

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2009**

The obstruction is their side, but they hammer on towards you. They are not going to stop so you give way, even though you have the right of way. But having the right of way is little comfort if we continue on and by so doing our vehicle is badly damaged. This is one small example of the attitude on the roads.

Then we are in the cafeteria, John Lewis, Bluewater for example, we have paid for our hot meal and walking to the seating area. Many of the seats are occupied with shopping bags while a lone figure sits there waiting for their friend to bring the meals; they are saving the table. Meanwhile we wander the cafeteria searching for a table while our meal steadily goes cold...

People unlawfully parked in disabled bays or casually parked across two spaces...

Conversations. Those not really listening, empathising; so desperate to regale us with their own life's events. We want to say, but we don't, "Look it's not all about you".

Sadly though the world's inhabitants seem more selfish than ever. Or is it, as Talking Heads famously sang "Same as it ever was". Perhaps it's because there are so many of us now, the multitudes have adopted that rat race mentality, every one for themselves. But what if we all applied that logic? Well it's pretty clear that without a degree of order we would descend into chaos: I wonder do those selfish individuals not realise that or are they aware and simply take advantage of others who, to prevent chaos, behave orderly? Is it any wonder too that there is bloodshed and conflict throughout the world when we cannot even live together peacefully at a domestic level.

If neighbours can come to blows over an unmanageable Leylandii or a loud stereo. If they are unable to resolve through compromise and negotiation such simple disputes then what chance huge border disputes, or the rights to oil, gold, industrial wealth, corruption. Surely there is no chance all the while a selfish attitude prevails. But will it ever change? I doubt it.

Thank goodness then for the selfless minority. Those amongst us who rise above the me culture. Who smile stoically, almost sympathetically, at the person saving the cafe table, at the driver roaring towards us round the obstruction. Thank goodness for those kind generous souls who seek no reward for their goodwill. Who never complain, who bear life's injustices with amazing good grace.

Personally I do try to rise above it, but to my shame I occasionally lapse and say "Oh no Muriel you can't let that go, they're taking the mickey now". So I keep going when they drive at me or I'll move their bags and sit at their table.

Of course as a consequence I've suffered their abuse. "You shouldn't be on the road, crazy old bag". Despite their being in the wrong. And in the cafe, unsurprisingly, as they gather up their bags and move off, I've been sworn at and my sanity questioned. In their eyes because I challenged their selfish attitude, I'm a 'Nutter'.

For a while I am pleased with myself, fighting back for what's right but then I start to feel sad as I recognise I'm probably marked, stoicism/tolerance 6/10 could do better.

To atone I drive home giving way too often, almost to the point of being dangerous. Motorists following do not expect this generosity on the roads and fume impatiently. As they overtake they make rude gestures and swear at me, prompting me to grab at my window winder to mouth a response, but it's too late they've gone.

Calm down Muriel, calm down, don't let them get to you. Rise above it: I know, I'll buy a cake and have a nice cup of tea, sit back and relax indoors. Oh look the bakers are still open I might just catch them. OK it's a double yellow line outside but I'll only be a minute, just this once, I promise I'll never do it again. But as I alight from the car, a driver squeezing past gently shakes his head in disapproval. His expression is one of pity rather than anger and all at once I am ashamed the words echoing in my head "Everyone for themselves"..

At home I make tea but I can't eat the cake I push it round the plate, I throw it in the bin. It represents what I did outside the bakers. I write out small cheques for British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research. I walk to the post box with them, the heavy rain should make me feel better about myself, but it doesn't.

You see deep down it doesn't come easy to me, rising above other's selfishness. Pitying them rather than getting angry with them and sometimes even confronting them. Worse still, being selfish myself.

Yes I've got a long way to go yet I know. Right a new start, a new me. Not tonight though, tomorrow, 'cos I've just got to bang on the wall, "Mary will you turn that television down, PLEASE".

Oh she drives me mad. Deaf as a post. Oh look there I go again.

