

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2004**

February 2004

I was last in the queue at our Post Office in Western Road when a man came and stood in line behind me. Then, through lovely blue eyes wreathed in laughter lines, he smiled at me. A smile so warm and gentle as to suggest he knew me, but he was surely mistaken for we were strangers.

Briefly he looked away towards the calamity that is our new high street junction, before his gaze returned and with it that perfect smile. Never one for romance, never confident in the way I looked, I turned away as if to read the document in my hand, and yet strangely I hoped he might speak to me, even if it were simply a case of mistaken identity. At that moment he peered over my shoulder and tapped the paper I was holding at the point my name was displayed, and then he spoke "Muriel Rurial, so you're the famous Muriel Rurial?"

I didn't think it possible but his eyes seemed bluer than ever and his smile even more engaging. So much so I foolishly held the document to my chest, rather than reprimand him for being so forward. "I love reading about you and your exploits," he said, then ever so lightly touched my sleeve, as if to emphasise the point he was about to make. He went on, "You really are a fascinating lady and look, here's my card, I think with a little help you could be a very successful writer."

I felt flattered, and stupid acknowledging such flattery as, at the same time, I accepted his card. Then just as I was slipping the card into my pocket we were joined by a rather attractive lady who glared at the man as she addressed him. "Edward I think we have a puncture, would you please go and look. Off side rear" ...

As he left, without even a glance in my direction, the woman shook her head and spoke over her wry smile. "What card did he give you. Photographer, publisher or is he back in the fashion business?" I withdrew the card from my pocket and read the details aloud. "Edward Mitty. Independent Publisher . Etc. Etc."

She sighed and said, "It's the eyes, I know, those lovely blue eyes, but you're a fool Madam." Then a quiet moment before she added wistfully, "And I'm an even bigger fool to have put up with it for all these years.".....

At home as I sipped my tea and watched his business card blacken and curl in the open fire. I wondered how many hearts, in the course of his life, Edward Mitty had broken.

March 2004

At last my greatest adventure was about to begin. The huge rucksack was full to bursting with tent, stove, provisions, utensils, clothes, everything. And following Hilda's advice my new twelve eyelet boots were tied as tight as humanly possible for maximum support on all terrain. Marjorie had agreed to look after Tibby and keep an eye on the place and now, after a last glance around the home, I was ready to leave. To travel as far and as wide, as long as it takes to "Find Myself"...

I crouched in front of the dining room table where the massive rucksack was perched, then hooked my arms through the bag's straps and heaved it on to my back. But never realised I had caught up the tablecloth along with three wicker table mats, a cruet set, two forks and a filigree fruit bowl in the cloth's intricate lacework. Then struggling through my narrow hallway, unbeknown to me, the rucksack dragged three pictures from the wall, several layers of plaster and a pine coat rack, all still attached to me as I emerged into Western Road. Prompting one startled onlooker to remark later, "she looked more like an Apache Funeral procession than a woman on a voyage of discovery"....

I decided to head for Crouch Lane and the open countryside beyond but was soon halted by the unwelcome presence of several youths "Oi lady, where you goin' then?" First of all I ignored them but they were persistent. "Wot you deaf or summin. Where you oft to?" I stopped and looked dreamily in to the distance, adopting one of those poses we see on the front of knitting patterns, before replying, "I'm at a crossroads in my life, I'm questioning the meaning of existence and wondering whether t'is nobler in the mind to ———"

At this point they lost interest and wondered off, tapping their temples with forefingers, all the while calling after me as I moved on, "Nutter! Nutter!"...

After some considerable time, bathed in perspiration and feeling particularly unwell, I arrived at the summit of Crouch Lane. I felt light headed, nauseous and my vision was blurred, so decided to rest and take in water. Sitting there at the roadside I noticed my legs had turned mauve and looked as if they were about to explode. Then it dawned on me that the twelve eyelet laces were so tight they were strangling my circulation. I fished in my pocket for the "Swiss Army Knife", all the while urging my semi-conscious self to 'cut the laces Muriel, it's your only chance'. But with blurred vision fading altogether, searching the knife for a blade I mistakenly opened it at the corkscrew, then the screwdriver and just as I was struggling with the horse's hoof thingy, I passed out.

