

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2003**

February 2003

I should not have gone up in the loft. So many memories there, in boxes, bags, photograph albums, or simply languishing in an old suitcase.

Fragments of a life preserved in tissue paper, tied with ribbon, wrapped in cotton wool. And amongst those pleasant memories are the skeletons locked away, too painful to evict with the truth. But now, prizing a small English/French dictionary from his bony fingers, I am about to reveal the truth and banish this particular skeleton.....

All my friends were married, I was nearly thirty. Still single and increasingly teased about my 'spinster' status. Suddenly I announced, "I'm going to Paris!... Ah the Left Bank, The Champs Elysees, The Eifel Tower. That city of romance. I'm off!"

And a week later I was boarding the ferry for Calais, and from there I would pick up the train to Paris....

I had packed fish net stockings, figure hugging sweaters, fire red lipstick and skirts split almost to the thigh!

I planned to sit at a pavement cafe, wearing sunglasses, smoking through a cigarette holder and sipping espresso coffee, where I would be swept off my feet by one of those romantic Frenchmen. The sort we see in black and white sub title films. You know the type. He has long, dark, swept back hair, smokes Gitanes, plays jazz piano and stares out of the window a lot. We will marry in Notre Dame and live in Provence, surrounded by our own vineyards and all the while he would whisper gently in my ear, "Ah Muriel, Je t'aime".

But from Dover to Calais it was an extremely rough crossing and I was so sick that, rather than continue to Paris, I had to spend the remainder of my holiday recovering in a cheap bed and breakfast near Calais before returning to Borough Green at the end of the week....

"Oh Muriel you look so pale, so thin," they said. "I know, he's exhausted me," I replied. "Who?" they asked. "Well to give him his full title, it's Baron Louis, Charles, Napoleon, Dupont, and we are to be married in the spring. What's more you're all invited."

They squealed with delight but of course over the coming weeks and months Louis Charles never appeared. Eventually I had to report that, despite writing to declare his undying love for me, he had been forced to call the wedding off.

I then went on to regale them with stories of our days and night aboard his yacht, in the casinos, or dining in the finest restaurants in Paris and, what's more, to proclaim I never regretted one wild passionate moment of it

In the loft I returned to the English/French dictionary to it's place in the old leather suitcase then wondered why on earth I had gone up there in the first place.

And d'you know, I could not for the life of me remember.

March 2003

I eyed with sadness the view from my patio doors into the garden. Hitherto it had been a riot of colour and song, filled with my most favourite creatures, birds.... But now, and for the past week, it has lain empty, except for the soggy bits of cake scattered about the lawn...

It all started when I invited Daphne round for tea "Oh," she said, in her typical blunt fashion. "These cakes are all very well, but I prefer home made". She continued, disparagingly glaring at Mr Kiplings exceedingly good Viennese whirls, "But of course I forgot you can't sew, crochet, knit or cook can you?"

"More tea Daphne," I enquired. "Or will you be going now?"

I didn't wait for a reply but went to collect her coat and quietly squashed a wodge of butter under the collar before returning with it for her to leave.

When she left, as I was washing up I reflected on her words and had to admit I never was much at those domestic chores. Preferring, as a little girl, a catapult or football, to dolls and pressing out pastry shapes.... But anyone can bake cakes, it's a doddle. Surely?

Right I'll prove it, I'll bake the finest cake in the land. It will be filled with four and twenty blackbirds, Little Jack Horner, Sixpences and the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Steady on Muriel, perhaps you should start simply, with a Victoria sponge. Yes that's it, a nice little Victorian sponge....

I went to the garage and the box of books that were my Mum's, and found the perfect thing, "Cake Making for Beginners".

Back indoors I looked at the book's cover, which showed a 1950's lady smiling proudly at a cake held between her oven gloved hands.

The book opened naturally at a page where a message was contained. The message had been written on a small white paper bag. It read, 'Mum, sorry I've been naughty again. I really don't mean to be. Love Muriel. x' The book's page was a recipe for a birthday cake and I noticed on the reverse of the paper bag Mum had practiced free hand the word, 'Muriel' ready for her icing.

I felt sad recalling how I always seemed to be getting into scrapes, not realising how hard it must have been for Mum, as a single parent.

'Right Mum, I thought, I dedicate this cake to you', and turning to the Victoria sponge page, I set about my task.... Some of the ingredients I didn't have, so I improvised, and other ingredients sounded so delicious that I put in extra.

Big mistakes now. I forgot to pre-heat the oven, also I didn't have any greaseproof paper so I used newspaper... At this point I thought I heard the 1950's lady groan but pressed on regardless.....At last the two layers of sponge were ready to leave the oven and, accordingly to the instructions, slip neatly from their baking tins.