It used to be a simple, straight forward procedure, ringing your insurance company. But that was in the days before the dreaded AVM. - "Automated Voice Machine".

AVM - "Hallo welcome to Muckabout, Small Print Exclusions Insurance Ltd. We are experiencing an unprecedented volume of calls, we are sorry for any delay, we will deal with your enquiry as soon as possible. If you are calling to renew your existing policy press one. If you wish to make a claim on your policy press two. For all other enquiries press three. If you wish to speak to an advisor press four. If you wish to listen to Vivaldi's Four Seasons, again, press five. If you're not sure and you want to compound your frustrations, then run through all these options again. Meanwhile put a saucepan of milk on the hob for coffee, 'cos you're here for the long, expensive 0845 haul, mate ..."

OK so I select option four to speak to an advisor but the AVM disputes this and tells me, "You've selected option two, please have your policy number ready and speak clearly after the tone. All calls are recorded so we can have a laugh at your audible frustrations".

MURIEL - "No, no. I didn't press two, I pressed four".

AVM - "Thank you for calling Muckabout, Small Print Exclusions Insurance Ltd. Please read the last eighteen digits of your policy number".

MURIEL - "Eighteen? *[panic]* There isn't an eighteen digit number here."

AVM - "Please do not shout at the machine. If you do we will play Vivaldi again. Thank you".

MURIEL - "OK, I'm sorry. Right I'm pressing four. That's four and I wish to speak to an advisor".

AVM - "All our advisors are busy at the moment. Please hold while we try to connect you".

[Long blast of Vivaldi, occasionally interrupted by AVM advising, "High volume of calls, sorry for the delay"]

Meanwhile, milk boils over on the hob, then to the tiled floor, and in my rush to save the milk I knock the cup, containing coffee granules, off work top, sending it smashing on the patterned tiles. Now I'm mopping up with the phone squashed between my ear and shoulder and this is fine for a while until it slips off, breaking the cover of the battery compartment as it collides with a plug socket at the skirting.

AVM - "We are sorry we do not recognise your policy number. Please press seven for further enquiries while we place you on hold, play Vivaldi and record this for training purposes and, to prevent fraud. Please note, failure to give true and accurate details could invalidate any future claims you may make....OK?".

MURIEL - "I don't believe this. Ohhh... Right I know what I'll do, I'll hang up and start again. Fresh! That's it good idea".

AVM - "Welcome to Muckabout, etc etc. Blah, blah, blah".

MURIEL - "No, no I don't want any of those options, I want four! Four! FOUR! Right, got it? Four!".

AVM - "You have selected option four. I'm sorry all our operatives are very busy at the moment, please hold while we try to connect you."

MURIEL - *[Psyching myself up]* "OK Muriel don't lose your cool. Stay calm, relax, deep breaths. Ahhh.."

Five minutes, ten minutes then, at last, clicking sound followed by a genuine real live voice. Good news, bad news though. Real live voice has impossible to understand Scottish accent.

VOICE - "Gooood mornin', ahm Gerry, who kin ah hilp?"

MURIEL - "Sorry could you speak a little slower I can't really hear you".

VOICE - "Whee r yee policy dit ails. Kestions foh siccoority reezons, Jimmy? Blah, blah, blah, Scottish blah. Ohkey, just poot ye on hooold git ye dit ails ont screen. *[more music]* Sorry te keep ye. Ohh claim is it? Och ye throo te rrong department. One moment, jes transfair ye. *[click, click, click. Silence then dialling tone.]*

MURIEL - NO! NO! *[Throwing damaged phone at wall, phone disintegrates, pieces stick in boiled milk skin on floor along with china pieces to form a bar room brawl effect.]*

For a while I stand there, surveying the mess, contemplating my next move. Then my spare phone rings and I'm convinced it's Muckabout ringing to apologise and to make amends deal with me swiftly and efficiently. Feeling vindictive I let it ring and ring before casually strolling over to the phone while pieces of the smashed phone light up amongst the debris but make no sound. And just as I'm about to pick up the phone, it ring off. Panicking, I snatch at the the phone and scream into it, "Hallo, hallo. Yes I'm here, please don't ring off. Please" I imagine I hear a voice, it's wishful thinking I know, but I quote my policy number, in a Scottish accent to endear myself. I whistle Vivaldi, pretending I'm a fan. I ignore the dialling tone, purring in my ear, I speak over it, I am in denial.