Then, thank heavens for Marjorie and Dennis driving by and immediately recognising the situation otherwise you might never have been reading this.

July 2004

Judy and Arthur were thrilled with the theatre tickets I gave them but of course were ignorant of how they came to be in my possession...

Well, the patio doors were open and he flew straight in, landed on the marble shoulders of Socrates, a souvenir from Greece, and fixed me with his twinkling eyes. Exotic greens and gold, blue and startling red, I soon discovered this was no ordinary bird. An almost mythological creature, cross between a cockatoo and a budgerigar, that spoke with a voice alternating from Shakespearian tones to pet shop jibberish.

He hopped on to Socrates head then commenced the soliloquy from Richard the Third. "Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by - Pretty boy Joey. Joey's a pretty boy".

When he finished, I applauded and Tibby scratched the carpet to show her appreciation. Encouraged by our approval the bird left a small deposit on the Greek philosopher's head and began anew. This time Macbeth. "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or ...Nice cup of tea Joey. Nice cup of tea".

Anyway, within the next few days I established that Joey was both passionate and knowledgeable concerning the theatre and classic cinema and welcomed mine and Tibby's participation as long as Joey remained the star.

Oh joy upon joy, a whole new world of drama and excitement had opened up to me and Tibbs and such was the pleasure we gained from it, I even took to making or buying costumes for the parts we were playing

One wonderful evening, wearing hand made togas fashioned for me and my beloved cat Tibbs, we were performing Julius Caesar... I motioned to stab Joey, he slowly tilted his head towards the ceiling then, after a dramatic pause, uttered the immortal lines, "Et tu Brutus - Joey's a pretty boy. Pretty boy Joey". Then he fell to the carpet and lay there motionless.

I told myself over and over again that I hadn't really stabbed him, that he wasn't really that infamous Roman Emperor. But so convincing was his performance, I was transported to Rome and that tragic scene of high treason and all at once felt the pain and remorse of Brutus.

For what seemed like ages Joey lay there then suddenly stood up, before flying round the room, to confirm he was not deceased, merely acting. And what an actor he was. A feathered Olivier, a technicolour Brando. Magnificent!...

Now, because of Joey, the house was in a state of permanent

excitement, and never more so than the approaching weekend. For the delightful reason, we had chosen to perform Oliver and were deep in to rehearsals. The first dress rehearsal was excellent. Joey was Fagin, hopping along the coffee table singing, "In this world one thing counts, in the bank large amounts - Who's a pretty boy? Pretty boy Joey. You've gotta pick a pocket or two". I was Oliver and Tibbs helped out in the crowd scenes and doubled later as Bulls Eye, Bill Sykes' dogAmazing!

So, Friday in the village, before Saturday's performance, buying wine and nibbles, millet and cat nip for our after show celebrations, I happened to stop at Shakti News and peruse the adverts in their window. The usual items for sale and services offered, then one that was like a cloud descending upon me as I read it. "LOST - EXOTIC BIRD. CONTACT CAVENDISH EDWARDS, ACTOR. Tel: etc. PS IF YOU READ THIS JOEY PLEASE COME HOME".

And immediately I knew, responding to that advert would mean the end of a brief but wonderful period in mine and Tibby's life. But selflessly I responded, and a couple of hours later, Joey and Cavendish Edwards were re-united and I was left with a broken heart and two tickets for Hamlet at the Old Vic.

August 2004

I don't know why, but I took myself off to the seaside. Skimming pebbles on the water, conjuring faces from the clouds, yawning in a stripey deck chair. But there was something missing. Ah yes, an ice cream! ... "£2 for a cornet, you're joking, surely? This is Heme Bay, not Monte Carlo."

"Look lady I do the best ice creams in the whole wide world. I'm an artist in ice cream. It'll be soft and whippy, there'll be a flake and hundreds and thousands, raspberry syrup, nuts, fruit, marzipan, Whadayawan for two quid?"

