

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2007**

One of the Christmas presents I received was a leather bound address book. This gave me the impetus to upgrade from the tatty old book that was mine and Mum's, so one grey January afternoon I set about the task.

Seated at the bureau, having completed 'A-C' I pushed the directory away from me, leant back in the old chair and began to recall the names of shops, tradesmen, friends and relatives who'll be missing from the new book. Premises closed down, people we lose contact with or simply another funeral attended.

I suppose what got me thinking this way was Pamela Collins. It was one of those familiar stories of two best friends in the whole wide world, at that magical primary school age, when suddenly everything changes as a family moves away; leaving shadows on walls where pictures once hung and a little friend watching a removal lorry disappear from view.

And then amazingly, some forty odd years on, a Christmas card arrived at Western Road. It was from Pamela Grant nee Collins. "This is a speculative card, wondering if you are still there, with your Mum, at good old Western Road, love Pamela X." There was an address, we corresponded but never met up. Pamela had married and emigrated to Australia but couldn't forget those wonderful times when we played together and explored our special place in the woods beyond the Rec. Lost in a fascinating world of make believe, intrepid explorers who could at any minute stumble upon the characters we dreamed inhabited that area made fantastic by our imagination...., we called it Montpellamell.

The correspondence continued then for no apparent reason letters bearing the familiar Australian postmark ceased; until one day I received a card from Mr Grant, Pamela's husband. "Sorry for the delay but" He went on apologising for being remiss in not informing me sooner but the gist of it was, Pamela had died....

The Christmas before Pamela died she sent me a poem written by her in celebration of our happiest times in Montpellamell.

Montpellamell

Bibberly bobberly,
Nibberly nobberly,
Gingerly Gongerly,
Montpellamell.

Skip and hop
Clippety clop
Come with me to Dingley Dell.

Where we can run, and jump, and hide
Between the flowers growing wild
Or loudly drum on tortoise shells
Echo in to wishing wells.

The deepest voice a bumble bee's
The tallest thing a Jumberly
The bestest place in all the world
Secret, special, never tell.

Where we can spy the Bimbley Born
Be frightened by the Frangipom
Make faces at the crescent moon
And puzzle at the crickets, who
Sing aloud, never seen, their chorus to the fairy queen.

Who sits upon a mushroom throne
Whose subjects have not yet grown
Beyond the age of Montpellamell
That right of way, to Dingley Dell.

I listened to Desert Island Discs, when Kirsty Young's guest was the mother of triplets, Anne Daniels, who had successfully completed a Polar Ice Cap expedition, making her a celebrity. In the warmth and comfort of my home it was difficult to fully appreciate the privations of such a journey so, addressing Ms Young through the mesh of the radio, I scoffed "What sort of guest is that, anyone could do what she did."

Yes, I was in a bad mood. I like D I Discs and I like to be surprised as to who the guest is. I tune in and hope to be enthralled and quite frankly strolling over the ice cap, in my estimation, is no challenge, in fact it's a DODDLE. Yes sir, doddle.

I was so angry I phoned Linda hoping she would agree with me and we could have a moan together, but she disagreed totally and went on to challenge me to spend even a night in the wild, let alone traverse the ice cap. Of course I took up her challenge and, to facilitate my efforts, Linda loaned me a camping stove and lantern then, a stroke of luck, I picked up a tent and equipment from a nice Romany gentleman at the Addington boot fair. "It's all dere lady. All de tingz yez'll be needin'. Trus' me on dis. Fifty quid!"

The plan was, Saturday evening Linda would blindfold me, drive to a desolate destination, drop me and the equipment off and there I would remain until she retrieved me late on Sunday. No mobile phone, no money, no watch, no turning back, but by golly I'd do it. And so Saturday teatime, blindfolded and with all the gear in the back, we set off.

It seemed we were driving for hours and then must have turned off the established road as I was bounced and buffeted around for ages until at last the welcome contrast of motionless silence broken only by the tick, tick of an engine cooling. Linda then took the blindfold off, declaring "Well Muriel we're here, this is your home now."

In silence and semi-darkness we unpacked the gear, and later as I watched the Astra's tail lights disappear I began to doubt the wisdom of this exercise; but then gathered my senses to demand of myself "Muriel get cracking, set your gear up and, as they say in those American films, 'Walk the Talk'."

First off I lit the gas lantern and then unpacked the tent. Erecting the tent was going smoothly until the head flew off the mallet and disappeared in the long grass. So, the last of the guy ropes and one tent pole had to be hammered in with a large tin of beans which burst open and smothered me and the tent with beans and bean juice.