Eventually I managed to prize them out, using a paint scraper, but they bore the headline, 'Smog grips London', from the newspaper I was forced to use. I should have let the cake cool before applying the cream and jam, instead the heat made it run everywhere but, I had made my very first Victoria sponge and knew Mum would have been proud of me.

Sadly I had to admit it was awful, and tossed it on to the lawn for the birds.

Now, a week later, I peer into the empty sky above my garden and gently sigh, "Oh come on birds. For my Mum Please."

May 2003

I thought I might apply for the part-time job I saw advertised in one of the those modern coffee bars... The manager admitted he would prefer someone younger but, as I didn't look my age and nobody else had applied, he would give me a chance. He gave me my trendy uniform and advised me to report for work next morning.

That evening, at home, I tried on the American style outfit, complete with frippery hat, and stood in front of the mirror. "Yes sir. What would you like?" "What's for you madam?", I asked the mirror, then turned sideways to examine my figure.

If I breathed in and held my breath it improved my neglected shape. If I tilted my head upwards slightly it took up the slack about my throat, and if I removed my glasses, although I could only make out shapes, I looked ten years younger.....

Next morning at 9.00am, without glasses, without breathing, head pointed to the heavens, I was ready for my first customer.

I thought I heard the other younger assistants giggling, but without glasses I couldn't see if they were laughing at me or not. Anyway, at that point a blurry figure approached the counter and uttered words completely foreign to me when he requested, "Two espressos con macchiato, one latté and a tuna ciabatta".

"What was that, again?" I asked the blur. He repeated his order, adding impatiently, "Come on, come on, I haven't got all day". Then I heard a young voice say, "Don't worry Muriel, I'll serve this customer, you see to that lady there".

"What lady, where?"

"I'll have a caffè Americano, two caffè mochas, one espresso con panna and a toasted focacca".

"Ohh that lady?".... I peered towards the sound of the order, at what seemed like a blue cloud wearing a hat, not realising that now I was breathing normally, the posture had gone. Also the head had dropped and so my throat was sagging..... The impatient blue cloud rasped, "Did you hear me, I want----", and went on to repeat her order. For a while I just stared at the the hat floating across the counter from me then suddenly blurted out, "Sorry, machines broken". At this point the hat, the cloud, backed up by previous customer, the blur, began loudly criticising my age and incompetence. The manager heard the

commotion and came over, asking me to step in to his office. He gave me a day's pay, said he was sorry but felt that I was not suited for this type of work and that I could return the uniform later....

Back in Borough Green, in the charity shop, I met Monica who became quite emotional when she saw me in my coffee bar outfit. She said I reminded her of a Wahwonga airline stewardess, from her Australian honeymoon over fifty years ago. She looked dreamily beyond the window, repeating, "Fifty years, and we're still together." Then plucked a hankie from the sleeve of her cardigan, to dab at her eyes. Practical Pat, unmoved by all this, suggested, "Why don't you work on the tills in Tesco's, Muriel, they're always advertising there?" ... "What a good idea Pat I think I'll pop next door and enquire about some contact lenses."

I was born in 1940. Dad was killed on active service, a year later. Mum never re-married, because for her dad was perfect. I suppose they never really had time to discover each other's failings.

Anyway, Mum devoted her life to raising me, and selfless acts towards others.

I was always a bit of a 'tom boy', causing mum more problems than if I had been pink and lace, but I don't think I was too bad as school reports described me as 'inclined to rebellion but even so a very nice girl'. Later I left school, got a job, left home, rented a flat, and generally enjoyed life. Little realising how sad Mum was at my leaving.... I was blessed with many friends but over the years they all married and, while I was always welcome in their respective marital homes, I knew that such a life was not for me.

When Mum's health suffered I moved back home to be near her when I wasn't working. People said it was a fine thing that I did but I saw it simply as the evolution of life, and that was the way it remained until I lost her several years ago.

Mum left her little terraced house to me but, although it's paid for, there is a lot of expensive repair work to be carried out on the property. Work which I'm afraid may never get done...

Returning home from my trip to the village, I discovered one of these scary, official looking letters on my mat. Wonder what it could be? I do drive too fast. I write political statements on hoardings. I sometimes draw moustaches on the Queen on bank notes. Hmmm, I wonder?

The letter was from a firm of solicitors acting on the instructions of Peter Hemsley, now deceased. It read as follows -

Dear Ms Muriel Rurial,

In accordance with the wishes expressed in Mr Hemsley's will, we write to inform you that he has bequeathed his entire estate to you. This being the property "Meadow Cottage" and monies comprising the estate after funeral expenses are paid.