His face was glowing bright red under his shaven scalp. The sun had eloped with his senses and as he leapt the ice cream counter I knew I had pushed him too far. Soon his hands were about my throat, the veins stood out at his temples and reason had clearly left him as he began to squeeze.

Faintly I heard the proprietor's voice pleading, "leave it Tony, let her go son, she's not worth it" And then I found myself in the first aid post where Tony stood handcuffed next to a policeman while a nurse sat beside me applying a cold flannel to my forehead.

A small child was crying and gripping my wrist, all the while repeating what sounded like "Nanny, Nanny". At this point a St John's Ambulance man entered, in full dress, wearing medals that elevated him to a rank of field marshal. Then bringing proceedings to some order, he bellowed, "Be upstanding and pray silence for his worship the Lord Mayor of Heme Bay, twinned with Akstanigrosia P15 2SW". There was a ripple of applause and a lone piper played as the mayor entered.

Following the discordant sounds of bagpipes in their death throes, a box was placed in front of the mayor and once perched there he began to address the motley collection gathered. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a wonderful occasion, marking the day we received our millionth visitor this season, and it gives me great pleasure to present this lady with her medal of honour, her freedom of the city certificate and six win vouchers on "Dave's Prize Bingo"."

The mayor then placed a medal over my head and handed me the other items. There were cries of "Speech, speech," but as I felt unable to stand I remained laying down to speak and so, to enable people at the back to hear me, I was given an ice cream cone to project my voice through. And thus I began. "I am honoured, and grateful, to the good people of Heme Bay and to them I say "Thank you. Not forgetting the citizens of Akstanigrosia P15 2SW, to whom I say 'Emgressia vol dubroysky nakt stromplesc'." The embarrassing silence and absence of their representative suggested the denizens of Akstanigrosia were

blissfully unaware of the significance of the day but, through the amplification of my comet, undaunted I continued. I decided, without a prepared speech, I would borrow heavily from classic speeches and, if stuck, I might throw in a smattering of Akstanigrosian. Long pause for effect then, "I have a dream... for Heme Bay and surrounding areas. 'Klioffsky greb fellhaufen knakrebsky'... We will fight them on the beaches, in the hills, but.. 'Nebrosneyu keslefski ignaufentenklepfer'... surrender".

The crowd was enthralled, I was on a roll, but then my feet began turning cold and the voice of the child tugging at my arm became louder and clearer. She was calling, "Lady, Lady", not 'Nanny', and there was panic in her tone

The tide had carried my handbag away and was lapping at my feet. The ice cream had slipped from it's cone in to my lap while I slept in that stripey deck chair.

Ahhh, Heme Bay the place that dreams are made of.
Twinned with Akstanigrosia P15 2SW.

September 2004

The cooing of wood pigeons and sun streaming through my window woke me earlier than usual. It was then I decided not to return to sleep but catch the train to London. Once there I would sit at a pavement cafe and watch the world race by, in sharp contrast and full appreciation of the gentle life in Borough Green

The rush hour was amazing. All those people. Hysterical, rude aggressive people. No eye contact, no smiles, no conversation, I was soon beginning to question this day trip whim.

The train, like some prehistoric monster in its death throes, squealed and lurched to a halt at Victoria, then I was pushed and jostled as commuters fled the station clamouring for buses and cabs or that sharp descent to 'The Tube'.

Meantime I slowly made my way to nowhere in particular but after a while found myself at the gates to Buckingham Palace. But it wasn't the Royal Family I thought of at that moment, it was Linda from WI , and the evening she was caught in a thunderstorm and her umbrella struck by lightning. Yes at that very spot. Thankfully she lived to tell the tale and continues to disrupt our Women's Institute meetings with her refreshing, if somewhat, eccentric antics. Goodness, how can we forget that evening at a packed meeting when she amazed us all by calmly...!

But I'm digressing, or as my nephew Wilton says, "Auntie M you're rambling again"

Leaving the Palace behind me, in to The Mall, Trafalgar Square then up in to Charing Cross Road, I was starting to feel a little inclined to breakfast. So, a little further on in Tottenham Court Road, when I saw a small coffee bar with tables and chairs outside, I sat down and waited to be served. Eventually a waiter plonked coffee and toast in front of me shortly before, without asking, a man sat down and commenced shouting into his mobile phone.

