

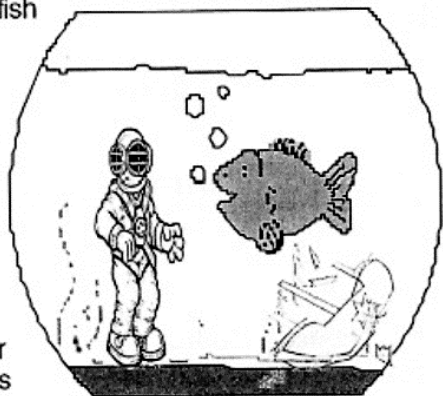
MURIEL RURIAL 2012

I think they meant well, Hilda and Daphne. They thought it would be a lovely Christmas present for me. It would be company, it would be calming, it would be decorative. A goldfish! A bowl, some gravel, a diver, a shipwreck, some algae. It was the complete works, the entire "Monty".

But every silver lining has a cloud and in this instance the cloud was the responsibility foisted upon me. A little golden life drifting aimlessly in its glass prison. Its only company a not very convincing, or communicative, plaster diver. And sometimes, as an alternative, a gormless face peering at it with an "ahhh" stare. The gift had put in me in an impossible position. It did not bring me peace or pleasure, I felt sorry for the little chap or chapessie. Thought the whole concept of captivity for our pleasure or amusement, a cruel attitude. And although I'm not particularly enamoured of animals, I do prize liberty.

So what was I to do? I suppose the kindest thing was to return him, or her, to its natural habitat. But where was that, I wondered? Anyway if the goldfish was a male returning him to the wild would be easy. But I couldn't tip a helpless female into a river or pond, to fend for herself against the sort of predators that lurk in such inky places.

So for a long while I watched the fish closely and, as I did so, it became clear that Sarah, that's what I called her, was most definitely a lady fish. She had a serene, majestic way of moving that no male could ever achieve. Yes Sarah was a she and I was determined to make amends for the awful start she had in life. She had obviously been taken from her mother and sold to a pet shop. Her brothers were probably in little plastic bags offered as fun fair prizes. They either perished en route to prize winners' homes or the hardier ones went on to be yobbos, terrorising the fish whose tank they shared. They were the sort of fish equivalent of the dysfunctional individuals Ian Duncan Smith speaks of. Swimming too fast, knocking over the diver, monopolising the bridge and shipwreck. Sucking up the gravel and blowing it in fishes' faces. General anti-social behaviour.



Then, as I watched Sarah swimming round and round, I had a wonderful idea. Why don't I fill the bath with cold water and let her have a real swim. And that's what I did and she absolutely loved it. She must have felt she was actually out at sea, that great expanse of water, compared to

the confines of the little glass bowl. Then an even better brainwave, a typical Muriel "light bulb moment". I used the extension lead for the CD player, put it on the edge of the bath and played my album of "Greatest Shipping Forecasts". A BBC Radio 4 favourite. They were all there, Viking, Rockall, Biscay, Cromarty, German Bight, and d'you know I think it worked. Sarah must have felt she was actually out there, at sea, in the wild. Port, starboard, give that man fifty lashes, there she blows cap'n, man overboard - everything. Yes she was in her element.

But all good things come to an end and at last it was time to return her to her Bastille I soon realised that what I needed was one of those little nets on a stick, enabling me to scoop her out of the bath and back into the goldfish bowl. I obviously hadn't thought this through before tipping her into the bath. Hmm. I went to the kitchen picked up a coffee mug out of the cupboard and tried to scoop her out of the bath with that, but she was far too quick for me. Then disaster; kneeling at the side of the bath, desperate to catch her in the mug, I knocked the CD player into the bathwater. It sunk immediately and plunged the house into darkness.

Feeling my way down stairs, knocking several ornaments over en route, I eventually found a torch. The torch light enabled me to pull the CD lead from the socket then reset the trip switch to restore light. But I still had the original problem of repatriating Sarah. Another brainwave, a saucepan. That's the answer; wider than a mug, easier to catch her, why didn't I think of that in the first place? Ah well, not to worry, back to the kitchen for a saucepan, and the bigger the better... I plunged the saucepan into the bath, it sucked in the water and Sarah too. Success first time, well done Muriel.