This made me feel quite hungry so lighting the stove I put some sausages in a pan while hammering the remainder of pegs with a tin of leek and potato soup. At last the tent was erected and secure but, stepping back to admire my work, I saw out the corner of my eye a fox with his head in the frying pan. Rushing to shoo him away I tripped over a guy rope and knocked the lantern over which set fire to the sleeping bag and melted the chocolate

biscuits and a bottle of fairy liquid. Struggling to lift the five gallon water container to douse the flames I managed to lift it but the water's movement unbalanced me to send me reeling backwards into the middle of the tent which collapsed as it ripped end to end. As I lay there ensnared in sopping canvas and guy ropes, I watched helplessly as the frying pan burst into flames and spread to the rucksack, and by the time I was on my feet everything was destroyed.

The fox, culprit of catastrophe, tutting with his body language at the pathetic efforts of a human to survive in the wild, sloped off indifferent to the chaos he'd caused.

At this point I decided, reluctantly, I had no alternative other than to return home. But how? Taking the compass from my pocket then gazing at the stars I realised I hadn't a clue how to interpret either. So, throwing the compass in the air and poking one finger up at the sky, I started walking.

After what seemed an eternity, thinking I heard seagulls, I stood still, listening intently, and yes I did hear seagulls. I grew excited and began to jog, then run, tripping and stumbling in my dash toward life. And then the faint sound of waves, growing ever stronger until a glow of artificial light came in to view, and all at once I knew where I was - Beachy Head!

There was the cafe/pub where people had their last drink before leaping into the unknown. There were the cliffs they leapt from, where I was soon standing gazing out to sea. I looked up at the crescent moon and felt quite emotional, having not only survived but found my way to civilisation, unaided, and only ever felt anger and frustration, never fear. I imagined this is how Anne Daniels must have felt and it got me thinking of my eight records.

My first choice, I started to sing that old country and western classic, "Your Cheating Heart" and was well into the second verse when interrupted by a softly spoken cool American voice.

"Now you aint gonna do anything crazy are you ma'am? Believe me that aint the answer." I smiled and replied, "Oh no, you don't understand".

"I think I do ma'am, I think I do. Now let's just move away from the edge here, get you home and things'll work out fine, jus' fine".

On the journey home he told me he'd often persuaded people against leaping from that very spot where I stood; escorting them home, going some way to restoring their faith in human nature. A Samaritan.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that wasn't my intention, nor to allow my curiosity to enquire the reason for his phoney accent. Anyway at 3.00 am he dropped me off in Western Road, with a "Goodnight Ma'am, you take care now," and he was gone. That night I slept soundly, right through to Sunday lunch time, which meant I had missed Desert Island Discs but, deep down I knew Samaritan is greater inspiration than celebrity.

April 2007

Why do things let us down? They break, they leak, don't fit, fall off. Don't we have enough to contend with from humans, without problems from inanimate objects?

Cheques and tax discs, that sort of thing that rips across rather than tears down the perforations.

The milk sauce pan that boils over as soon as we look away.

Self-assembly packs with parts that don't fit, or have screws missing.

Electrical appliances that blow, we change the fuse and they work fine. So why did they blow in the first place.

Those little tabs that tear instead of peeling back, on milk, tiny portions of marmalade, butter, jam and cream.

The nozzles on tubes of super glue that set rock hard after one use.

The enclosure we spot, after the envelope is sealed, we forgot to include.

The phone that rings as soon as we've sat down to eat.

The knock at the door directly we sit on the loo.

Photographs we look good in but there's a dustbin or a skip in the background.

The tallest man in the theatre, sat in front of you.

The unruliest child in cinema, sat behind you, kicking your seat for a the entire performance.

Food that drops off your fork into the gravy or bolognese sauce; ruining your shirt or blouse.

The tradesmen that never call The tradesmen who do call just when you despaired and popped out for a minute.

Call centres.... Phone options. Press one for account enquiries. Press two to renew existing policy. Press three to speak to an adviser. "I'm sorry all our advisers are busy at the moment". Press four to speak to my Uncle Stanley about his mushrooms, thriving in a shady position in his garden. Press five if you want to hear the options again as you didn't press any because none of them were appropriate. Or alternatively you can put the phone down, let the car insurance lapse, be arrested for driving uninsured whilst under the influence of "got the hump", banged the phone down, stormed out, vowing never to deal with the company again.

But they are all the same aren't they, these companies? Millions of us ringing up, querying accounts, disputing details, challenging decisions. Running through options one to ten. No joy, no peace of mind, no resolution. Or finally if you do speak to a human(?), it's "Hello, I'm Danny, how can I help?" I will now speak to you at a hundred miles an hour in an I indeterminable accent that you will find impossible to understand. I will then

we go out for a little spin?" They actually found it a pleasurable experience. These days it's a veritable battlefield. The car is the modern equivalent to a knight with his lance, on a horse. Those big ugly four wheel drive things even have aggressive names - Warrior, Animal, Thunder, Invader, Rhino. You never see Mitsubishi Butterfly, Toyota Lollipop or Ford Balloon on a Stick... No it's aggression and confrontation. "I'm not giving way, the obstructions on my side of the road but I'm hammering through anyway. Not only that, I'm not acknowledging anyone who lets me through, gives way. No sir. I'm insecure, ignorant and I don't want to appear weak so I'm not motioning any namby-pamby thank you gestures. I'm the black knight in chain mail thundering through. Not to receive the hand of Lady Guinevere but to buy a pasty and takeaway coffee while I park outside Plaxtol Bakery and block the High Street..."