All around me, on the pavement, in the road, was impatient chaos, but then I noticed something wonderful. A woman sitting on her own, totally oblivious to the frenetic doings surrounding us. And for ages I sat watching her mesmerized until at last I took a note pad from my bag and wrote this poem.

CAFE AL FRESCO

An old felt beret on her head
Glasses broken at the arm
Innocence brimmed her eyes and held you with their charm
And all the while I watched her she didn't have a care
She simply sat in fine repose puffing smoke in to the air

She did not look wistfully at lovers in embrace
Or scornfully at those poor souls, prisoners of their haste
She wasn't hostage to the hour, she hadn't pledged her day
Yet the sun shone equally on her as those who rushed away

A flock of birds at her broken shoes, caring little of such things
For the morsels that she threw their way, could have been the crumbs of kings
And when they fled her barren plate, left her there to contemplate the motion of their
wings
She traced their flight with high esteem, knowing who was king
For liberty is a kingdom we live in if we dare
To sit beyond the hour prescribed and never really care...

I've often passed that way again, hoping I would find
That ragged woman I thought I knew with scant regard for time
Who sat beside a vacant cup, often heard the hour struck but lingered for a while
Perhaps she wasn't ever there, I merely saw her in my dreams
Sitting in a cafe chair, pretending that was me.

October 2004

I was in the charity shop admiring a Byzantine ashtray when Tina, a regular customer, let out a shriek over by the CDs and declared, "Ohh, I love Elvis. If he were to walk in here now I'd run in the cake shop with him and we'd share coffee and Ginger Bread Men." She then looked dreamily at the "Greatest Hits" CD she was holding and, swooning, knocked the entire video and CD display over.

Helping her pick them up I calmly remarked, "Course you know, if Elvis were here now he would be nearly seventy years old ...". Tina's expression changed, she smiled nervously then quietly slipped from the shop, and all at once I felt ashamed. I had shattered the dream she harboured for nearly fifty years. Her and Elvis. Together!

Edna and Edith frowned at me as my thoughtless words hung in the air, and it was then I decided I would make amends and her dreams would come true. And it would be made so much easier because she wanted to believe ...

The Elvis outfit from the costumiers was £45 plus £5 for a pump up shirt to be worn under the famous white and diamante suit. It gave that bloated look Elvis had in his twilight years. The jet black wig was so realistic too. In fact the over all effect was quite simply stunning, if I remembered to take my vari-focals off...

I watched hours of his films and concert recordings and eventually perfected his voice and mannerisms. Then I tried them out in Kent Aluminium, Barclays Bank, but came a cropper in the Co-Op, swivelling the hips, curling my lip, gabbling in a Southern drawl, querying my bill at the check out. Daphne, who happened to be standing behind me, was convinced I was having some kind of fit and insisted on driving me home. She even popped back later that evening with a bunch of flowers and some rhubarb she had grown ...

Next day the first big test. Shopping at BlueWater, wearing the full Elvis outfit, and I had to admit I was nervous. But I need not have worried for I seemed to have fooled every one. I was asked for my autograph in Marks and Spencer and John Lewis, then in HMV a woman brought a CD over and asked would I sign the insert. "OK baby, what would you like me to write," I asked. She replied trembling, "To my darling Pat, I love you" But then I made my biggest mistake. I needed to use the loo and naturally went in to the ladies. At first I thought the screams were for Elvis so, playing to the gallery I swivelled my hips and held my arms outstretched to my 'adoring fans' the realising I was a man in the ladies toilet and the screams were for real, I fled the loo, fled BlueWater and sought the sanctuary of Western Road. However tomorrow would be the real test when Tina collected her pension and hot footed it to the charity shop for, "bargains"...

