

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2006**

February 2006

Washing machines are definitely far too complicated these days. Rinse hold, half spin, temperature, weight, Acrylic, colours, separates. Stop! Stop! Well I've never been one to be messed about like that. No Sir, I just bung everything in on number seven and that works just fine for me thank you. Possibly the only downside is, my clothes are now virtually all the same colour, shape and size. That's never bothered me. What did, was the flood I came home to the other afternoon.

It has happened before and I watched the chap repair it so, knowing now what to do, I drove to Gravesend to buy hose from the wash machine shop to repair it myself. He had a seven foot length of hose left but refused to cut it so I was forced to buy the whole length. It was difficult to carry so I wrapped some around my neck and let the surplus drape across my chest and down my back.

Then, strolling back to the car, probably because I was assailed by the cold and a bout of winter blues and, still smarting from having to buy seven feet of hose, I wandered into a travel agents in the high street. Seduced by pictures of white sand, clear blue sea and blazing sunshine, I soon found myself sitting opposite Deborah and her computer trying to determine my ideal holiday. We narrowed it down tremendously when I confessed my joy and fascination for children, on a scale of one to ten, was two. We weeded out further suggestions when I admitted third rate entertainers working the holiday hotel circuit filled me not with dread but pity, and with this in mind Debbie wiped a score or more holidays from the screen ... I declined a few more of her suggestions and when experience failed her, she leant back in her chair seeking inspiration which eventually came, causing her fingers to blur across the key pad, for the screen to burst into life depicting outrageous, bizarre happenings under the heading, "Festival of Erotica".

She turned the screen towards me for my full uninterrupted view then enquired, "How would this suit you?" She winked suggestively before continuing, "It's full board, Amsterdam five star and privileged access each day to the festival." I guessed she was getting fed up with and found the hose pipe off-putting so tried to shock me into leaving. But I wasn't having any of that so I asked, "Tell me, will I have difficulty through customs with any purchase I make at the festival. Have you ever been stopped Debbie?" Her face coloured visibly, she left her desk to whisper to a colleague who replaced her across the desk from me... "Hi I'm Angela I'm going to help you find the perfect holiday. So what sort of things appeal to you. Action, culture, sunshine? You tell me."

As she waited for my reply she studied quizzically the hose about my person and I could almost hear her asking herself, "What have we got here?". At last, and in fairness to Angela who did try to accommodate me, I acknowledged I have champagne tastes and lemonade pockets. A villa with a pool in Tuscany seemed ideal except for the price, and even the compromise of a smaller villa in Corsica was far too expensive. The alternatives of "never quite made it" comedians, unruly children, pool games or vast dining areas where men sat at their tables in vests and shorts, accompanied by women looking like boiled lobsters about to burst out or ridiculous tops - well, if I had to choose, as a penance, give me the "Festival of Erotica" every time.

I took Angela's card and a few brochures, promising to ring her if anything took my fancy before slowly making my way back to the multi-storey car park.

It was freezing in the car so I locked the doors, started the engine and put the heater and blower on for a bit of warmth before I set off. Now for my big mistake. While waiting for the heat to come through I casually looked at one of the brochures.

This must have been the following sequence of events. Pictures of Tuscany villas, combined with the heat, conspired to induce sleep and the deeper I slept the further I slumped over the wheel.

At this point Angela from the travel agents returned to her car to make her way home. Her car, coincidentally, was parked next to mine and as she peered through the steamy haze that was my window, what she saw led her to draw all the wrong conclusions.

The hose about my face that trailed away towards the exhaust. The engine running. My head slumped against the steering wheel. And as she recalled how my perfect holiday was financially beyond me, panic gripped her and she began to scream, convinced of suicide...

A security guard smashed in the passenger's window, turned the engine off, dragged me from the car and began mouth to mouth resuscitation. In this position it was impossible for me to call out but, kicking wildly and flailing my arms convinced him he had brought me back from the other side... At this point he stopped working on me, I stood up and a huge cheer erupted from those gathered, who continued to pat him on the back and shake his hand.

For them he was a hero. A modest hero, blushing and trembling with the emotion one feels from such an experience. I did not have the heart to explain the reality and demand thirty quid for a new window so I slipped away while he was still being congratulated Later that week the washing machine and window did get fixed but the villa in Tuscany will have to remain a dream. S'pose I could always nip over to the Festival!

March 2006

I've been waiting nearly two weeks now to take delivery of my new television and, incidentally, I'm still picking up splinters of glass from the carpet. What happened? Well apparently the first step in curing a problem is acknowledging its existence so, as they say in legal terms, 'Notwithstanding this', furthermore, 'Habeus corpus' or 'Magna est veritas', I hereby admit to shouting at the television and radio your honour. At this point, swoons from public gallery and cries of 'shame', but red faces too as many positively identify with my admission....

First up, Huw Edwards the BBC newsreader with his irritating Welsh twang. Perhaps I'm blaming him for the creepy politicians he introduces but it's as if he knows I'm getting angry with them and he's goading me, smirking, urging me to throw something at the telly.

Look, look they're going over to that bloke with the big ears and he's talking to - oh no he's talking to Prescott. 'Three thousand new homes for the south-east, chin wobble wobble, chin wobble chin, smug, smug chin.

Don't watch it Muriel, try a distraction. Yes the guitar, I only tried it once, I'll have another go. I bought it at Bluewater where a bloke was demonstrating and selling them. He made it look so easy. 'You get an instruction book, tortoiseshell plectrum and a guitar. Sixty pounds Madam'. He went on, 'C, F and G, three chords, that's all Bob Dylan knows and he's a millionaire. Come on lady, give it a go'.