Yours sincerely, etc...

Yes, Peter Hemsley. A shy young man who sometimes sat at my table in the work's canteen, more than forty years ago... I remember, he once said, 'I think you're lovely'.

Me? Tall, skinny, scatty, Muriel. Lovely! And foolishly I laughed at him, drowning his compliment in my own shyness. And that was that, he never sat at my table again. Sadly he has never entered my consciousness since those days, and yet secretly he must have harboured dreams of a life with me. Probably imagining me perfect in every way, because I never gave him the opportunity of discovering my imperfections.

I dropped the letter in the bin, knowing it would not be fair to accept his bequest, having rejected his affection.

July 2003

Increasingly I am obsessed with the weather. So imagine my delight when I discovered, in the charity shop, one of those little Swiss chalet weather predictors, where the man pops out of it's wet or cold and the lady, in all her glory, will present herself if it's fine.. Fifty pence later I took my little treasure home, then dusted and polished, it stood in pride of place on the sideboard... So excited was I at acquiring such a piece, I failed to notice that while it was teeming down with rain outside the man stood resolutely hidden inside the chalet... Anyway, in the morning the winter sun blazing through my window woke me early and I hurried downstairs to greet Heidi and Yoli. That's what I christened my new chalet friends. "Good morning Heidi, good morning Yoli," I called, with a Swiss accent into the chalet, and I'm sure I heard their soft replies, in almost perfect English. "Good morning Muriel, how are you today?". I was floating on air, I was overjoyed, I was a new woman as I made tea and poured Tibby her saucer of milk. And of course I failed to notice that, despite the glorious sunshine, Heidi was hidden at the back of the chalet while bad weather Yoli, complete with trilby hat, 'mit de fedder' and perilously short lederhosen, stood proudly beyond the threshold soaking up the sunshine....

Over breakfast I had what can only be described as 'one of my brainwaves'. I decided I would go to the model shop and buy some little Swiss type trees and Swiss looking model figures, maybe even some cows and a Toblerone and dot them about the chalet to make Heidi and Yoli feel really at home. Unfortunately this project was not entirely successful as I forgot to take my glasses with me and not until I got home did I realise that what I thought were Swiss gentlemen wearing trilby hats, were in fact cowboys. Even worse, I had mistaken model railway porters for traditional dress Swiss ladies. A pure fluke I had got the trees and Toblerone right but a bigger mistake still was buying miniature Morris Minors thinking they were Alpine cows... But I had paid a lot of money for them all and decided to place them about the chalet regardless, and invite Madge round for tea, shamelessly to impress her.

Maybe just this once I could get her to admit praise for something I had done... We were drinking tea, she told me about her son's promotion, her new car, her Spanish time share and her

landscape gardening project. Then I couldn't contain myself any longer and blurted out, "What d'you think Madge?", inclining my hand towards the spectacular chalet scene, Madge rose from her chair and then stared incredulously at my handiwork. "What on earth is it?" she asked. "It's a Swiss weather chalet with authentic surroundings", I replied. Eventually, when Madge ceased her uncontrollable laughter, with tears in her eyes she said, "It looks like the nativity at the OK Corral." Then picking up one of the Morris Minors and a railway porter, added, "Or it could be one of those 'Seaside Holidays begin at Easter', adverts".

She was still laughing when I threw her out. She was probably still laughing somewhere as I ate the Toblerone, as I boxed up the chalet and figures and placed them in the loft. And even more probably, despite the sudden bitter wind and sleet, up in the loft Heidi was still standing outside the chalet, freezing, while Yoli sheltered inside.

September 2003

It was a warm summer afternoon. I was sitting in the garden enjoying tea and toasted tea cake, at the same time admiring the fragile beauty of a floating butterfly and particular charm of a ladybird.... There was a loud knock at my front door and reluctantly I left my garden to attend the intrusion.

Standing on the step was a young man, with shaved head, sporting several ear rings in each ear and wearing a rather untidy Arsenal supporters' shirt. In an agitated tone he asked me if I would give him shelter. "You know, like the Bishop did to John Valjean in *Les Misérables*", he said. Then he started singing 'One More Day Before the Storm', got all emotional, fell to his knees and wept right there on my door step.

I was embarrassed by this and, sensing my embarrassment, he composed himself then went on to offer sharpening services... "Knives, scissors, mowers", he said. "You know like they did in 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers'". And at this point he began slapping his knees and thighs whilst humming a sort of country and western medley, braking off occasionally to display sharpening gestures. In fact I have to admit to being quite impressed with his carborundum wheel shear sharpening routine. But once again he was overcome with emotion and fell sobbing at my knees.