And what about the car at the traffic lights in front of you at the red light, when the light shows green it doesn't move off. After a while you gently toot. Eventually, just as the light returns to red, he pulls away leaving you sitting there. Or, it's a perfectly clear road behind you but someone roars out in front of you then dawdles along for ages at 26mph, all the while it's impossible to pass. A car backing into the last space just as we arrive.. Some one parked selfishly over two bays, leaving nowhere else to park....

Not to mention, Junk mail. People who push in front of you in queues. Cardboard cups. Anti-social behaviour. Politicians. Celebrity based television shows. Recycling. Rap music. Weak milky tea. Oranges dresses. Fishing. Climate change debates. I could go on. Some things personal, some things general. I'm sure we can all identify with some or all of the afore-mentioned things.

But let's put it all in perspective. Why do those things I've mentioned, frustrate, annoy or confound us? It's because they are not the norm. We expect, and are used to, different behaviour. We may not realise that at the time but that's why it's so noticeable. However we must not take too much comfort from that fact, for this would lead to complacency. Be aware, the tide is turning so we must do our best to resist such practices ourselves or we could eventually descend into chaos.

As you know I've always been a bit of a rebel, so I'm off to go fishing, in my orange dress, listening to rap music whilst drinking weak, milky tea out of a cardboard cup.

They smashed their way in, without conscience or finesse. Individuals with no regard for people or property. Violent rogues, amateurs, imposters in the world of burglary. Not for them the gentle picking of a lock or the subtle prising of a door. And once in, they roamed the house pulling out drawers, upturning furniture, scattering photographs across the living room floor. Smiling black and white images. A child in school uniform, family pets, friends and relatives; ageless when dipped in the elixir of photographic fix. These items tossed, deemed worthless by thieves.

And no doubt later, they went on to celebrate in similar cretinous style. Reveling in some dingy pub and then spilling out on to the street in noisy, stumbling disruption. High on the proceeds from savings I stupidly kept in a tin, entrusting its safety to the smiling face of the little girl on its lid. And Mum's jewellery. A slim wedding band, some ear-rings, a gold cocktail watch she never wore for fear of its theft. Huh! Then there was Dad's medals. For King and country, some metal and ribbons. Unfair exchange for a life sacrificed. For a marriage cut short and a daughter never to have known her father.

But who cares about all that when you're in? When the window's gone and no one's seen or heard you. When you're roaming the house alert to anything even remotely negotiable. You find a tin containing cash, you hold it up to show your accomplice. He smiles and gives the thumbs up.

Later, more cash. Not so much this time, just twenty and fifty pence pieces in a jar, standing on a paper receipt for the previous donation. Again they exchange smiles, not so broad this time but smiles none the less.

Upstairs now, jewellery box. Don't look through it, just snaffle up the pieces, sort it out later, throw the box on the floor. Knock some ornaments over, just for the fun of it. Spray some perfume, screw your nose up registering your disgust to your partner in crime. He sprays some in return, you laugh then resume the business of theft. A gold bracelet on the dressing table. Oh that's nice, rose gold, antique. We'll have that.

And so they continue, these villains; no cupboard, drawer, or potential hiding place escapes scrutiny until at last they flee. Their pock-

ets, and a pillowcase they've "borrowed", bulging with the proceeds.

Items collected over a lifetime, gone in minutes. The house breached, its window laying shattered on the patio, its frame splintered, hanging from a kitchen wall. The interior ransacked, violated, waiting for me to return, to restore order.....

A police officer called and he was sympathetic but weary. Obviously in the grand order of things this burglary was well down the list of incidents he had been summoned to during the course of his day. So he took notes, gave me a crime number, declined a cup of tea, then left.

Later, a security company boarded up the window then next day builders called, replaced the window and practical order was restored, but the real damage could never be repaired. A person or persons unknown had broken in to my home, stolen my possessions and trespassed upon my memories; discarding them to be trodden underfoot as they went about their task. Surely no craftsman's tools could ever fully repair that harm?

I often wonder, where are they now, these men, perpetrators of such crimes. It is possible that during the course of our day we may come into contact with them and that they appear perfectly normal citizens. But this is not unique, for most of us have a public and private persona; it's just that theirs is more extreme. And the bottom line is, they can not be trusted and this fact does not bother them at all. Where as to you or I it would be an anathema to imagine people could not put their trust in us. With this in mind, maybe the burglar should be pitied rather than censured.... Maybe. Whatever, when all is said and done, we will continue to buy items of value and leave money in tins and jars.