Right, now where did I put it after I gave up last time? Oh yes, under the stairs. Ah here we are... Now, place first finger, first fret over first two strings. Hmm tricky. Second finger second fret over third string. Ouch! Then third fret, third and fourth finger over fourth and fifth strings. Ooh painful! Now strike all six strings boldly with free tortoiseshell plectrum provided, to enjoy the full F chord. TWAAANG! Tibby flies through cat flap without her magnet, is not seen for a week and guitar is unceremoniously flung back under stairs...

Back to the telly. Oh it's Taffy Edwards smirking at me again. 'Will you stop looking at me like that Edwards'. Right you've asked for this. I grab a vase, rush to the kitchen, empty its contents of water and flowers and return to lounge ready to hurl vase through screen. He must have known, he's gone from view and we're in Iraq. I put the vase down and switch to ITV, Trevor McDonald.

I like him he has got a nice lilt to his voice, he must be Irish. I could imagine him in a little pub in Southern Ireland, standing there, Riverdance style, arms at his side, flicking his feet like Michael O'Flatley while reading the news to diddely, diddely music. 'Oh de diddely diddely, diddely diddely, Unemployment up by sixty thousand... T'hoodely hoodely, hoodely hoodely, Ministry of Defence announce new measures, so we go now live to John Reid at the Ministry of t'hoodely hoodely. Oh no, not a politician! Quick Muriel go for another distraction.

The marquetry under the stairs. Big heavy green box ... Bulb gone. Dark under here. Boing, twang, splinter, what's that? Trod on the guitar. One up for the fingers still bleeding from Bob Dylan's millionaire F chord. Eventually I emerge from under the stairs, here we are, 'Marquetry Set for Beginners'. Dozens of bits all rattling about loose in box, instructions advise, 'keeping marquetry section pieces separate, take pieces from section A and using mallet provided tap gently into area marked A. But A is jumbled with pieces from B and, for good measure, they are both in a riotous assembly with C. And look, handle of flimsy mallet is split near head and suddenly the memory of my last attempt at marquetry comes flooding back to me, prompting me to fling the whole lot in the bin and watch BBC Newsroom SouthEast.

That's much better, usually simple, local toytown type stories there. No politicians just lollipop ladies, cats and budgerigars, traction engines and all things marzipan. 'Good evening and welcome to Newsroom SouthEast, I'm Shafi Aziz.... A small boy living in Deptford kept two giant hamsters, Ben and Cecil, but one night the mischievous pets chewed through a cable and plunged the whole tower block into darkness'...

Y'see this is a nice hoppety, popperty story isn't it? No naughty politicians here. 'Blah, blah, blah. Blah, blah, blah' from Ms Aziz then fluffly wuffy pictures of tubby little boy and chubby red faced Mum each cuddling offending hamster. Ahhh, I do like Newsroom SouthEast. But what's this, oh no, not the Mayor of London, not Ken Livingstone? Ughh it's him, quick where's that vase? Ah there it is, right you've asked for this Ken.

At this point I have a big row with him, shouting at the television, the vase held aloft, water dripping in my eyes. I'm taking him to task about the bendy buses, congestion charging and even things that aren't really anything to do with him but he's ignoring me so I'm about to hurl the vase through the screen when Shafi Aziz says, 'We return you to the main newsroom'.

The vase is still held high above my head as Huw Edwards continues to smirk at me, reprising the news items to the accompaniment of a gallery of slippery, toady politicians. The Welsh twang is more pronounced than ever. He's begging me, pleading, 'Go on Muriel throw the vase through the screen, hurl it at me with all your might. What are you afraid of? Go on Muriel, do it do it, go on...'

Ah a knock at the door. Oh look there's a lorry out there, Currys. That'll be my new telly.

Every now and then, through whatever means, we learn of a person's actions that are inspirational. Of course there are some whose work will continue throughout their lives, and beyond those directly affected no one would ever know. This may have been the case for Ekangwey Chongra, had a wandering journalist not speculatively driven across Africa and discovered the small township of Sepirwah.

The population of Sepirwah is probably similar to that of Borough Green and Wrotham combined, but far more widely scattered by way of dilapidated, corrugated, brick and breeze block dwellings.

The impoverished people here have been virtually forgotten by the government, through an attitude of, 'perhaps if we ignore their plight they will eventually, like the dinosaur, simply disappear'. Sepirwah wasn't always poor. In fact before the government dammed the river and diverted its life blood, the area prospered. Testament to those glory days is the sight of rusting Land Rovers, old electrical equipment and faded luxury goods, now useless or incapable of arousing jealousy or desire. Symbols of a golden age that once was Sepirwah's. And whether through apathy or fear, locals allowed the government's attitude to prevail. Crushing their spirit, denying them hope or future.

But then a lone voice made itself heard, above the poverty and injustice, the corruption and indifference towards the once proud people of a withering township. That voice belonged to Ekangwey Chongra, proprietor of the 'Sepirwah Luxury Electrical Goods and Fresh Vegetable' store. Mr Chongra is a proud, determined, generous man who shared his prosperity in many ways, one way in particular. As gifts, he distributed short wave style receivers to various parts of the township where people would gather twice a week to hear him broadcast news, information and music to the delight of his listeners. He was known affectionately as DJC 'Disc Jockey Chongra' and those broadcasts soon became part of the gentle life that was Sepirwah. But then corruption damned the river and all things changed, and steadily that change brought decline, and with it the hopeless wasting of an entire area...