MURIEL - "Yes I wish to report a change in my details. I'm informing you to avoid invalidating my insurance... Oh I don't mind, any options fine by me. Look I'm pressing them all. Anything, anything".

At this point the purring stops only to be replaced by a loud whining noise, a sort of Guantanamo Bay experience and I recognise I am in danger of 'losing it'. At last whining stops; a brief silence swiftly broken by new AVM.

AVM "Please hang up and try again. Please hang up and try again. Please hang ..."

Then it's that moment, that laugh or cry moment. When the red mist will come down and I'll do something I'll regret later or, or, I will calmly regroup and move on in a different approach. Military tactics, yessir!

And that's what I did, decided to write to Muckabout Insurance Ltd. Make a nice cup of tea, sit down and write a letter. How sensible and civilised is that. Once again Muriel, you're a genius. Well that was three weeks ago and so far I've not had a reply.

Ah well. I suppose I'll have to give them a ring.

Spring is my favourite season. Tulips, bluebells, all manner of delightful flowers. Sunshine, lighter evenings, what a splendid time it is. So this month's scribbling should be full of joy and optimism. Sadly it isn't. Why? Well I do apologise because I really did want to be positive as I recognise that of late I am inclined to melancholy or ranting. But, ...but, I can't help it... Litter!

What d'you mean, litter? I mean that's what's affecting me, litter, rubbish everywhere. Bottles, tins, fag packets, dog ends, chip wrappers, sweet papers, pasties.

Bad enough, bad enough but now a new breed of litter. Odd trainers, socks, cups, plates, supermarket packaging. Everything! And this menace has now spread to our lovely little village. Just stroll across the railway bridge towards the pub or Co-op and look over the wall, down the embankment, behind the railings. It's a recycling depot. And Station Road! What about it? Well I counted one hundred and sixty seven fag ends down there, from top to bottom. Why? Simple; off the train, light up, inhaling sharply, pleasure denied since Victoria, so by the time they reach Station Road the fag is done for. Right, flick it anywhere, tread it out, let it burn, anything, just get rid of it...

Of course there is a more recent, far worst menace than using the street as one big ashtray. I am referring to T.S.F.C. Throwing Stuff From Cars. I did write to several motor manufacturers with the idea for a compartment in the car's interior, for litter, but judging from their response I don't think they took me seriously. They all ignored me, with the exception of BMW who said "We thank you for your interest shown and would like to give you this £5 voucher to spend at any Boots store"... Hmmm?...

But what if we all did it? What? Indiscriminately threw all unwanted items to the floor. In the home, the workplace, the road, schools, hospitals, parliament. Yes, parliament. "Would the right honourable gentleman, member for Dystopia East, kindly refrain from stuffing his chip paper down the back of the green leather benches.

But they all do it, Mr Speaker.

Hear. Hear.

Orderrrr, orderrrr"

And it wouldn't stop there, oh no. Articles covertly fly-tipped now would become the norm. Western Road would be blocked with old mattresses, fridges, tyres, climbing frames. We would be deluged, and us merely a microcosm of a macrocosm. For the whole country would be drowning in a sea of - RUBBISH. Sounds fantastic doesn't it, but if we all behaved irresponsibly, selfishly, then that is what could happen.

Now you may think I'm scaremongering, but I am merely looking to the future, with occasional glimpses into the past. Of how things used to be .. Road sweepers with barrows, brooms and shovels. People using litter bins, even picking up stray bits of litter to deposit into those bins.

And although conscience and a sense of community still exists in many of us, the destructive minority are gaining ground, and we are all well aware that one miscreant can so easily undermine the responsible behaviour of a majority.