And just as surely, there will be those among us who will continue the practice of burglary.

Muriel was a bright, happy girl but often she would be far away, lost in reverie, imagining fantastic situations and the company of excellent people. "Excellent", she liked that word, it described special things. She read it first in a girls' annual from a short story entitled "Pamela's Excellent Holiday". Pamela was a character in Muriel's favourite comic and Muriel wanted to be just like her. Fearless, adventurous, attractive, a hero.

Pamela was thirteen. She, like Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Superman and all children's heroes, never aged. She rescued animals who fell into wells, or were stuck in the tallest trees. She led children to safety from desperate situations and, on one occasion, even apprehended a criminal.

She understood Morse code, could read a compass, light a fire with two sticks and once rode a motor bike in the May fair; leading the procession with the May Queen riding pillion when the Queen's float broke down....

At thirteen Muriel took to dressing like Pamela. Plaited hair, faded jeans, baggy green jumper and shoes with red laces. That was Pamela's trade-mark. Bright red laces!.

People thought Muriel wasn't very bright but that was because she did spend so much time vacant, dreaming, gazing out the window. "Muriel Ruriel, will you stop staring into space and pay attention". Muriel's teacher Miss Clover (Clever Clover they christened her) called aloud so many times during lessons, but as hard as Muriel tried she couldn't help it. She would look beyond the window in her bedroom, in the classroom, imagining a real life adventure. The sort that Pamela triumphed in every week, then slipped modestly away.

But after a while someone always brought Muriel back to earth; and the fantastic events were banished to be merely the slates and chimneys of the houses opposite. And she would sigh and give a wan smile, knowing it was really just a dream that would never be realised.

It was early, on the first Saturday of that long Summer break from school, and already, even before the first breakfast egg was cracked on the side of a pan, the sun was blazing down from a sky unanimously blue. Later, dressed like Pamela, Muriel set off on her

bicycle for Teston. In the front basket was a picnic and fishing tackle and strapped to the frame was a small fishing rod. And as she free wheeled down the long steep road at Barming, Muriel called aloud to the blazing sun, "Summer holiday's here. Hooray".

As she approached Teston, Muriel caught a glimpse of the river that ran through the weir and on under the little bridges that crossed in to East and West Farleigh. Small boats moored at the bank bobbed gently in the wash from passing craft and the scene filled Muriel with excitement at the prospect of the day ahead...

After she'd eaten lunch and drunk her lemonade, she set a small piece of luncheon meat on the hook then waited for the float to betray a fish's hunger. In no time at all the float dropped below the surface, Muriel tugged at the line and the rod bowed at its tip. A small boy watching discreetly behind Muriel grew excited and moved closer as she began to reel in the fish. The boy clapped his hands as the fish, flapping silvery in the sunlight, emerged from the water.

The inquisitive boy reached out to touch the fish but as he did so, lost his footing and slipped into the water. In panic rather than in bravery, Muriel dropped the rod and jumped in after the boy and, after a desperate struggle, managed to grab him with one hand and clutch a tuft of grassy bank with the other as her rod floated away with the current.

The boy's parents, hearing their son's screams, were soon on the scene and both the boy and Muriel were hauled, wet but unharmed, to safety.... The local paper carried the story and for a long while Muriel's mother kept the cutting, testimony to her daughter's actions. But that was me then. What now, fifty odd years on, Muriel Rurial?

Well like many of us I look back and wish I had lived life differently. I still gaze out of windows for long periods, now without Miss Clover to interrupt me; but as is often the case in later life, I find myself remembering rather than imagining.

Oh I still wear red laces now and then, and occasionally ride a small motor bike, but despite that curtsy to youth there can be no denying my body's declaration of age. Unlike my hero Pamela, who lives on, timeless, within the pages of those old annuals. Inspiration to generations of young girls.

I went to to new, regular antique and bric-a-brac sale in Tonbridge where the pound entrance fee includes a free ticket for the mystery prize draw. That was Bank Holiday Monday and by Wednesday I received a call informing me I had won, asking me to confirm a convenient day for delivery.

By Saturday lunchtime a giant of a man set the huge mystery prize down in my kitchen, wiped his forehead, pointed to the attached delivery note and requested a signature. He then went on immediately to say, "Right, fitting". Then plunged his head inside the sink unit, moaning and sighing for several minutes before standing up to report. "Phhew it's absolutely rotten under there, I've never seen anyfink like it. The cable's crystallised, there's only a whisker of copper, the bakelite's cracking up on yer junction box. An' look at this ..."