One evening as DJC announced, 'that was John Lennon, Imagine', he surprised his listeners by going on to appeal for unity and

action, democratic action against the injustices that Sepirwah was victim of. This was the first of such appeals that went on to be regular features of his broadcasts and gradually the word spread, placards appeared, letters were written and that lone voice became a choir of dissent, so loud it was heard in government. Eventually retribution from the authorities was severe and emphatic. Removing DJC and his equipment, spiriting them away, silencing 'Freedom Radio Sepirwah', stifling the voice of outrage. And for a while silence reigned, until one day there was hope. Hope as once again Ekangwey Chongra reached out to the people by way of an inspirational communication smuggled out of jail to his beloved township, to be read, copied and distributed to as many as possible. Here is an exact copy of that written communication.

FREEDOM RADIO SEPIRWAH (Bulletin)

Faitful lisners ah is ere in de Mtompo jail special for dissidens, broadcarsin on de A4 paper to public people lisernin - (crackle, crackle, whistle), still incloodin de short wave noises and interference dat you love en know so well - (crackle, buzz, whistle).

Well yeserday woz de lars day oh de broadcarsin when de governmen tugs burse in an brek up evertin - (crackle, buzz, foreign voices, fade). Dey hittin me at de hankle an de crenium, den big stick swish at de bone. Shout, scream, body drag - (whistle, fade, crackle, breaking up, silence)...

Ah hurge you to unite genns d'oppressers foh de sake of Sepirwah - (buzz, crackle, Russian voices, chess moves). We must stan up to dem bullies who - (crackle, crackle, buzz whistle, fade, crackle, silence)... stole our water, our livin - (whistle, buzz, burst of music, crackle, hum, fade, crackle, long monotonous buzz, silence)...

Dey torcher me, fingernail pull - (crackle, buzz, hum) but even doh ah her tears in me eyes ah wheel nevah submit to doze - (crackle, whistle) tugs...

An ah promise det one day (shipping forecast, buzz, fade) ah will return wit new 'quipmen an - (hum, buzz, crackle, fade, whistle, breaking up, hum, silence).

It was Sunday morning, I was in the sitting room reading the newspaper and sipping tea, while in the distance a choir of lawn mowers sang their spring chorus to the accompaniment of church bells. There were sounds to delight, like muffled applause at a cricket ground, coins rattling in a child's money box or the hiss and crackle of a breakfast frying pan. Sounds that conjure images of England and all things pleasant and gentle.

But nothing lasts forever and this particular peace was disturbed by the clawing, shredding sounds as Tibby tugged at the carpet with her talons. Marking her territory, seeking attention or whatever interpretation we care to apply to that infuriating habit cats have. I shouted at her, banging my palm on the patterned Wilton for added scare value, as I have done countless times before but never to lasting effect. Tibby fled the scene of her crime, the cat flap muttering behind her as she ran to the street, returning me to the scandal in headlines and Sunday atmosphere.

And so it was, me quietly reading, time slipping by, when the screech of tyres preceding a dull thud, averted my attention from news and celebrity, to a commotion outside. A man was at the front of his car, scooping something up in his arms. He had his back to me, so I couldn't see, but I just knew it was Tibby.

The man came to the kerb where I stood on the pavement, and began to apologise, knowing from my expression that this cat was my friend. "I'm really sorry but she just ran out ..." I interrupted him, cutting short his apology, "It's OK, it's not your fault. She dares the cars, I know, I've seen her". I asked him if he would bring her through to my garden and he obliged, carrying her to a spot I indicated close to our apple tree. "Is there anything else I can do? Only I really ought to move the car, I think it's in the middle of the road." "No, that's fine thank you".

Tibby looked much the same as she always did. Laying there by the tree, her favourite spot in the shade, alert to the unsuspecting mouse or bird, Yes, much the same, except for a small dribble of blood at her mouth. I took a spade from the shed and dug an area big enough to bury her, surprised at how much earth I needed to move, but worked on and eventually just a small scar on the topsoil was evidence alone of a life past. I put the spade away then set off for Manklows, noticing outside the house two short tyre tracks that the weather would eventually erase. I bought a simple bunch of tulips, placing them where Tibby lay and stood quietly for a while before returning indoors.

I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, gazing at her bowl half full with milk; she wouldn't drink water. I looked at her food bowl with just a few biscuits in it, and then to the wallpaper shredded near the back door where she'd attacked it, for reasons she was never able to communicate. Then I

smiled recalling conversations with her. Not really what you would call conversations, Tibby purring on my lap, contented, and me enquiring, "So tell me Tibby, why do you chew the carpet and shred the wallpaper? And what's wrong with tuna or liver? You never eat that." "And I wish, I just wish, you wouldn't keep dashing out in front of cars. One of these days you're going to ..."

At this point I should have cried. I wanted to cry but couldn't. I willed the tears but they wouldn't come. They refused in the same way they had when I lost Mum. Not even then did I feel the symptoms of tears. Sadness yes, but that outpouring of emotion, not in public I would not have wanted that, but privately. Like people do when they're alone and leaf through a photograph album or look at a particular brooch or cardigan; something that reminds them. At times like that I should have cried but didn't.

Maybe that's why I shout at the television and radio. Why I get unnaturally angry at selfishness, greed, rudeness, injustice. Maybe it's all that pent up emotion in me that only those tears can release.

Reluctant tearsmaybe?

Anyway, I'll miss you Tibby, I'll miss you. But I may not cry.