So let's all work together, 'cos ultimately it is for the good of us all.

Put it in the bin. Please.

It did seem that whenever I turned on the radio the topic was gardening, in particular edible produce. Radio 2 - a chap supposedly on an allotment somewhere in Wales, suggesting we can all be self sufficient in vegetables, even those of us who only have a window box. Phhh! Radio 4 - gardeners' question time, mushroom obsessed, continually extolling that clammy fungus. Ugghhh! Radio Kent - no better, regularly broadcasting long discussions on growing potatoes in a sack filled with earth. A constant plentiful supply, enough to feed a family of four, meeting their needs in the potato department. Phh! And double Phhh!

OK Muriel time to put this to the test. Because I couldn't believe that bloke, with the rustic accent and the jolly red face voice, really was in Wales, on the land. No sir, he's in a BBC Studio in Portland Place, making shovel and earth noises, occasionally dipping his hands into a cardboard box for potato sounds. You're a fake sir, you and your sound effect allotment. It's not the Rhonda, it's London Central, with the aid of a nifty engineer/producer.

But Radio 4, the bow tie gardeners, are definitely the worst.

"Question from a Ms Wallace from Guildford."

"Er I'm rather partial to strawberries and a glass of Pimms in the afternoon; are they jolly difficult to grow?"

"Oh simplest thing in the world, Ms Wallace. Just pop the seeds into a terracotta planter, water liberally and then wait. You'll have strawberries coming out of your ears for weeks. Can't help you with the Pimms though. (Gales of laughter from audience high on home made jam and souvenir postcards.)

Almost as bad is Radio 5 live. Supposed to be sport and current affairs but recently they have introduced a trug full of fanatics. Example -

"Ok so now we have Mr P on the line I believe, he is ringing in about his Flypolia. Go ahead Mr P."

"Well the leaves have fallen off, the branches have withered, the soil is rock hard, even the plastic container has split, it's covered in moss and cobwebs and started to smell. What can I do, I don't want to lose it, my mother bought it for me and she's coming to stay at the weekend?"

"Ah well we think you may have to revive it with plant food salvation. Perhaps the slugs, errrh nasty creatures, rather partial to Hosta and Flypolias, have made it unwell."

Toffee and balderdash, Radio 5 live trug person. Come on for pity's sake tell Mr P the truth. His plant is dead. Il est mort. His mother must know that Mr P took the plant she lovingly gave him that he didn't want or appreciate. He never fed or watered it and only when he knew his mother was coming did he recall its existence, but by that time it was too late. Mr P should hang his head in shame, pick up an old guitar and sing the blues, "My Mamma done gave me a plant that just died." And Mr P's mum should strike him from her will, rip up all photographs of him as a child and smear jam on his door knocker. A bit extreme? Yes, but he deserves it..

But it's not all about you, Mr P. What about me? Well it was action time for me and action requires planning and materials, and materials means my favourite store in the whole wide world - Kent Alloominom - Ahh!

"Yes Richard, yes Des, I'll need grow bags, lots and lots of grow bags. And

canes and peat, and barbed wire and plant food and seed and everything. Yes give me everything, all that a person of the soil requires."

I was getting carried away, swept up in the vision I had of huge tomatoes hanging from vines that rose up those towering canes. Lost in my hysteria that saw strawberries as red as pillar boxes, as bloated as opera baritones. Lettuces, courgettes, celery; serried rows of gorgeous green like a conquering army on parade. My enthusiasm knew no bounds; exceeding my garden size, my expertise - my purse.

At last I stopped and, still shaking with emotion, I quietly left the store in a sort of daze, as one does at such a time. Then, wandering into my garden I pictured the transformation from its barren landscape to a miniature farmers' market, thronged with admirers pleading with me to part with all on display. At close of business Richard delivered my order and within three days everything was in place. Even the barbed wire coiled around the strawberry planter to deter the birds. All I had to do was to wait and let glorious nature take its course. But that was over six weeks ago and still the canes stood vacant, void of tomatoes. The soil refused to yield even a hint of food. Rain had washed the earth from their grow bags and the barbed wire, uncoiled of its own accord, pointed limply into the distance; redundant, no strawberries for it to protect. And the sorry overall effect suggested the Battle of the Somme rather than a farmers' market. I strolled through the garden, perusing my failure.