At this point he held a blackened fuse in the palm of his hand for my inspection. "It's yer fifty amp cooker fuse, bin put in yer two gang, two way terminal. I tell yer I've never seen nuffink like it". A sharp intake of breath, a shake of the head before poking his head under the unit again, like a bird at one of those hanging feeding things, and calling to me from within. His voice muffled and distorted by the assortment of Marigolds, dishcloths, sprays and tea towels underneath. "Look at this pipework", is what I think he was saying but it came out via the kitchen sink acoustics as "Hmm at miph pmmwah, if diaphumuple".

And his diagnoses of a joint leaking must be what he meant when he said, "Muph me whh join wheekin. Oh yeah fort so". He emerged from under the sink, banging his head as he did so, brushed the dust from his jeans then gently fingered the mark on his bold pate that was discolouring as he spoke. "You got real trouble under there lady. Leaking like a sieve, close to the dodgy 'electrics. Liable to go up any time... But the good news is I can fit yer dishwasher. Nuffink's impossible". He gestured to his van parked outside, the boast emblazoned on the van's side panels in bright red paint, "Nothing's Impossible". Then he looked at me abstractedly as his lips moved while mentally calculating the cost of installing the dishwasher. "Well yer lookin' at let's see, renewing the pipework and 'lectrics under there; re-arranging the unit, making good... Hmm work out about four 'undred".

A long silence before I enquired, "Pound? Four hundred pound?". He looked at me as if I had insulted his worth; there was fire in his eyes. "No lady, four 'undred camels, Smarties, teapots, rocking 'orses. Course it's pounds". I told him I would have to think about it, and this seemed to tip him over the edge. "I knew it, I knew it. You're a time waster.. I bin ta college, dun me city and guilds, got me serstificates an' your frone a wobbler at four 'undred to sort this lot aht." His blood pressure rose and the recent head wound began to slowly weep and trickle on to his forehead.

"Would you like a cup of tea. I've got some penguin biscuits."

"Tea? Tea? Nah, I want fifty quid call aht money," adding as he dabbed at the blood with his sleeve, "a plaster and some germolene. Not bloomin' tea." Thankfully at this point his mobile rang and he broke off to respond in some sort of tradesman's patois, wandering off in the front room for privacy.

"Alo? Ah Dave. No I'm round that old dear's in Western Road."

"Old dear's?!"

"Nah I fink it's a scrub. I was gonna try a monkey but she blew out at four even... Oh yeah, yeah. Well I've demanded a bull's eye call aht, I dunno if she'll wear it..." He spoke softer now, conspiratorial, but I could still hear him. "Ere Dave, must tell ya, nice touch yesterday. Eight 'undred sovs. Re-wire, re-plumb re-everyfink, but actually did, NUFFINK! Looked at a few photers of grandchildren, drunk tea you could protect fences with an' left 'er pleased as punch wiv 'er 'free' dishwasher. Made in China, forty quid, supplied and fitted by Nuffink's Impossible for eight 'undred. Yeah it's as sweet as a nut Dave, this scam. Clock the ol' dears comin' in to the gaff, pick a mug and there's your winner. Yeah some winner eh? Anyway gotta go, she ain't wearing the installation con so I gotta reclaim the dishwasher. Yeah see ya Dave".

He returned to the kitchen and put on his affected posh official voice, with occasional lapses. "Well madam high have to inform you that under the terms and condition of the prize draw, unless the appointed technishun (tapping his chest) hinstalls d'equipmen, all goods MUST be reclaimed by syd technishun"

"Syd technishun"

"Look lady don't get stroppy with me, just give me four 'undred an' I'll fit it or, sign here an' I'll get it outa yer way. And I'll even scrub the bull's eye call aht."

I signed the docket and watched as he manoeuvred the dishwasher into the back of his van, but while doing so he was unaware of the mobile phone falling from his pocket under the van. I was about to call out to him but decided not to, listening later to the to the delightful crackle and splinter as he drove over his elaborate phone.

Gleefully I recalled those sounds as I washed up by hand later that evening.

It's a love affair, but can it be an affair if only one is in love? Then again can it be deemed as cruel a thing as unrequited if one of the party is not capable of love in the first place? Let me explain. I am in love with the clouds. Huge colonies hanging motionless above; armadas of white idly drifting by. Shapes, colours, formations; myriad permutations to delight and marvel at. Then, as if a heavy velvet curtain had been draped across the sun, darkness descends upon the earth as ominous brigands bloated with rain hang menacingly above. They are the pantomime villains of the sky and we hiss and boo at their promise of rain but there would be no performance without them, for rain is our life's blood...

I thought I should learn more about those wonderful clouds. Gather knowledge and understanding that I might fully appreciate them, and for that purpose I was at the library doors about to enter when that age old debate raged within me. Is ignorance bliss? OK, ignorance of the finer things in life does not allow us to enjoy every facet of them but then would it not be wonderful to be totally oblivious of all the nasty things our sensitivities makes us acutely aware of?