I've kicked the odd tin can, rolled trumpets out of till receipts and traced raindrops on a window pane. I've blown raspberries at passers by, watched helplessly as keys slipped through a grating and listened patiently to excuses from those I trusted... Melancholy times. But there are the times that life's "greats", those tortured souls, did their finest work. Crossing that fragile line separating genius from madness. And so it was my turn....

I felt receptive to inspiration that must surely visit. I had pen and paper ready, nervously inviting, as if a lover about to elope. And I waited, for ages I waited, then slowly my mood changed as I considered inspiration.

Inspiration, the Mother of innovation and progress. "But is all progress for our good, Muriel?" My conscience posed this question, and in reply, but not of my own volition, the pen I held moved across the paper... Its response was not the rough sketch of invention, it was the voice of reason.

And this is what I wrote -

"PERFECT"

The streets emptied. The moon, a million times moon, reflected wherever water lay, while anonymous men and women peered into screens, studied phials full of mystery, as empty expressions betrayed their dubious experiments.

The quest? Perfection! The human form perceived as perfect. And yet, throughout the world imperfect people find love, artists faithfully portray a flawed landscape and mothers hold the natural child to the breast...

The hours passed, more figures were added to a sheet of paper before someone raised it aloft, declaring, "At last, here is the formula for perfection"...

The document was placed on a table and silence fell upon the room as they considered the implication of such knowledge. They remained silent, motionless, until eventually one of the team moved forward, knowing what had to be done. She held the jumble of figures and symbols to a flame and only then, when the paper blackened and crumbled, did those present convey expression.

Unanimously their expressions were smiles, beatific smiles.

There's alcoholics anonymous, gamblers anonymous, nicotine patches but nothing for chocoholics. Don't they know we need help too?

That I've come close to mugging a child for their Curly Wurly and felt no shame consuming a six pack in one go. That's six Blue Ribands, 99 pence by the way, not half a dozen pilsner lagers, pot belly, slurry speech, stagger about, "I love you" six pack. Easter was a wonderful time, theologically and eggy weggy wise. Smartie egg, Flake egg, Crunchie egg, KitKat egg, all manner of eggs but what about those gorgeous Lindt bunnies? Small for beginners and children, larger or giant size for chocoholics. Delicious.

First I gently tear open some of the gold foil and just nibble one of its ears. Mmmm that's nice, perhaps the other ear now. Ohh lovely, then more foil, more bunny, more chocolate, and before I knew it the foil's in the bin, the bunny's disappeared and I'm feeling physically sick and emotionally ashamed.

I've been here before but once again I vow "NO MORE CHOCOLATE" and, to honour that pledge, ransack the cupboards. In to the kitchen bin with the Mevities chocolate digestive, the Cadbury's fingers, the Penguins. That's it, the whole lot gone. Right, take the bag out of the bin, tie the top, go to the wheelie, throw it in, feel good, feel strong, no more chocolate for me, oh no. But who am I kidding, I know there's an emergency pack of four flakes hidden in a biscuit tin in the coat cupboard. Hidden from myself. How ridiculous is that. I know where it is so what's the point. Might just as well put it with all the other stuff. Dump it Muriel, your chocolate days are over, finito, verboten, mort. I return to the wheelie and in they go, tin an' all. The future is looking good....

Returning to the kitchen, making coffee I am lost in reverie. It's all gone, I'm proud of myself, I'm strong, a giant among women. I've kicked the habit, I'm clean, an example to others. "Care for piece of Toblerone, Muriel?" "No thank you, I'm resolute, strong willed, determined." "Crunchie?" "Not for me, thank you." "Yorkie?"

At this point the kettle's click reminds me I'm making coffee and when it's made I sit there wondering what I can dip in it. I'm missing chocolate already. The mug sits there, the golden liquid still belting round, where I've stirred it in "Sans Chocolate" temper. Then I remember I've got some Rich Tea in the cupboard. I always keep a packet and end up throwing them away, it's my nod to healthy eating when I'm shopping..... I look at the best before and there's a week to go. I dip one in my tea, it comes away from the bit I'm holding and sinks to the bottom of the mug. I try to spoon it out, it breaks up and I have to keep spooning like a woman baling out a dinghy. This doesn't happen with chocolate biscuits, the chocolate holds the biscuit together. I've got it down to a fine art, I can drink and crunch with a short dip or dunk and lick when the biscuit is immersed long enough for the chocolate to melt, but it never, never ever drops in the mug. I try eating another biscuit without dipping it in the coffee. Uggghh! Revolting!

I'm angry now, saying things I know I'll regret, nasty insulting things I'll reproach myself for later. Holding up one of those anaemic looking biscuits, "Call yourself a biscuit? Tasteless, messy. Yes messy you are, breaking and splintering in a thousand pieces or sinking straight to the bottom of the drink. And you're, you're - BORING! Yeah that's it you're boring."

I take half a dozen biscuits from the pack, one after another, frowning at them before skating them across the kitchen like mini frizbees, shouting as each one leaves my hand. "Boring, boring, boring" the remainder of the pack I throw in the garden, calling after them, "You'll lay there for weeks, the birds won't want to eat you, even the squirrels turn their nose up, you see..."

I'm angry now, frustrated, berating myself. You've got to break this cycle Muriel and you know what's required. Positive thinking, mind over matter, that's it mind over matter; and my mantra will be "I am strong I don't need chocolate. I am strong I don't need chocolate". I keep this up for a good five or six minutes before losing concentration, my sub-conscious infiltrating the mantra, simply at first with, "I am strong but I wouldn't mind a square of chocolate," to "Chocolate chocolate, I want chocolate. Walnut Whip, Curly Wurly, Yorkie, Mars bar, I want chocolate."