I didn't blame Richard or Des, their goods were sound. I didn't blame mother nature, she unselfishly gave them water and sunlight. I didn't blame myself, Muriel Rurial, 68 years old, spinster of this parish. No, I blamed those radio gardeners. On their necks the guillotine must fall, in the form of an irate phone call to the chief culprits, Radio 4 gardeners' question time. And that's what I did. Alas those broadcasts are not live and you will never hear their tosh and excuses for such abject failure as that which I experienced. But anyway this is how it went:

"Ah now I believe Ms Rurial from Borough Green needs advice on encouraging her edible produce garden to yield and not die. So let's see if we can help you shall we?"

"Well bow tie, it's not dying because it never actually lived. Not one thing, NUFFINK! All the dreams and aspirations you and your programme engender every week, came to NUFFINK!"

He quizzed me on what I tried to grow, on how I went about it. He tried to trip me up. Did I do this, did I ensure that.

"Yes, yes, yes. Did it all. I even took to wearing one of those ridiculous straw hats, the sort that lady gardeners wear. I felt a fool in it but I did it for the sake of the crop. Crop? Phh."

Bow tie seemed flustered, he giggled slightly, nervously, before suggesting various useless remedies, clutching at straws, even at one point asking if I had considered talking to the plants in the style of our heir to the throne.

"Plants?" I countered, "there are no plants. Perhaps I should talk to the compost and the barbed wire?" I then got personal with my insults and at that point they cut me off, mid flow..

Ah well perhaps I'll never have green fingers, but then I am blessed in other ways, and that I recognise that is, one of my blessings.

It's funny isn't it; we begin by looking for something we need at that moment and, whilst raking through drawers and cupboards, come across various items that distract us from the original search. Oh look, my old Timex wind up watch. It's fully wound, give it a shake, hold it to my ear - Nuffink! They never were a lot of good, those watches. Back in the drawer with it and carry on raking.

Ah an old black and white photograph wedged at the back. It's me, a proper "Tom Boy", perhaps sixteen years old, standing by an ice cream van. "COMMER" the manufacturer's chromium badge is clearly visible. It's a delightful vehicle, so understated, not at all like the gaudy things we see today. And there's the man leaning out, over the counter, handing a lady two cornets, a small child at her side. The man's hair is swept back, slicked down with Brylcreem. He has a pencil moustache and he is smiling. A carefree summer's afternoon smile that was the late 1950s. My mother is behind the lady being served. I am patiently waiting for my treat while admiring the van's rather splendid badge. Hmm, I wonder who took that photograph.

I put the photo on the table and continue looking for the plug adaptor for tan electric toothbrush I won at a garden fete. I knew I had an adaptor but never did find it, so the toothbrush languishes in a drawer - and I will probably come across it in ten years' time when I'm looking for something else....

Throughout the day, despite other distractions, I kept returning to that old photograph. So why is it we look upon the past with such fondness. Was it really that special or has affectionate recollection merely distorted the physical truth?

Ahh nostalgia, a heady emotion. But wouldn't it be wonderful to own that little ice cream van; not as a commercial venture but just to tour the villages. Toodling along bathed in sunshine, the occasional chime. Luxury. Ah well, just a dream for a time gone by, but I suspect a fully restored ice cream van would cost many thousands of pounds and of course we never can recapture time ago can we? Nor should we either, as the wisdom of that adage reminds us, "Never meet your Heroes". And my

hero is that time frozen there by the click of a Brownie camera. A smiling teenager standing beside an ice cream van, over fifty years ago. Yes, precious time just slips away then one day ...

"CHEERIO"

They boxed up my life

Artefacts, paper, pencils - books.