More appropriately to this debate, I once met an accomplished concert pianist who confessed that, while her ear was so finely tuned to every little nuance of a performance it made her too critical to enjoy hers or other's performance. Bearing this in mind I turned from the library and made my way to the bakers, to celebrate with a cream doughnut my blissful ignorance, of clouds at least.

Of course buying a doughnut is, for me, fraught with problems. Y'see I don't like to appear greedy by asking for a particular doughnut, the obvious large one, but I guarantee if I don't, I'll get the small misshapen specimen. The baker's equivalent to the puppy with the naff coat, last of the litter, left in the pet shop. The fat girl stood on the touch-line with her freshly laundered but redundant kit in a bag at her feet... When I get the dud cake I try to convey my disappointment by expression hoping they will recognise my sadness and privately resolve make amends next time I purchase. But they never do. Cornish pasties, Swiss fingers, bread pudding, wholemeal loaf, it's all the same to them, as are the cream doughnuts. "Who's next?" "Could I have a cream doughnut please?"

Today they are all exceptionally fine cream doughnuts. Big, puffy, sugar coated brown cheeks, bloated like Botticelli's cherubs, complemented by oceans of cream. A glorious abundance of delicious while waiting to anoint our chin, eyelashes, cardigan. And then the baker signs his genius with a crimson streak of jam. Ohhh. Yes, today they are doughnuts délicieux, de perfection.

Oh no! No! No! No! What is that wedged in the corner, cowering next to the Swiss fingers? It's not is it? Oh please don't be .. I cover my face with my hands and peep through my fingers. Yes it is, it's a cream doughnut.

The assistant reaches for her tongs, they hover over each masterpiece. Silently I will her to stop and place one from display, but the tongs continue their journey inexorably to the pathetic, shriveled, teeny example that I just know would soon be in a box and transported back to Western Rd. Not proudly, lovingly carried home but, roughly, in temper, then placed on a plate and ridiculed. "Look at you, hopeless. Call yourself a doughnut. I'd have been better off with a scone, an apple slice, anything but you. Cream doughnut? Cream? That little squirt of white sticky with the thinnest of jam. D'you know I'm tempted to throw you straight out to the birds .."

I'm convinced it's a conspiracy. In the early hours of the morning amidst the heat and flour, steam and yeast that is the cauldron of Plaxtol bakery, the baker, for a moment, forsakes all to stop and fashion a sad doughnut just for me.

Get a grip Muriel, these are the first signs of paranoia... "Would you like a box?" She has the sorry little doughnut clasped between the tong's jaws, ready to place in a bag or box. It is at this moment I "lose it". The bakers is packed. Builders, cyclists, denizens and they are not prepared for this outburst. "Box, do I want a box, for that?" There are gasps from the crowd. Hardened builders are shocked, locals are embarrassed and cyclists nervously adjust their lycra. "It is a conspiracy isn't it? Every time I come in here I get the tiny doughnut. Not once the great big one or even the regular; no never. Always the midget."

I address the crowd now, I am playing to the gallery trying to justify my actions! "I'll ask her to hold it up. You see, it's the smallest one in there." I turn to the assistant who still holds the offending cake in her tongs. "Go on hold it up, you show 'em, let them decide. Go on, go on." Ignoring my request she slowly returns the doughnut to its shelf, replaces the tongs at their station and all at once I am ashamed. People are looking away from me now, reluctant to make eye contact as an hypnotic hush falls upon the place. I realise it will be a long lonely walk to the door, silence compounding my shame. But then a brainwave that may rescue the situation, I cry out, "The cakes are on me".

But there are no takers as unanimously they wish to distance themselves from me and so all I can do is leave the shop, to the sound of my own footsteps and retreat to the sanctuary of Western Rd...

The sun is shining, I make tea and lay in the garden, I am in defiant mood. The sky is teeming with glorious clouds and from their shapes I conjure images of Olympians, galleons, ogres and then a small cloud hovers over me. Its shape is different to other clouds. It doesn't billow, it's short, slim. The colouring is unusual, it's not uniform white. There is white, but just a little and streaked with red and , amazingly, a very rare colour for a cloud - brown.

Can't quite make out what it's shape suggests ... Wait a minute. Oh no, it's a

I finished mowing the lawn then stood back to admire. Yes, excellent Muriel, now go and make yourself a well earned cup of coffee. Half milk, half water, in a saucepan. None of that cheap skate boiling water tipped onto a spoon of coffee then topped with a dash of milk, stuff. No proper coffee. And hold the saucepan a couple of feet in the air as you pour it in the cup then marvel at the froth that accumulates. Look at that. Fantastic! It's as if you were there on the continent.

Anyway I lit the gas under the saucepan and reckoned on putting the mower and bits in in the shed just before the milk came to the boil. I finished packing away and was picking up some stray leaves when I noticed a slug at the lawn's border. But how had he survived the Qualcast's rotating guillotine? This was a tale of high drama of which he would surely regale his friends.