Of course if something is not accessible it increases our desire so I'm frantic now as I hurriedly grab my purse and throw on a coat, while still repeating the mantra which clearly demonstrates I'm at that dangerous final stage of, pleasure, passion obsession. "Chocolate, chocolate, I love chocolate, I want to marry chocolate, chocolate. Live happily ever after with chocolate, chocolate." I'm running the length of Western road, I'm at the off licence now but it's closed. Oh no. I'm banging on the shutters, calling through the window, "A bar of whole nut, some Maltesers, please." Kicking the door now, "All right just a bag of Revels, big bag though, please let me in. Look I've got money, lots of money."

I'm offering up my purse to the off licence, hoping someone inside will take pity on me but, in this state, I accidentally drop the purse and money spills out on the pavement. I mustn't lose that, it's my money for chocolate. I'm on my knees scooping it up, the tears welling in my eyes, when I have a flash of inspiration. The Esso garage, open every day of the week until eleven. Petrol, diesel, flowers, bbq coal, free air, newspapers but, more important than that, better than world peace, restoring the ozone layer, the pyramids of Egypt or Strictly Come Dancing. Better than all that. CHOCOLATE! Shelves of neatly laid out chocolate... I'm jogging now, not running, 10.40pm plenty of time, and, as I gently pass the four ways crossroads, there in the distance a comforting glow from the garage lights. Beautiful signs still lit, and that tells me they are open. Unleaded 95.9 litre. Diesel 97.9 litre. Low on oil, low on the causes of oil. Open, bursting with sweets. Chockie, wockie, sweets. YES SIR.

I push the door open and make straight for the; bulbs, oil and brake fluid section. I'm teasing myself, safe in the knowledge that it's all there if I want it, at my mercy, to carry off home to Western Rd, like a Viking. I move to the upright fridges. Milk, mineral water, fruit juice, coco-cola. Keep moving Muriel; crisps, bread, baked beans. No thank you, not for me, I'm not so keen, awfully kind of you but I think I'll just take advantage of this offer, "three for a pound". There we are, Cadbury's one, two, three, on the counter, don't ring it up yet, I'm still buying. Ahh creme eggs, Cadbury's creme eggs. Choco, hocco for the cognoscenti. A delicacy all year round, not merely seasonal. I'll take a dozen. And so it went on until my purse was empty, my desire sated. "Would you like a bag, madam?" "No thank you, I want to stuff my pockets, fill my blouse, imbibe the rich aroma of choc choc, a chockie choc choc.

I was five creme eggs down as I hurried past a police patrol in conversation with the "Offy" manager, and that plus two bags of Revels saw me back indoors. When I finally got to bed that night, full of self loathing, resolving never to touch chocolate again, I had consumed almost all my purchases in an orgy of sugar, cocoa, glucose, syrup, raising agents and oil, in fact the whole nasty gang..... But please don't condemn me, take pity on me, I need help.

Write to me at "The Voice", telling me how I can overcome this weakness. Prize for the best suggestion, a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray. (Some centres maybe missing).

Now I know this will be unpopular, controversial but it has to be said. Take it from me there is no global warming, hole in the ozone layer, ice cap melting, environmental disaster looming. Any more than there are pixies, fairies, lucky heather, love at first sight or Father Christmas. Let's destroy these and other myths once and for all.

Myths that are perpetrated by politicians, documentary film makers and crack pot scientists, using statistics, gobbledegook and partial documentaries. Insulting our intelligence with pleas to "RECYCLE", hoping they'll earn brownie points with the greens, vegetarians and other weirdos. Homes filled with little piles of cardboard, paper, glass, tin cans, plastic. Eco warriors hoarding the stuff for collection instead of consigning it to the wheelie bin. My motto is, "The planet's fine bung it in the wheelie"....

Right I will now discredit the shameful portrayal as villains, of Messrs Ice Cap, Ozone and Warming as depicted in a David Attenborough documentary early in the year. Did you see it? The one with huge lumps of ice breaking away and dropping into the sea. All the while him warbling on, predicting ominously the end of our planet. Well I like Dave, I've even got a calendar with him on it Somewhere? But he should stick to the programmes he does that we love and know so well.

You know the sort of thing. Little hoppity, poppity spiders mating on a fig leaf. Loveable friendly elephants lumbering across the plains of Africa, Dave following behind in an open top jeep, smothered in dust and elephant dung.

We do love you Dave, and your brother. You know, the one who escaped from the prisoner of war camp with Steve McQueen. Dug a tunnel the length of the Bakerloo line and disposed of the earth down his trouser leg. But Dave, Dave; honest wildlife is your forte, that ice cap programme stuff is not you, really. It might have fooled a lot of people watching that tiger pursue a zebra for several miles, only to see it escape across a river suddenly appearing thanks to a dodgy ice cap. But if that wasn't enough, if you look closely you will spot a number 53 bus in the distance going over Camden Lock. It's just a brief glimpse but it's there, I'm sure I saw it. Which just goes to confirm what I said earlier. DA, and other docu-makers, politicians and scientists are not averse to, shall we say, blurring the edges to substantiate their claims.

