my favourite subject mind you, but it was part of the curriculum. Oh I'd rather have been out on my bike or climbing trees. "Miss Rurial would you come down from there at once and attach an apron to your person." "Yess Miss." But I've digressed. Now the rhyme, "Hygiene in the Kitchen" it was called.

Look intently beneath your nails
Before the flour hits the scales
Don't cough or sneeze in the soup
Always, always wash the fruit
Remember germs can make you dead
So wear a hat upon your head.

Well I don't suppose Monsieur M.P.W. is aware of those few words of wisdom. No sir... Oh look what's this? He's cutting up strips of liver wrapping streaky bacon round it and then - guess what?. Nohh! Smearing marzipan on it. Yes marzipan! It's just flashed on the screen, calves liver, marzipan surprise. Or to give it its proper description, calves liver au

marzipan, sans hat, avec Salmonella. Come on Pierre get a grip, who are you kidding. Even a down and out wouldn't eat that. "Any spare change miss. Twenty quid gets me a calves liver marzipan surprise."

I don't think so Pierre. You are not fooling me. You're probably got restaurants up and down the country and back in France but - I'm no cook, but, I'll show you an omelette. Not a TV omelette but a real omelette fantastique. Watch this. First of all the pan. My Mum's old pan, proved as they say in culinary parlance. Proved over the years. Coal black and heavy steel. Take a close look at that my French friend, un pan deluxe. And for an omelette what do we need, we need eggs. Not three, four or five but six eggs. Eggs, eggs, eggs. Then mushrooms, tomatoes, onions, everything, the lot. This will be an omelette the likes of which you have never seen before.

I break the half dozen eggs, add milk, salt and pepper and beat with a fork, not a whisk. It's soon a big swirling, thriving, rampant froth. I offer it up to the television M.P.W. He chooses to ignore me, pretends he hasn't noticed, but I know better and can spot professional pride wounded when I see it.

I chop up a beef tomato, two mushrooms and an onion. I'm on a roll now throwing in whatever I can lay my hands on. Some mint, chopped nuts, parsley and a digestive biscuit, that should do it. It's a glorious mixture, bobbing and swirling in the Pyrex mixing bowl. I smear the old pan with butter and olive oil, light the hob and watch the butter melt and marry the oil as blue flames lick the side of the frying pan. I tip in the mixture, it's above the plimsoll line of the pan, nearly over the edge, threatening to flood the hob. Steady now Muriel, steadyyy.

What do you think Pierre, jealous are we? Oh almost forgot my hat. Can't find Mum's old chef's hat so I put on Arthur's deerstalker hat he left behind when he and Judy came round for tea recently. Hmmm it's a bit big but it will have to do. Better get back to the pan. It's all going solid in the pan, I've got to try and turn it over while it's still pliable. But the steel handle on the old pan is getting red hot. Gloves! Gloves, gloves, gloves. Only got these, They'll have to do. Not really gloves, motorcycle gauntlets. Ah, least I can now touch the handle now.

Right Muriel, now ram that spatula under the omelette. That's it, that's it; and flip it over. It's coming, it's coming. Heave, heave and flip. Ohhhh! Quick, pick it up off the floor. Put it back in the pan... So difficult

with these gauntlets, come Muriel come on. There done it. Hooray. What's that, is that - oh it's dust and fluff from the floor, or is it a mushroom. Oh not to worry at least it's back in the pan. Now, folding it in situ, press down hard with the spatula. Oh no, handle's broken. Blooming plastic, what am I gonna use as a spatula? Oh yes, the TV remote, perfect shape. Brilliant. Press it down, lovely, starting to look like an omelette deluxe now. Have to put up with the telly coming up deafening me. I reckon two more minutes of this and it's done. So it's ok Pierre you can continue shouting at me but you will be so jealous when this slips out of the pan...

Going for it now, forcing the remote under the omelette. Bit more gas, lovely. Wedge nicely under the omelette, levering it out now, here she comes. No she's stuck. Press harder in to the pan, more leverage. Hold it, hold it, what's happening? The remote's melting, oh it's on fire. Smoke alarm's going off now, telly's blaring at me, bits of remote's electronics melting into the omelette.

Pan's on fire now; smother it, smother it. No, gauntlets are alight, deerstalker's slipped over my eyes, can't see a thing. Take the hat off. Oh gauntlets have set the hat alight. Quick, quick throw it all in the sink, turn the taps on. Smoke everywhere but at last, no flames.

From the small telly in the kitchen Monsieur White is looking out at me, offering up some new concoction. Cheese bonbon, avec amaretti. And I do believe he's smirking.

Then, as the smoke clears, I have one of my light bulb moments. I remember the final two lines of that old domestic science rhyme;

And for omelettes there's a rule of thumb
Eggs per person should be one.