I studied him for a while. I say 'him' but couldn't be entirely sure, and, although movement was barely discernable, he was definitely on his way somewhere. Watching him I thought of that lovely phrase, "All creatures great and small", and started to feel some compassion for that slug. OK I know they eat your lettuce and are rather partial to a hosta but slugs do get a really bad press, don't they?

And let's face it, they're nowhere near as bad as the wasp. Stinging you, ruining quiet sits in the garden as you lash out at them, knocking crockery and hot tea over guests. Wasps, ughh, horrible things...

So I left him alone, the slug. I didn't say 'errr' then tread on him, I simply walked on. Well it's not his fault, he probably didn't want to be a slug in the first place. "OK, next. So Whaddayawannabe? Concert pianist, actor, writer... Slug?" I don't think so.

Then as I was dead heading a marigold, I noticed another slug. It had to be a different slug, there's no way slug one got over here quicker than I did. No, this was definitely slug two. He looked different. Hey, why don't I take slug two over to slug one. They could be mates or lovers even. What a great idea. Muriel you're a genius. So I picked up slug two with a potting scoop and placed him next to slug one. But as far as is possible in the kingdom of torpidity that is a slug's, there was an instant antipathy.

Also my first big mistake suddenly became glaringly obvious. Slug one was not a he but a she. The two of them together I was able to make comparisons and it was clear that one had a certain grace and charm about her that two could only admire but never aspire to. And let me say straight away this was not a biased female opinion, it was plain for all to see.

I watched as one sought the sanctuary of a flower pot with two in hot pursuit, and gaining on her. What had I done, interfering with nature, putting these two insects together (I suppose they're insects I don't know), when possibly she was happy and contented to be alone. A sort of Greta Garbo of the slug world.

I made amends, put one back in her original position and left two to contemplate the ill fortune that presented him with a beautiful mate only to see her cruelly snatched away. Then I replaced the sun lounger on the lawn, settled into its puffy mattress and began to wonder, the chemistry that is instant attraction beyond looks alone. That unique feeling we experience in the company of a certain other or, conversely, a natural dislike we would find impossible to explain. "I dunno, I just don't like him!" Well today proved to me such reactions are not exclusively the preserve of humans. I think slug one proved that.

Friends, lovers, colleagues, neighbours (set aside bad behaviour for that will alienate every and all), if we're honest we do have preferences. We try not to but we can't help ourselves. Even parents with more than one child, will rarely admit to it publicly, but they do have a favourite offspring. And that's OK isn't it, as long as it's never apparent.

But who am I to trumpet this? Muriel Rurial, spinster of this parish, who tried in vain to bring two slugs together that they may live happily ever after...

It's crazy, I know, but at that moment I felt the symptoms of tears, laying on the that lounger gazing into the clouds, knowing it wasn't really about slugs. It was that romantic idyll I had of two beings together, finding love. But she fled, slug one, didn't she? The way I always did. Afraid. And now I'm alone.

I could not hold back the tears any longer and, as they flooded my cheeks, I looked away from the clouds to the kitchen, just in time to see flames rising from a saucepan that had boiled dry of half milk, half water. Proper coffee!

November 2007

Regular readers of this column, if there are any, will know that for some time now I have been without a car. This meant travelling by bus and once I mastered the timetable, and with my free pass, I became a seasoned user of the service. I must say first of all it was fun, a novelty, but later I found it frustrating. I took to suggesting short cuts to the driver and found I could get away with that if I wore silly hats and other bizarre items of clothing.

Yes for a while they indulged me as a crazy old dear but eventually I exhausted their patience, offering them driving hints and making unreasonable requests. "Oh look, stop here for a minute would you, I want to pick those blackberries... Pull in here please, I want to feed the ducks. D'you mind making a detour I want to drop this birthday card into Auntie Dolly?" Not surprisingly this could not last and one evening, after a blazing row with one of the drivers, I symbolically tore up my bus pass and threw it, like confetti, in the aisle of a 308. Vowing to walk rather than ride...

Linda was very good, she gave me innumerable lifts but try as I might I could not get used to the speeds she drove at. Cornering on two wheels, scattering wildlife and once, returning from the shops, literally curdling milk. WOW!

Daphne helped out with lifts too, but once behind the wheel she totally abdicated driver's responsibility and entrusted our safety to a plaster effigy of Saint Christopher who stood shivering, affixed to the dashboard.

Hilda is a good driver and was generous with transportation, but she has blazing rows with the satellite navigation woman. And the language during altercations with other road users. Well!