It's easy, look, statistics now. Ninety four per cent in real terms of the projected gross increase forecast demonstrates a marked rise of somewhere in the region of, blah, blah, blah; agreeing with a finding from our survey where seventy two per cent of all people interviewed "Sorry, going to have to stop you there, run out of time, look on our website, etc, etc." Right that's twelve million people converted to recycling, through statistics we have no way of disputing. Now bring on bearded professor, fly

away hair, world of his own, looks like his Mum still dresses him.... So over to your Professor Slozweckzki, from the institute of something or other, government funded, nice little earner, big pension, own department, not answerable to anybody...."Ve can no lonker suzstain zis aboose of ze planet. Zere is a mark-ed deteriorizashun of ower envroh-ment. Look at ze fecks ... Blah, blah,blah. Ramble, ramble". Cover blackboard with baffling figures, technical word finale and another fifteen million are converted. "Well sadly that's the end of tonight's programme. Our thanks to Melvyn Bragg, Lord Fumbler and of course to Professor Slozweckzki." OK that's, er twenty-seven million down, thirty-eight million to go.

Take it away Dave, and Dave does, with a veritable "tour de force". It's all there in a one and a half hour special, trailed for weeks beforehand. And if we thought his programme earlier in the year was outrageous, what about this most recent one? You must have seen it? Ice flows as big as St Mary Platt, eloping from the ice cap to float serenely by in a projected computer graphic that floods Basingstoke, Winchester and the Isle of Sheppey.

But more significantly, lions and tigers are drowning as they pursue their lunch. And attention to detail this time as there's political pressure on Dave so, not a bus in sight. Now if that wasn't enough, "D" hits the nation with his "coup de grace". Tugging at the heartstrings of all but the hardened non believers of the ice cap, ozone, recycling bin syndrome. Insidiously convincing children, the kiddywinkies, those little darlings who terrorise supermarkets, kick the back of your seat in cinemas or on airplanes or, when slightly older, are permanently wired to their iPod while thumbs dart across a key pad sending insane messages to someone sitting not three feet away from them!

We can't reach them through dialogue or social inter-action, the key to their attention is via a screen. Enter DA displaying images of pipsy popsy animals drowning, or alternatively, fluffy wuffies peering forlornly into a parched water hole.

Children from Carlisle to Cornwall are in tears and rushing to the pedal bin, retrieving bits of cardboard and Evian bottles in a desperate bid to retrieve pipsies and wuffies. Echoing Dave's sentiments, "These don't go in the bin Mum, you're destroying the planet. Dohhhh!" Documentary ends, people wander off to bed, swearing allegiance to the cause and that's another thirty-eight million converted.

No not quite it's actually 37,999,999. This woman is not convinced and only the passage of time will prove me right. In the meantime I'm off to the wheelie with four baked beans tins, a Weetabix box and six empty Chardonnay bottles left from Linda's last visit when we discussed the ozone layer.

Increasingly I am inclined to reverie. Long languid periods of thought, of what might have been, or perhaps what is yet to be. And then at other times a whim, that I may or may not act upon. Yes that's it, no more than a whim.

It could be a new pen, a trip to the to seaside, or a card to someone for no other reason that I briefly thought of them. Recently, acting upon one of those whims, I set off in Trevor, my Fiesta, with no particular destination in mind but excited at the prospect none the less.

Before leaving I ate a hearty breakfast and completed my new daily ritual of feeding the birds. Of course! Well since Tibby's demise and absence from the garden, all sorts of birds flutter in to No Western Road, to amuse and delight in their unique way, alternating from noisy aggression to timidity. Squabbling over a morsel of food when there's enough for all, or fleeing the scraping of a garden chair or the harmless turning of a page.

But they are a delight to me and I am so pleased that at last I have discovered what pleases their palate. Digestive biscuits crumbled small, madeira cake (not too moist), tiny pieces of fruit and, most important of all, fresh water daily. My reward for this care. Their antics, their song and the occasional mess on my window.

But where did my whim take me that Sunday morning? Well after driving for a couple of hours in no particular direction and, if comments from other drivers were to be believed, with no particular skill, I was eventually seduced by the picture book charm of a village in East Sussex...

Parking in grounds of the village church, then wandering amongst the listing headstones, a thought struck me that I was merely visiting not just there, but life itself... From the church I strolled to the high street's collection of little establishments, including a pub, an antique shop and, a tea rooms in the style of our sadly missed Borough Green Tea House. So I decided to browse amongst the antiques then treat myself to cream tea. Clearly this was one of my better whims.

The antique shop was an Aladdin's Cave of bric-a-brac, lace, jewellery, pictures and other 'quirky' things. I suppose something for everybody. A young man wearing a Panama hat, seated at a roll top desk, greeted me with "Hello", then returned to the Sunday crossword, leaving me to peruse items for sale in the various rooms.

I enjoyed looking around but when a Westminster Chimes Mantel clock struck 3pm, I was reminded it was time for tea. But as I made my way to leave something caught my eye. In a little wicker basket, lying on the top of some crocheted doilies, was a bundle of letters tied with pink ribbon, and I don't know why but I felt compelled to read them and pulled at the ribbon's bow.

I soon realised from reading the first letter that these were love letters from a soldier in the trenches to his young wife in England. I wanted to read them all, their love story, hoping it would not end in tragedy, like so many from the first world war period.

Thinking I could read them over tea I took them to the man in the panama hat to determine a price.... "Ahh they're lovely aren't they," he said and then went on, "It's a heartbreaking story, I've read them". He weighed the letters in his hand, assessing their value. "Hmm let's say the whole bundle, including telegram, thirty pounds." I was shocked at the asking price but when he mentioned telegram I imagined a tragic ending but just had to know for certain...