Wednesday morning Betty and Joan, volunteers in the charity shop, seemed unmoved by the presence of Elvis studying jigsaws in there but then in walked Tina. I smiled at her in true Elvis fashion, like he used to in the Sands Hotel, Las Vegas, and, even though I'd forgotten to remove my glasses, Tina's jaw

dropped open. Lost for words, actions spoke louder as she took the enamel Elvis stick pin she always wore from her lapel and plunged it in to my jump suit, presumably as a mark of her love and undying affection for “The King of Rock’n’Roll”.

The pump up shirt emitted a loud hissing sound and immediately I began to shrink from fourteen stone to seven and a half and all at once Tina became hysterical. Convinced she had mortally wounded me she flung her arms around me, begging forgiveness, then in the confusion the jigsaw shelf collapsed, showering us in thousands of pieces and Tina screamed, “It’s confetti, we’re married, we’re together at last”.

But then my wig fell off and the lady in the wheelchair who’s scotty dog goes everywhere with her, well the dog slipped his lead and promptly began to mate with Elvis’s hairpiece. To regain some credibility I needed to replace the wig on my head and try to re-flate the shirt, but the amorous scotty was not to be denied and I could not locate the valve on the shirt. Only one thing for it, retreat with what ever dignity remained. So, I placed twenty pounds on the counter then spoke in traditional Kentucky Elvis fashion, “I’d like to thank all my fans for coming and ask you to accept this donation. Goodnight and I love you all”. Then I made my exit whilst singing towards Tina, “I don’t have a wooden heart”, and left the shop in chaos, Tina in tears and knew I would lose my deposit for the shirt and wig and knew further it’s true what they say, “Never meet your heroes”.

December 2004

If you look in the charity shop you might still see it. Joyce priced it at fifty pence, yet it cost four hundred pounds to make....

The hoarding said "Adult Education. Enrol Now". So I did. But not for me the science of Galileo or the politics of Marx. No, my vision of enlightenment and celestial well being would be through - Pottery! Tall tapering pots. Twisty, turny, swaying pots. Luxurious, voluptuous, extravagant pots. Pots, pots, pots, oh dem pots brudder. Yes!...

I arrived at the college, paid my final instalment then made my way to room 8c. There were half a dozen students there, several pottery wheels and a trendy woman tutor standing in front of a desk. And as soon as I sat down she declared, "OK now we're all here we can begin," then launched into an impassioned lecture on the history of clay. From clay BC to Torquay terracotta. Bor-ring! She waffled on for nearly two hours, with slides, until at last I could stand it no longer and blurted out, "Look I've spent four hundred pounds on this course and six fifty for an apron, so please can we make something".

There was a stunned silence before she responded angrily, "Right which one of you reckons they can fashion a pot without the full knowledge of the origins of clay? Come on. Anybody?" She glared at us in turn, finally fixing me with an icy stare to quash the mutiny, and room 8c crackled with tension. At last I slowly walked to the clay bin, clawed away a huge blob of clay and held it aloft, pledging dramatically, "I'll make a pot. Without knowing the full history of clay but, with these bare hands, I'll make one!"

There were cheers from the other students followed by gasps as I switched on one of the electric potter's wheels, dipped my clay in water then threw it on the whirring apparatus.

At once huge brown droplets splattered us all and covered the room, before I grasped the swirling mass and began to shape it. I worked in a frenzy, as if possessed. Pulling, gripping, caressing and gradually a magnificent piece began to rise up from the wheel.

The students were enthralled, the teacher was amazed and I, bathed in perspiration, smothered in clay, worked on in ecstasy. It rose ever higher, my pot. Majestic, a masterpiece, a towering thing of undeniable beauty, then disaster struck. Its top collapsed and spun wildly like a thick brown lasso, tearing pictures from the walls and strangling the teacher. And before I could stop the wheel it had bludgeoned two students and shattered a glass display cabinet in the corner.

The scene was one of chaos and injury and all that remained of my artistic endeavours was a dun coloured mass, like a burst football, which I scooped from the wheel and carried home.

Once there I fired it in my own oven, along with two sausage rolls for tea, before donating it to the charity shop in the morning. And there it remains, priced fifty pence, unless a discerning passer-by happens to spot it languishing in that little shop of treasures, too painful for me to keep, on a window ledge in Western Road.