Inevitably I acknowledged this arrangement could not last and so I resolved to raise enough funds for a small car or even one of those Vespa Scooter thingies. You know the sort that were fashionable with "Mods" in the sixties. So I am selling off certain luxury items, heirlooms, to make some money. You can respond to any of these ads via "Editor - The Voice". Thank you - MR

SET OF FALSE TEETH
SLIGHTLY DISCOLOURED
WOULD GO WELL WITH
KHAKI SHIRT

FULL SET OF ENCYCLOPAEDIAS
NO LONGER REQUIRED
NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOUR
KNOWS EVERYTHING

UNBREAKABLE TEA SET
6 X CUPS
6 X SAUCERS
5 X PLATES

PAIR OF ANTIQUE VASES
LADY OWNER MUST SELL
SLIGHTLY CRACKED

TIME MACHINE
SORRY WAS SOLD
NEXT WEEK

SET OF HAMMERS
WOULD SUIT HANDYMAN
WITH CLAW HEAD

MICHAEL

Michael lived alone, he was 57, he was nice. But nobody liked him enough to love him. He was kind, he had big brown eyes, a lovely smile, yes Michael was a nice man.

Monday to Friday he caught the train to London where he worked in the post room of an insurance office in the city, which left his weekends free. "Goodnight Michael," his colleagues would say and give him no further thought until they met again on their return to work. They never considered his life, his solitude. Well he was such a nice man, it never occurred to them....

Ray and Sharon Lee were stall-holders in a general street market. They bought and sold - well almost anything really - and this was their busiest time of the year; Christmas! Ray had what he called "contacts", and through these contacts he bought "gear".

Sharon was cooking tea when Ray staggered in under the weight of gear he was carrying. He was beaming with excitement as he set down boxes of merchandise then disappeared to bring in more boxes. There were watches and costume jewellery, football shirts, torches, in fact everything you would expect to see on a Christmas market stall. Sharon was delighted, "Fantastic Ray, fantastic; she was about to go on when Ray said, "old on wait'll you see this" and he returned carrying a three foot tall plaster figure. "Whadaya reckon?" Sharon looked at it quizzically and after a while replied, "Well the other stuff's brilliant Ray but what's this. I mean, it's not Father Christmas is it, it's a garden gnome."

"Well yeah I know it's not a Father Christmas, it is actually a gnome but well it's nice ennit. Yeah that's it, it's nice," and saying that Ray patted its head then gave Sharon a hug followed by a request for a cup of tea...

Two days to Christmas, not just in Michael's house but the world over, and at the foot of Michael's Christmas tree were the few presents from work, one from Mrs Clarke next door and one from Mr & Mrs Tyrell whose cats Michael fed when the Tyrells went on holiday. Also there were cards displayed from people he never saw from year to year, some from work, a few with spidery hand writing from surviving relatives and in pride of place a delightful card "To a very special friend at Christmas. With best wishes from Emily and David, x". It was Emily's handwriting, David would never have written it, he wasn't fond of Michael, he was jealous of him and the time when Emily and Michael were neighbours.

Silly really, because Emily liked Michael, she thought he was nice but, but she loved David and Christmas would be spent with her's and David's parents, probably never thinking of Michael...

Christmas Eve and Ray and Sharon were up early and off to market, confident of a prosperous day. Their van was filled with goods to tempt Christmas shoppers and tucked in the corner was the gnome, peering through the bubble wrap with an expression that made him almost real. But as the day progressed and Mr & Mrs Lee's stock was steadily depleted, there was not one enquiry for the purchase of the gnome. Oh people liked him alright, and some even took photos kneeling beside him, but as dusk fell and the market's fairy lights came on he remained unsold. People said he was nice but no one really cared enough to want to take him home....

Michael ate a mince pie, drank coffee and looked at the bustling world beyond his window and sighed. He sat there quietly for a while then rose suddenly, put on his overcoat and left the house. He was off to the street market to buy some bits, any bits. To join the throng of last minute shoppers buying presents for friends and loved ones. The market where there would be goodwill to all, even to this imposter who moved through the crowd as if there really was a purpose to his visit. And then as Michael made his way into a new aisle between the stalls, he saw it.

As if it were smiling at him as he came into view, and so pleasing was the figure's expression Michael returned its smile, self consciously waving, a half hearted waggle of the fingers. Ray Lee was drinking tea behind his stall as Michael approached and he watched as Michael stood mesmerised staring at the meter high figure. Sensing a sale Ray launched into his patter, "Nice ain't he?" There was no reply so Ray tried again, "Well I know he's not everyone's cup of tea but I tell you what, as it's Christmas you can have it for fifteen quid. How's that?"

Michael replied while his gaze remained on the gnome, "No it's not nice, it's not nice at all". Ray leapt in quickly, "All right I'll tell you what I'll do. Let's see, it was twenty quid originally but you can have it for a tenner. Come on, tenner, that's half price."

Michael seemed to be in a dream, a daze as he gave Ray ten pounds, gathered the gnome up in his arms and, holding him to his chest, he addressed Ray, and Sharon who had come to join him. "No he's not nice, nice is not enough. I'm nice ... He's lovely." And with that he turned and walked away carrying the figure home, still carefully holding him in his arms.