Lots of books.

Clothes, watches. I collected watches

They marked a time that went on regardless.

They sold the home, the car - the bits

Neatly disposed of

Nothing remained. No trace I was ever here.

And that was the way of it, the end of it.

Yessir.

September 2009

I came home to find sodden washing hanging from the line. Once again those weather chumps had got it wrong. Introduction of their new satellite weather tracking system merely meant they can now wrongly predict the weather thirty days in advance.

The BBC are worse most definitely. Furthermore it would appear the only qualification necessary for the position of weather person, in the case of women, is no dress sense whatsoever. Have you seen some of those outfits? Straight out of the dressing-up box. Sometimes I feel I'm watching an amateur pantomime production and, if I turn the sound off, I could imagine them asking Jack to go to market to buy a cow, when in actual fact they are warning us of a high ridge of low pressure moving in from the Atlantic. This is one of their standard phrases set to confuse us. The subtle mixture of high and low in the same sentence easily confuses us at a time we are willing Jack to choose a decent cow.

And the men, they're worse! Why do they all think they're camellias. One in particular who knows his days are surely numbered owing to public outcry subsequent to so many sodden washing days. Well he's obviously trying to establish a personality of natural wit and charm, a perfect choice for most panel games and TV AM couch conversation. It's a common progression, a pension for most faces on the box. A jolly little club.

The commercial channels are as bad but they are so blatantly promoting themselves it's as if they've admitted it and are saying "Hi I'm Sally, this weather thing is only temporary 'cos don't you think I'd be great in Eastenders, Emmerdale or in a long running panel game ..."

Well I know I did try it before but I thought it was time to revisit my attempts at predicting the weather, old school style. The secrets are all there in nature itself, if we can only unravel the mystery. If I recall correctly I did try but failed miserably with the miniature Swiss Chalet, where the little man pops out for rain and the woman for sun. But I never really gave the seaweed a proper trial. I remember collecting seaweed and hanging it in the garage but didn't know how to interpret reading of the weed. So off in the morning to Whitstable to try again..

Sunday morning, approaching midday, I parked a little way from the town and strolled in, as Whitstable is quite a trendy area now and fills up with trendies at the weekends. It was a lovely day, the sun high in the sky, but I doubt last night's pantomime dame, who predicted showers, was hanging her head in shame somewhere or in the stocks covered in egg yolk. Anyway after a little while I wandered into a coffee bar not realising, until my place in the queue reached the counter, I was in Whitstable's first ecofriendly coffee lounge and that I would be buying a "Friends of the Earth, decaffeinated, save the planet, save the whale, save the rainforest, save everybody, Mocha Americana." Oh and here's a card we stamp every time you buy a coffee and when the card is full you get a free coffee and mug badge. £4.25, thank you.

I had to share a table with three other woman who, I learned from their loud conversation, were Radio 4 producers living in Hampstead, proudly displaying their mug's badge, clearly regulars. And from the way they looked me over and exchanged glances between themselves I could tell they were thinking "Oh look there's a shabbily dressed poor person, obviously a local, let's engage her in conversation, perhaps we

can use her". That's an awful expression those media types employ and their very choice of words says it all. Fortunately a seat at another table became vacant so I moved before they could "use me".

Leaving the coffee bar I strolled along the high street, browsing through some of the shops, then wandered down to the harbour and beach area. It was there I saw a man dressed in typical seafaring garb, sat on the keel of a very small upturned boat, holding a length of seaweed up to the Sun's rays and studying it with what appeared a practised eye. He then went on to lightly touch the seaweed, occasionally stopping at a particular spot to gently squeeze and stroke its surface. I was mesmerised as I watched him, marvelling at the way, without satellite or computer in the manner of ancient mariners, he was probably able to determine mother nature's intention. He sensed my attention and without looking towards me spoke in an accent not readily discernable. It was a mixture of Cornish with occasional lapses into Cork or Derry. "It's in the weed, answers are all there."