I lifted the large saucepan out, it weighed a ton, I was struggling, Sarah was near the rim of the giant pan when I tripped over the CD player lead. I tried to keep my balance but went over. The entire contents of the saucepan, a huge tsunami, liberating Sarah, sweeping her up and sending her slithering across the bathroom's vinyl floor. I tried to save her in cupped palms, she thrashed and contorted, then disaster. The gap in the floorboards where the central heating pipe rises to meet the radiator, yes that gap, swallowed her up... I watched helplessly as she disappeared under the floor boards and for a long while I remained kneeling there, still holding the useless saucepan, peering into the chasm that had claimed her.

Later that evening, having tidied the bathroom, I set the goldfish bowl on a chair catching the drips as they came through the ceiling. It was a long night that weighed heavily on my conscience but I took some comfort in the knowledge that Sarah's swim in the bath had been a welcome blindfold and cigarette for her. before her premature end.

March 2012

The journey from my home in Western Road to a friend's house in Meopham is exactly eight miles. Last Sunday, during the course of that ride, I came across three road traffic wild life fatalities. Initially it saddened me then I got to thinking - do they simply not have any road sense or did they actually mean to end it all. Well, if that is the case, I think I know who were the pioneers of such practice. And this is my tribute to them.

HARA KIRI

The noblest way an insect can die
Spectacularly drown in a cyclist's eye

The rabbit, the squirrel, the hare and the fox
Abandon caution to be gloriously squashed

The horse will flee his paddock and then,
on a ribbon of road , collide with a van

Magpies linger too long to take flight
A sheep will just cross,
not look left and then right

But who, without fear, takes a languid stroll
Knowing for sure he'll be fused to the road

Where can we say this madness began
Arise "Hedge the Hog"
Creatures' main man.

They roped me in. It was the word "charity" that shamed me into saying Yes. Let's face it, under no other circumstances would I have agreed to attend a quiz night somewhere near Maidstone. Ugghhh! Draughty old village hall. A weak tea, soggy cake, stale Penguin interval. NO THANK YOU.

But they stood there looking at me. Shirley holding a poster showing emaciated children, barefoot on scorched earth, garlands of flies about their heads. "It's a good cause" said Daphne, followed by mumbles from the others. Indistinct mumbles punctuated occasionally by the clearly enunciated word "charity". Eventually I cracked and blurted out, without good grace, "Alright, alright, I'll come". They patted me on the back and each echoed the phrase "Well done Muriel". But I knew, deep down, the euphoria was in respect of press ganging me into attending, not rejoicing in the prospect of my company at Dingly freezing Dell village hall.

And, as if that wasn't bad enough, they then sprung on me the news that our team captain would be Linda. I argued that she's always captain or team leader and that surely such an appointment could only be made when every member was given the opportunity to vote. They said it was unanimous and that my one vote could not influence a new vote, and so the captaincy was confirmed. Linda looked triumphant, Shirley and Hilda look smug and Daphne, bless her, looked confused and bewildered as usual. Reluctantly I agreed but made a mental note to drive over some of Linda's daffodils as I left her house. I knew it was a childish attitude but it would have been nice if, just once, someone else, me perhaps, could have been captain.....

Well the day of the quiz soon came round and right on time Hilda was sounding the horn on her Mercedes people carrier and we were off. Fortunately we had a "sats nav" otherwise I doubt we would have ever have found the village hall. There a makeshift sign displaying the words "car park" pointed to a field adjacent to the hall. We parked up and the Mercedes appeared to be sinking as we walked away. Then, disentangling ourselves from the bunting that had left it moorings above the canopied entrance, we entered the hall. Daphne trailing the bunting tangled up in the belt of her top coat, lending her the appearance of an Apache funeral possession.

As we made our way deeper into the hall we were greeted by "Monsieur Smarm". He was dressed in a suit and bow tie and for me was the incarnation of Charles Dickens' Uriah Heep. He extended a long, thin, clammy hand which our captain shook, and shuddered visibly at the touch of. "And you are?", he enquired. Linda replied "We are the Numbskulls". "Ah yes, the Numbskulls", Uriah replied and his lip curled in disgust at the humour. Then almost by way of apology Linda remarked "We're being ironic. It was Muriel's idea. She's, er, different". Heep gestured towards a table bearing a sign "Numbskulls"



then the same damp palm waved at a kitchen area at the back of the hall "Refreshments thataway" he advised then, before moving on, he said "I'm Stuart your M.C. for the evening and in charge generally. Glad you could make it, enjoy - "...