As I sat in the tea rooms waiting to be served, I plucked at the ribbon then began to read the letters arranged in chronological order by their faded post mark. By the time I finished my tea I had read the entire collection and, with much sadness, the telegram informing young Mrs Wyles of the death of her soldier husband...

Walking back to the car I couldn't pass the antique shop without calling in the speak to the young man, if only to agree on how touching those letters were. As I entered the premises I noticed that the roll top desk was vacant but then I heard voices towards the rear of the shop. Tracing those voices I discovered they came from behind small door marked "PRIVATE" "Yeah she fell for it, hook, line and sinker. That's our best line yet, those 'tragic' letters. Much laughter followed and, as I peered around the door slightly ajar, I saw Panama hat standing over a young woman seated at a desk, surrounded by everything necessary for their cottage industry of fake correspondence.

Driving home I thought, "What a heartless pair they were and what a silly old fool I am."

October 2006

Like Martin Luther, "I have a dream".
My dream? I'll tell you.

The Borough Green by-pass will go ahead, Western road will no longer reverberate to the thunder of lorries or the scream of motor bikes and our high street will be pedestrianised. There will be tables and chairs outside shops where people can enjoy cappuccinos, wine, pastas or pastries. And I imagine too, street theatre. Actors, musicians, poets, entertaining us in what was once a busy thoroughfare. Where children may now walk with impunity, while others will cross at their leisure. And guess what, the village hall car park, cleared of vehicles, can be our very own "Speaker's Corner".

Where on a simple upturned milk crate, we can exercise that sublime democratic right to something so precious to this once beautiful country. Something that is being steadily eroded by legislative political correctness. Freedom of speech!

But from the top of our milk crate nothing will be politically incorrect. We may say what we wish and leave it to the intelligence of the listener to heckle what they feel is the bigotry or stupidity of the speaker. This is how ancient Greeks did it, the birthplace of democratic free speech. And in that tradition, Athens will be our milk crate, in our car park, as confident orators articulate the thoughts of those around them. While other normally shy individuals suddenly feel moved to give impassioned speeches, voicing their fears for the nation and ideas for resolution.

But at no time will a speaker be covertly observed, followed home, arrested. For as Voltaire famously said, "I don't like what you say, but I defend with my life your right to say it".

So let our high street come alive to the aroma of ground coffee, the melody of buskers, the power of liberty. And may Borough Green be an example to men and women across the land, to stand on makeshift platforms and, with loud voice revel in that glorious luxury that generations fought long and hard for, and to preserve.

Freedom of Speech.

November 2006

It's autumn again and we try not to think of winter just around the corner. Barren trees, frost covered lawns and an impotent sun, blazing in the sky but shedding no warmth.

Classically the line "Oh I don't like it when it's cold", is associated with older people but I've always hated winter, for that brings on snow. Possibly this is a legacy from those days when I was a young girl at senior school and Gary Wilson put a snowball down my neck. Gary was a particularly unpleasant boy, always playing tricks on people, mostly girls and timid boys.

He was a bully. I realised that much later when I understood fully the concept of bullying as opposed to, in my ignorance, simply dismissing him as a thoroughly nasty boy. Wilson, like most bullies, was really a sad character. He was spiteful because he was jealous, he was jealous because, unlike other children, he was unhappy. His seemingly unprovoked attacks were a result of his perceiving his victims as normal happy individuals. Something he was never made to feel in the violent atmosphere that was his home.

How did we know such an atmosphere existed? Well Gary would occasionally miss school and upon his return bear the marks of an 'accident'; one such incident necessitating stitches above his eye. An injury that would leave a deep permanent scar. Most of us did our best to avoid Gary and his sadistic pranks, and apart from those who made up his small gang, not out of loyalty or admiration but self preservation, Wilson was a lonely young man.

Then during our final term a young girl, Pamela, joined our school and was placed in Wilson's class. She was a delightful girl who everybody immediately warmed to so we felt it fair to warn her of Wilson's rage. Amazingly Pamela and Gary became friends, confounding all who tried to fathom what appeared the unlikeliest of friendships. And steadily Gary changed from his spiteful ways to that of a near normal boy. I recall clearly his obvious embarrassment and muted pride when one of his paintings was framed and hung in the dining hall.

Yes this once outwardly cold, hard young man, all the while had the artist's eye to perceive and hand to convey, but it took the kindness and affection of someone outside authority to recognise and nurture his potential. He would still lose his temper if provoked but, more worryingly, the cycle of absence from school followed by bruised return continued. But in those days folks were slower to investigate such things and many children were scarred physically and emotionally for all their days.....

July 1956, school's out forever. For me, for Pamela, for Gary, for a whole generation. It was a day of liberation leaving that old red brick seat of

learning, optimistic for the future, symbolically tossing pens and school bits into gardens as I made my way home. Ahead of me Pamela and Gary, with linked arms, paused occasionally to lightly kiss before turning left for the bus home. And that was the last I saw of them...

Several years ago in West Malling, as I entered Tescos a man at the threshold gently shook a collection box and, as I moved closer to give a donation, we exchanged expressions of uncertain recognition. Dropping a coin in his box I noticed a deep scar above his eye that seemed to excite my curiosity even further. Moving through the store I noticed several people wearing charity stickers, confirming their donation but until then I hadn't really noticed the charity NSPCC.