Particular pleasures. Conjuring faces from the clouds. Freewheeling down hill on a bicycle in the sunshine. Reciting favourite lines, a tray of tea, bird song, laughter, charity.....Kent Aloominum.

So many things to delight, but there is sadness too. Waving goodbye, tears, loneliness - only memories for company. Conflict, pain, six numbers but no bonus ball. I shouldn't do this really. What? Well these philosophical thoughts, they always lead me to melancholy. Not good for me, melancholy. I'm better at curmudgeonly, rebellion, oddball. Yes that's what a young man called me recently. He was behaving rather badly in the Co-op, causing disruption in the soup and baked bean aisle.

I approached him, "Excuse me young man would you please behave yourself, you are disturbing other people". He glared at me, then, playing to the gallery, replied "get lost lady". I enquired "How old are you?". "If you must know I'm sixteen, alright, satisfied". I replied "When I was your age I was eighteen". Dumbfounded he jabbed his finger at me and said, before storming out, "YOU ARE AN ODDBALL LADY, AN ODDBALL". I called after him "Different, not odd, I'm a different ball".

But the automatic doors had disgorged him into the night long before my words reached him.... On the way home to Western Road I got to wondering, when does different become odd, eccentric is seen as mad, vision - insane?... I thought for a while and then decided, if I really am different, although I do feel it's the rest of the world that's got it wrong, but if I am different then I'm in good company. Columbus, VanGogh, Howard Hughes, Tarquin Rurial. Yes my mum's brother, Uncle Tarquin, now he was different.

He was fascinated by and appreciated all forms of life and could do no harm to any. I remember often how he would call through a rolled up newspaper to blue-bottles and wasps "Please fly away from here". He just could not bring himself to swat them. Yes many are the times we have sat eating bread and jam at Uncle Tarquin's, surrounded by flies and wasps... I loved Uncle Tarquin and he would often tell me I was his favourite too.

In later life on one occasion when we visited him in "the home" he inclined his head towards my ear and whispered "I like it here Muriel, please don't feel sad for me. They look after me, they spoil me in fact. They think I'm, well, shall we say, *different*". And he smiled at me then continued "You're different too Muriel. Rejoice in that, it's a wonderful thing, a gift. You have that gift, also you have your youth and a generous loving mother. Truly your cup runneth over".

At this point he wiped the sleeve of his old tweed jacket across his eyes and I too felt the symptoms of tears. Then he reached into his inside pocket, withdrew an envelope and pressed it into my hand. "This is for you Muriel, I have everything I require here, I don't need it, I want you to have it".

I looked at mother, confused as to whether I should accept it or not. An envelope the shape and weight of which suggested it contained money. She exchanged glances with Uncle Tarquin, his expression imploring acceptance of such gift. Mum nodded and smiled at me. I took the envelope and hugged Uncle Tarquin, wondering why he chose to stay there, as he could not be "beyond" different, could he? At home, when I opened the envelope, I discovered it contained thousands of pounds ... In Monopoly money! So I was never really sure about Uncle T...

But most of us have an Uncle T or Auntie M haven't we? And some people like blue but can't stand orange. Love opera but feel unwell at the sound of rap music. Would rather starve than eat liver. Well you've probably guessed, I'm describing myself, so how would I feel, standing next to another woman at a party when she's wearing an orange dress, listening to rap music while eating a liver sausage sandwich.

"Ahhh but", you might say, "That's fine, but what if she then went on the say that the world is flat, what d'you think of these sunflowers, and the way forward in air travel is a giant airbus called *The Spruce Goose*". Humm, tricky one that.

So we are all different. Some of us enjoy each other's difference, to others it's anathema. Sometimes difference is a euphemism for something else and on those occasions that difference is more complex and difficult to manage. But in general, as they say, "Variety is the spice of life", and so the choice is ours. If it's not to our liking we walk on...

Incidentally Uncle Tarquin passed away sometime ago and although he didn't leave any property or real money, his was a wonderful legacy, a life time of memories in the luxury of his company. What finer gift could a person bequeath.

So, to the young man who called out to me in the Co-op, I say "I'll wager you like liver sausage sandwiches, orange trousers and listening to rap music. Am I wrong?" Anyway, "Vive la difference and behave yourself in the Co-op in future".

November 2010

I was feeling fed up. I know it's selfish to say such a thing but I couldn't help it.

Yes I was fed up. What to do? I know, I'll nip along to Kent Aluminim, buy some bits. But it didn't work. I bought sandpaper, lots of sandpaper, took it home, arranged it with current stock; coarse, semi-coarse, fine, extra fine but I was still fed up. I made a cup of tea, ate a four fingered Kit-Kat in a decadent fashion, dipping two fingers at a time in the steaming tea then sucking the chocolate from its wafer, a la Nigella Lawson. No use though - still fed up. I opened the street door and shouted at the busy Western Road traffic, pointing at it in that manner of winos. No use I thought, no use, as I gently closed the front door.