He popped a bobble of seaweed and a viscous fluid ran onto his fingers which he held up for my inspection as he turned to face me. "And can you tell the weather from that?" I asked him. "That I am after doing madam for sure! But it's not possible from just any of the weeds, 'tis only certain skeins that inform of the weather". He looked at me and a silence fell between us, as if he knew what I was about to say, and he waited. It was a long agonising quiet as I pondered the words that would persuade him to impart a wisdom surely passed down through generations. Eventually as he was about to turn away I settled for, and blurted out, "Would you tell me how?". Again an agonising silence as we exchanged a gallery of expressions that I finally interpreted and moved the situation on with "I'll pay you of course".

Some ten or so minutes later, with a Tesco bag housing my skeins of seaweed and a memory bank clinging to the wisdom of interpretation he imparted, I made my way back off the beach towards the high street. En route I was approached by a gentleman in uniform complete with peaked cap bearing an enamel badge informing us the hat sat on the head of an employee of Whitstable borough council. He spoke in the officious tone of minor authority. "Oh no he's still at it then, is he?" He took the Tesco bag from me, peeked at its contents and went on "I thought so, right, how much did you give him?" "Well ten pounds actually".

The man from the council pressed his lips together, shook his head and said, "Ok come on we'll get your money back. We did move him on and he disappeared for a while but obviously he's back." I followed him down the beach only because he had my bag of weed but then I caught up and held council's sleeve. "Look I don't want my money back, I want to try it." Council stopped in his tracks. "He's a charlatan miss. He's never been to sea and he can't predict the weather". "I want to give it a try anyway, maybe he can". And with that council returned my Tesco bag, in disgust, and resumed his course towards the man he called a charlatan.

This all happened a little while ago and I expect you're wondering. Well a council was right he couldn't consistently predict the weather but sometimes he does get it right, and I like to think it was ten pounds well spent. Anyway I think £4.25 for a mug of froth was a bigger con - don't you?

I'm sorry, I'm going to have a rant, again. Perhaps there will be laughter, jelly, ice cream, Punch and Judy and all things pleasurable but, I can't help it, I've got to have this rant first. It's "e-bay"! That dreadful cyber shop, that's the source of the problem...

Monday morning I had to go to the post office to road tax my little Nissan car and, as I left my home in Western Road, I saw a lot of people on the pavement and, on closer inspection, realised they were the tail end of a queue that stretched to the post office counter. Those two lovely women, Queens of the counter, a credit to our gender, were not to blame. On the contrary, lesser mortals would have a queue out to the M20. No, the culprits were caught in clear exhibit as they stood at both window positions, surrounded by boxes for despatch to destinations worldwide. Items purchased-sold via the internet.

Window one, a rather overweight woman, dark rings about the eyes, jeans, tee shirt, child in buggy throwing a tantrum, spent too long at the counter. Window two, tall emaciated youth, deathly pallor, empty sockets for eyes - solitary hours staring into a screen, a flickering genie, mesmerising, seductive, putting people in touch with the worrrld, then laughing at us floundering in the chaos...

O.K. First rule of warfare, "know your enemy". "Enemy identified as e-bay Suh!". What to do though. I have identified him but I do not know him. How can I combat him when I am ignorant of his weaknesses: Hmmm?

At times such as this, periods of hopelessness, I am often rescued by my unique Muriel brainwaves, and sure enough I was. "Challenge the messenger not the message". I can not possible defeat the world wide web, the internet, this modern phenomenon but I can obstruct its servants. I'll start in the morning..

The plan was to wait until an obvious e-bay approached the post office. Laden with boxes, vacant expression, jumpy impatient movements, and I would deftly slip in front of him and cause my own queue, but to the motorway, down to the coast. Let them have a taste of their own medicine.

Sure enough I didn't have to wait long as a mountain of boxes on legs, denim legs, came round the corner. I held the door open and slipped in front of him in the queue. Perfect: window one closed for internal audit, queue moving inexorably to counter though.