Could it really be Gary Wilson championing the cause against cruelty to children? Himself a silent victim for many years. Or was it merely an amazing coincidence? Did he and Pamela, childhood sweethearts in that romantic idyll, stay together? And how had their lives evolved from that last day at school?

When I left Tescos the charity volunteer had gone, precluding any inclination to enquire.

But perhaps it's for the best that I'll never know.

December 2006

FOR SALE

**Brand new front wheel, off a Raleigh bicycle.
£500. Apply within for contact details.**

This is the advert I placed in Shakti's newsagents window. Why? I'll explain.... It was one of those open back vehicles, with chrome crash bars back and front. The windows were blacked out and it had Klaxon type hooters on top of the driver's cab. Oh dear! I was in Trevor, my Fiesta, waiting to turn right at one of the Wrotham Road turn offs, when open back thingy careered in to me. Trevor would have been eighteen years old in two weeks time, had he survived the crash; but he didn't. And as I waited at the roadside for a pick-up truck to tow Trevor away, him twisted and broken, me angry and upset, I began to recall Trevor times.

October 1988, me and Mum proudly taking delivery at Foreman Bros of a brand new motor car. Mum dressed up for the occasion, us setting off from the forecourt, giggling like school children, and the salesman waving until we were out of sight. Trips to the seaside, to National Trust properties, across on the ferry to the Isle of Wight wonderful memories.

And strangely as years passed and Trevor's bits started to break and wear out, so too did Mum's. Then, as we left Borough Green for her numerous hospital appointments, there were no salesman waving, or us giggling. Just Mum subdued and afraid, while I sat beside her knowing there would be no more of those excellent excursions we enjoyed so much. Mum never did learn to drive, she had always been a keen cyclist, carrying amazing amounts in those pannier contraptions, and it remained that way until cycling became too much for her, and that's when we brought Trevor.

When the pick up truck finally arrived the intermittent rain had become a steady downpour, it was dark and open back thingy driver (OBTD) had gone, leaving scribbled details and no apology. Simply remarking "Jusoneudoz fingslur, ennit?" I sat up front with the pick up driver as we made our way to the garage, the old break down truck's engine whining, gears crunching, a terrible racket competing with the driver's CD. And when Trevor was unceremoniously unloaded, I was given a courtesy lift home, clutching a few possessions salvaged from the glove compartment and a National Trust sticker from the windscreen, with the words, "Write off", ringing in my ears. And to add insult to injury, a valuation advice of "Lucky to get two 'undred quid luv".

Weeks later the misery continued when I was notified by my insurance company that OBTD's details were false, even his number plate was fictitious, and this meant I would not receive a penny in compensation. I was so disappointed as I reckoned on possibly £500 insurance payout, and this would be my deposit for another Fiesta I had seen. I called her Samantha, and used to stroke her bonnet as I walked past her on the forecourt and whispered, "I'm going to buy you. Yes, soon". But of course this was not to be....

I sulked for a little while, jealously spiteful to other car drivers. Spending long periods at the Four Wents pedestrian lights making cars stop while I just stood there as lights showed red and drivers fumed. Also stepping straight out on Zebra crossings, causing emergency stops, but never losing my grip on reality enough to vandalise parked vehicles. And then I snapped out of it, resolved to positive action. If I couldn't afford a car I would get a bike. And I did. Helmet, lights, panniers, lock and chain, pump, everything.

How? Lycra! That was the condition. I had to wear the full lycra outfit, emblazoned in jet black letters "MEGABIKE SUPERSTORE. BIKES. BIKES. BIKES AND ACCESSORIES. CONTACT RIDER OR TEL: xxxx" But how did this come about? Well because I responded to an advert in the Courier for volunteers and, because of new legislation regarding ageism, they had to give me a contract for fear of being accused of age discrimination.

The contract stated I must wear the promotional clothing and give out leaflets if approached, and in return the bike is mine. This deal appealed to me, particularly as I did not have the money for a new bike. Of course there is no such thing as a free lunch and the downside was the lycra outfit was excruciatingly tight and, being flesh coloured, gave the impression of a nude cyclist tattooed or painted in adverts. This effect might have been quite striking on a young curvaceous woman but a sixty-five year old bean pole may not have been quite the image MEGABIKE had in mind.

Anyway they delivered the bike on Friday and Saturday morning I squeezed into the outfit and set off. Panniers loaded with leaflets, me chilled to the bone (no warmth in lycra), wobbling all over the road, eliciting wolf whistles, turning to groans and exclamations of disgust as I came under closer scrutiny. At last I arrived at Tesco West Malling and dismounted. The saddle had cut me in half, my ankles had turned blue with cold, denied circulation by the lycra, and I needed the loo. But I knew Mum would have been proud of me. Me with no sense of balance, a modern day Godiva on a push bike, filled with a sense of achievement as I locked my bike to the railings and strolled down the High Street, drawing gasps and the occasional raspberry from passers by. I had a cappuccino in Mackenzies high street cafe, bought some books in the charity shop then strolled back to my bike, thinking I would unlock it and cycle home to good ol' Borough Green. But no, the leaflets were dumped on the pavements and the bike had gone. All that remained was the front wheel still padlocked to the railings. Big mistake to lock the wheel and not the frame to something. So this meant a long walk, in lycra, carrying a front wheel, in the rain that had just started to fall. But I thought, if I could sell the wheel for the price of Samantha's deposit, then all is not lost. So I placed an advert in Shakti's window.

Of course I could wake up on Christmas morning, and there outside my front door is Samantha, with a note on her windscreen.
"MERRY CHRISTMAS MURIEL. BEST WISHES OBTD"