At last he rose to his feet and apoloisingly explained, "I'm sorry, I can't help myself. It all comes flooding back to me". He went on, "But if I can do any gardening for you or rendering?... Guttering perhaps, or some grouting?" There followed a long cold silence as we searched for common ground between us. Suddenly he blurted out, "I grew up out of a suitcase. My parents were entertainers". An awkward pause before offering to, "Clean your windows, creosote something? Oh come on lady your windows gotta be filthy? Or what about your garden out the back there, it's bound to be a tip. Stands to reason, old dear living on her own, everything blunt, messing about making jam and crocheting doyleys all day"...

At this point I could tell he regretted having said these things and his lips shaped the word "Sorry" but nothing was said. Instead he produced a

small mouth organ from his jeans pocket and commenced playing the blues, breaking off now and then to tilt his head to the heavens and plaintively moan, "Oh this one's for you Momma". He finished his song, apparently his own composition, 'Momma Done Bugged Off', and as he was tapping the spittle from his instrument into his open palm he blurted out, "I know, I know, what about your loft, it's bound to need lagging? It's important lady. Not now I know, but come the winter", and he sucked air in through his teeth, at the same time shaking his head.

At last, with resignation he said, "OK I can see you're not interested but be it on your own head." Then he began humming the tune from 'The Great Escape', kick started an imaginary motor bike he had there and making motor cycle noises, roared off up the street.

When I returned to my garden the tea and tea cake were cold, the butterfly and ladybird had gone but, d'you know, I would not have missed my impromptu visitor for the world. And come to think of it I'm not sure my loft is lagged.

November 2003

It's all very well being hailed a hero by the girls in the charity shop and at WI but frankly I'm ashamed and embarrassed by the whole episode.

Daphne and Pat thought I was being silly and in fact were so proud of what I did they decided to throw a party in my honour, while Judy pledged two of her famous coffee and walnut cakes if the celebrations went ahead.

Of course I didn't want any fuss but there could be no denying what had happened. It was all there in black and white, front page headlines no less... 'Pensioner crushes antiques rogue'. It went on to say 'Mick the Monkey, notorious con man, antiques dealer, on the run since May 2001, was rendered unconscious by martial arts expert Muriel Rurial in a bloody boot fair confrontation'....

Naturally the paper allowed themselves a measure of poetic licence, concluding with, 'We have 5th Dan Ms Rurial to thank that 'The Monkey' is now safely behind bars.

And then a touching post script confirmed, 'Joyce will give a paper folding display of Victorian erotica, complementing the party to be thrown in Muriel's honour'. But how did all this come about? Well, briefly I'll explain... I thought I might do a boot fair. The idea being to sell a few bits and make enough money for a holiday. So with this in mind, early one morning, the car full to bursting, I drove into a field just off the A20. Monica advised me that dealers would descend upon me as soon as I arrived and that I should remain in control, not to let them harass or bully me I like Monica, she's gentle but strong willed, and brilliant at Scrabble. Anyway I echoed her words as I stopped at the end of a row of cars. "Remain in control Muriel, remain in control". Then suddenly they appeared, surrounding my car, peering through the windows, tugging at the door handles, attempting to prize open the hatchback. And as soon as I was out of the car they were at me, and already I was losing control. "ow much the picture lady?". "What price the carriage clock?" "Those vases love, whaddayawan' for 'em?".. "Figurine, you got the pair, should be a pair y'know?".

I started to panic, the chaos was frightening. Oh why did I do this, why didn't I leave it all in the loft... No, regain control Muriel don't

let them bully you. "The picture, lady. You sellin' it or not?" "Vases love, I'll give you a score for 'em" "Take a tenner for the fruit bowl darlin' ?" "An' what'bout the doll, 'ow much is she?"... The scrambling and shouting continued, then a dealer unable to contain himself any longer, wrenched open the passenger door and dragged mother's Teddy bear from the car.

This was an item I accidentally brought along in my haste to pack, but definitely had no intention of selling.

I yelled at the man, 'Give me that back, it's not for sale, it was my mother's.' He refused, and a struggle for possession ensued. A struggle so desperate that Teddy's head suddenly came away in the man's hands... Mother's Teddy that she loved as a child, treasured as an adult and bequeathed at the end of her life.

A stunned silence followed as we stared at the decapitated bear I was holding and, after that, I don't really recall the action the rush of adrenalin encouraged but, according to the front page of the Chronicle ——— .