Later I went for a walk, I kicked the odd tin can, I rolled trumpets from Co-op receipts. I stood at the Four Wents pedestrian lights, pressing the button but remaining on the pavement during the red light, inviting abuse but to no avail. They simply glanced at me with an expression that said *"Ahh isn't she with anybody?"* It was getting serious, transcending serious to despair.

I went home, phoned Shirley, Hilda, Linda and Daphne. No answer! They've gone out together I thought, excluded me. One of their bus pass jollies to Bluewater. Without me!

Paranoia now, get a grip Muriel, put the radio on. A distraction that's what you need. Right, radio on there you go a phone-in. Oh no, Alice Parnell from Cuxton boasting about how many children she has. Seven children, eighteen grandchildren, three great grandchildren. "Nothing to be proud of Alice", I'm shouting at the radio now, "that's why we're so crowded here. What if we all did that". I'm pointing the ol' finger at the radio, "Eh Alice, what if we all did that. Be like living in China, streets so crowded can't see the pavement. Getting like that now here". Can't listen to it any more, ranting's not good for me, so I pull the plug and collapse in a post-rant heap in the armchair. Phhhh!

I decide to put on a relaxation CD. You know the sort of thing, birds twittering, the sea lapping at the foreshore, occasional panpipes but I can't undo the case to get the disc out so I throw it at the wall. That's Hilda's CD, I'll ring her and have a go at her. "I'm sorry we are unable to take your call at moment, if you leave a message we". I banged the phone down convinced that the girls are out together. Right this calls for ACTION (dramatic music dern de de deren).

I get the photograph album, look there they are in a group, me in the middle. Phonies the lot of you. You don't love me at all. I'm really angry now, I take a felt pen from the drawer and start drawing glasses and moustaches on them. "Call yourself friends", I shout as I draw thick scars on Hilda's cheeks and an axe sticking out of Shirley's head. And look there's Daphne laughing still "Oh don't think you're getting away scot free Daph, oh no, take that" as I draw an arrow passing right through her neck and a beard on Linda. I hold the photo at arm's length, admiring my handiwork, remarking "Brilliant". I punch the air triumphantly but it's a hollow victory, I'm sad really What can I do? I know, more sandpaper, loads of it. Coarse, triple "X", heavy duty, off the scale industrial sandpaper. Shuffle it, feel it, gently trail my fingers across it, identify it blindfolded. But it didn't help.

Because, hand on heart (sad music now Hmmm, hmm, hmm, mmmm) I had to admit it's all my fault. The girls have finally had enough of my outrageous behaviour. They've indulged me for long enough. Why, what happened? Well it was one of our soirees, at Shirley's this time. She had made a flan and I remarked it not only looked like a wheel trim from a Peugeot 405 it tasted like one too. Hilda had been at the Chardonnay, drinking through a funnel, and leapt to defence of the flan and a heated argument ensued. Linda tried to diffuse the situation by showing us her latest masterpiece produced at her morning art class. I was scathing, comparing her work unfavourably to that of a diagram on a motor insurance claim form.

I followed this insult with my favourite coup de grace, up ending the small occasional table housing the maltesers and the ridiculous fudge squares that nobody eats. A deathly state of quiet fell upon the room. That shocked silence that follows such an act, then I was gone, into the night, with a slamming of doors and a roaring away, in the Micra.

But that was two weeks ago and ever since I have pretended I don't care, but that is not so; I know I have the sandpaper to prove it And then out of the blue a knock at the door The girls with chocolates and carnations, maintaining our friendship with kindness and forgiveness. Shirley held her arms outstretched to embrace me, I moved towards her but instead of hugging her I pat both sides of her coat. "Just checking you haven't brought a flan with you Shirley".

And as they say in tales of old "They all lived happily ever after". As long as Hilda doesn't ask for her CD back.

SIGNORE SALDANO



Signore Saldano was an opera singer. The finest tenor in the world. A huge man with a voice as powerful as one would expect to come from such a giant of a man. But despite his size he was a gentle, kind, generous person whose absolute delight in life was to sing. And he did sing, filling theatres, enchanting audiences who stood to applaud and cry "Bravo, bravo Signore Saldano". Sadly this was about to change ...

Signore Saldano loved his opera so much, the thrill of music was so great, he began to sing too loud and, the more he delighted in the music, the louder he sang. Each performance he gave, the louder he sang, and hands that once clapped in appreciation were now covering their ears, and ecstatic cries of "Bravo" were soon pleas for "Sotto".