I sense e-bay's restlessness behind me but imagine he is thinking "Oh just an old dear in front of me, buying a few stamps, writing letters to

her grand children, Ahhh: so she won't be long". Five minutes later "Oh I'll need some large first class stamps, book of four. Second class, ten stamps, no no, twelve stamps. A biro, rubber, notepad".... This went on for ages and it was the system I operated throughout the week, Monday to Friday...

Saturday morning, day six, I was about to leave home to complete a week's disruption when I glimpsed the chaos in the sitting room and it stopped me in my tracks. There were tall stacks of box files, cellotape dispensers, notepads, envelopes, folders, paper, everything; and all at once I realised mine was a pyrrhic victory and knew then how old King Pyrrhus must have felt when counting the cost of defeating the Romans...

I never went to the post office that morning, instead I visited Tesco for a case of Chardonnay. Well, now that Linda was off the wagon AND she has a computer, I thought she might sell my stationery for me, on e-bay.

It's happened to us all. We open a pantry door, or cupboard, and there are the telltale signs of small unwelcome visitors.

The top of a biscuit packet nibbled. Tiny "visiting cards" dotted about. Cardboard packaging gnawed. Yes, mice have moved in and anything not in an air tight container is fair game. Little incontinent characters, foraging, trespassing, looting. Time for action; Muriel style...

I place fresh cheese on a mouse trap but do not set the spring. The cheese sits there, it can be taken without danger to the mouse but the mouse is not sure. He has lost a lot of friends lately. Wracked with uncertainty, driven insane by both fear and longing, the mouse can stand it no longer and so throws himself on a trap set properly in some other house; and he perishes....

The old style sprung traps are often lethal but for some mice they are a challenge, a risk worth taking, but these new traps, cheese offered apparently without threat, well they are different entirely. And soon the word spreads and that word becomes louder, voices unanimously warning of the psychological damage these traps engender. Eventually the chancy mice dare to look but will not try and so can no longer live with themselves for not trying. Naturally there is only one honourable course of action left for them. Harakiri!

Obviously humane mouse traps are the choice of most mice. A gentle stroll into a plastic tunnel, followed by a drive in the countryside whilst nibbling the cheese, then released without harm into the wild - perfect. Naturally there are mice who, for other reasons, prefer this option. Mice whose domestic situation is no longer tolerable, needing to, shall we say,

re-locate. Well no finer, surer way, than the ol' humane mouse trap dodge. But beware soft option namby pamby mice; for there can be a hidden peril that is more sinister, more vile than the spring or poison, awaiting victims of the seemingly benign humane mouse trap. I refer to the research lab (dramatic music here please), where the captive is not released into open countryside after a slap up meal and 'jolly' into rural splendour. No, I am talking hideous experiments performed in laboratories by mad fly-away hair scientists. (Always a bad sign in the laboratory, fly-away hair). Experiments in the name of progress. Mice given three ears, human size teeth, six legs. Ohh imagine the shame a mouse would feel, strolling under the floorboards to meet his girlfriend after an enforced absence and she sees him

grotesquely disfigured. Obviously if she loves him she will stand by him but it's a serious and unnecessary test for any relationship.

"I love you but I can't bear to see you like this, it breaks my heart".

They part, she moves away to an area far removed from the laboratory district, meets a nice regular looking mouse, while her original partner is doomed to a solitary, pathetic existence. In the words of King Richard III, "I that am rudely stamp'd and want love's majesty to strut before a wanton ambling nymph" etc etc. Oh the sadness and misery of it all, that is the life of a mouse.

Prolific, diminutive creatures, limited defence system, minor intelligence, cursed with a penchant for cheese. And little do they realise they will never achieve the Hollywood Dream Walt Disney promoted; for there could only ever be one Steamboat Willy, one Mickey, one Minnie, and even they were not for real.

So, consider the mouse, he means you no harm. Spare him the spring, the poison, the laboratory. If he does prove a nuisance then place a fresh piece of cheese on a trap but do not set the spring. The choice is his, there will be no blood on your hands.

Viva la mouse. Yessir!