Unfortunately, try as he might, Saldano just could not contain himself. Yes he did begin softly and excitement spread through the audience, whispering "Saldano is back", but as the aria progressed his voice grew stronger and, unheard of, people actually began leaving their seats during the performance...

For a while Saldano did not appear in concert, then the press announced "Signore Saldano to return promising to be better than ever". And for nearly an hour his performance was the Saldano of old but steadily the notes grew louder and louder. Chandeliers shook and the theatre's ornate plasterwork broke away showering the orchestra, the audience and Saldano himself but he continued the longest, loudest note ever heard. Musicians stopped playing, returning their instruments to velvet lined cases. Patrons started to leave and at last Saldano stopped singing as he realised what was happening and stood motionless centre stage. The manager eventually escorted Saldano from the stage, passing him his cloak and silver topped cane, gently closing the stage door behind him as he ushered him into the street.

In the morning, newspapers were full of the news, commenting that the once great tenor must surely retire now, never to grace the stage again. Truly a sad end to a wonderful career. Saldano was heartbroken, flinging the shutters of his apartment open, calling into the busy street below "I will never stop singing, never". But as he tried to sing no sound passed his lips. He tried again but still he could not sing. Again and again he tried but it was hopeless. His once great singing voice had gone, and with sadness he closed the shutters...

For weeks he rarely left his home. A tragic figure emerging only at night to buy food and wine. Then one morning as he lay in bed wondering how to pass the hours of his days, days that were made so very long without singing, he had a wonderful idea. He decided he would move to the countryside. Perhaps a small village where the people did not know him and he would no longer have to hide for the fear of shame and embarrassment that

he felt in the city of theatres and pointing fingers. He recalled a small place he stayed at, with his mother, when he was a child and wondered if it was still as unspoilt as it was then. And for the first time in ages Saldano felt excited...

In the morning he bought a map and drove to the village. It took him nearly all day to arrive there but when he did he knew this would be the place he wanted to live. It was almost exactly as he remembered. How wonderful and even more amazing there was a little house for sale just at the edge of the village. He could not believe his good fortune and driving home he was so happy he tried to burst into song but once again became sad as his voice would not return.

Some weeks later, just as winter gave way to spring, Signore Saldano moved from the city to his new home where daffodils and crocuses were springing up outside his front door as if to welcome him home. And the people of the village soon warmed to him, speaking affectionately of him as "il-grande" because of his size and big hearted generosity. The villagers appeared not to know of his life as a famous opera singer, or if they did they never mentioned it, knowing that it would be too painful a reminder for him.

As spring passed and summer began, concerns spread amongst the village as there had not been rain in the area for weeks. Most of the villagers grew fresh produce, fruit, vegetables and flowers which they took to market and so the village prospered, but summer was half way through and still hardly any rain had fallen. So serious was the situation that for the first time ever they turned off the little fountain in the village centre, and the old well that had never been dry in over a hundred years finally did not echo to a splash when they tossed a stone into its dark opening. The land was parched, the people were sad but nothing could be done but wait and hope that the rain would come.



At night Signore Saldano walked out of the village towards the hills, wondering what he could do to help those lovely people who had shown him so much hospitality and kindness. But how could he, a mere mortal, possibly bring about the rain they so desperately needed? ...

Then one night, following another day without rain, Saldano walked into the hills and for the first time ever in his life his sadness gave way to anger. He shout at the moon hanging there in the heavens "Rain for the people, please rain. Rain!" And as he cried out "rain" he hung on to that word loud and long until the shout became a note, a beautiful tenor's note.

Signore Saldano's voice had returned and he sang louder and louder still, shaking leaves from the trees and sending clouds scurrying across the face of the moon. And then as he sang even louder, richer, a gentle patter of rain fell from the sky, growing to a steady luxurious downpour of a million, trillion glorious raindrops. Tears of joy mingled with rain soaking Saldano's cheeks. He could sing again and perhaps it was he who had helped to bring about the precious rain.

In the village people were dancing in the street, arms outstretched, palms upwards, laughing, embracing, celebrating that perfect storm. Window panes rattled to the drumming of rain and huge drops bounced off the shiny cobblestones. "It is wonderful", the people cried, "Wonderful". And then Marco, the baker, heard something above the rain's roar. It was a voice, a perfect voice. "Listen, listen" he cried and the people stopped to listen, then followed Marco towards the hills where at last they saw Signore Saldano still singing, a huge silhouette against the moon. And the people cried "Bravo, bravo Saldano. You have brought the rain". And they applauded him louder than the rain's tumult.

For Signore Saldano this was the greatest moment of his life. Signore Saldano the finest tenor in the world. But it was not he who brought the rain.