Well, after what seemed on eternity, the first half of the quiz came to a close. Our captain was confident but my thoughts with fingers crossed, were not of the quiz but of a good strong cup of tea and delicious home-made cake to go some way in making amends for this dreary evening so far. Let's face it, if people offer you decent tea and cake you can forgive them practically everything. Mary next door to me is as mad as a hatter, plays her Irish jig and Riverdance music at hundreds of decibels, gaffer tapes her arms to her side and clumps up and down for hours. And she lights huge bonfires in the garden, sending sparks and flames high into the night sky, but her tea is nectar and her Victoria sponge is sublime. So for me, carry on Mary, all is forgiven...

As it happened Beryl, that was the name on her sticky paper badge, Beryl exceeded my pessimism. The stream of liquid that cascaded from the huge catering sized teapot was colourless. The cake, christened Titanic cake, had sunk in the middle so in the end I settled for two ginger nuts, which I found I could fold in half, and a tin of warm lemonade. But a greater horror was about to unfold. There, at the back of the kitchen, tuning an electric guitar, was Heep. Oh no please don't let him play that guitar, please.

Unfortunately, no sooner was everyone served and seated, U. H. blew into the microphone then, like the rock god that he saw himself as, followed it with a "Testing one, two, three, four", then a full blast "A" chord as intro to Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Women". It was at a deafening volume with screaming feedback but Uriah "Jagger" Heep was in a world of his own, as polystyrene cups shook on tables and all but the deaf or insane clamped palms over their ears.

We were suffering his full repertoire, he was oblivious to our pain as he murdered Eagles' "Hotel California", Elvis's "Jailhouse Rock", then, thankfully, as he struggled with the riff in Eric Clapton's "Layla", perspiration pouring off him, there was a blinding flash, a loud bang and the hall was plunged into silent darkness. Chaos followed, then calm, but no light was restored. Slowly as we shuffled from the hall, news filtered through that Heep was still breathing and sitting up but still in a state of shock.



Later in the car park, the Mercedes eventually managed to extricate us from the mud to set sail for good old Borough Green. Back at BG I was first drop off point and, as we parted, I mouthed the words "Cheerio, goodnight" but my expression said "Quiz night. Phhhh!"

May 2012

Call me a curmudgeon, a wet blanket, a party pooper, but I just can't get excited about the forthcoming Olympics. Friday 20 July the torch is coming through our village and there will be euphoria and all that stuff but we are just one of thousands of villages up and down the land, being tricked into celebrating the billions of pounds wasted on the games.

That Friday will be a sad day. There will be no cakes left in the bakers. Cream doughnuts and Eccles cakes will go in a flash. Not to mention the litter, the clapping, the cheering and flag waving. All that noise and scraps of paper, not nice. Not nice at all. And let's face it, the Olympics is not like it used to be, is it? They ran in plimsolls and aertex vests back then. No need to be tested for drugs. Perhaps one or two competitors had a quick glass of Lucozade before the off, but all that other stuff? I don't think so!

And tube drivers weren't turning down offers of £850 a week to work during the Olympics. £850! Well to make that sum real imagine a thousand bars of Cadburys dairy milk. Nearly two thousand peppermint Aeros. Twelve hundred Mars bars. Just for driving a tube train? Turn the handle, mind the gap and yes I am still a chocoholic... "To be or not to be, that is a Toblerone". "Coulda been a Crunchie, Charlie, coulda had class".

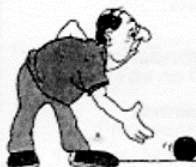
Incidentally here's a chocolate availability announcement for fellow sufferers. Chocolate in Shakti until eight pm, Nisa until nine, Co-op up to ten, then time gentlemen please, your last orders, in the Esso garage until ten thirty. After that it's cold turkey until Shakti opens again with the morning papers. Those are the desperate hours, 10.30pm through to 5.00am. Agonizing craving, willing the big hand to bully the small hand, to chase the hours away that I might indulge my lust for confectionery.



For surely there is more joy in sweets than the Olympics. I ask you, where is the pleasure in watching people pushing their bodies to the point of destruction? Where winning is the only option. Taking part is not enough?... They say that everyone loves a winner, well let me tell you I love a loser. Someone who can come last, who crosses the finishing line as they are packing the hurdles away, as long as that someone felt pleasure in merely participating and had some Smarties in their locker. To the winners, punching the air, celebrating in summersaults, I say to them "Take your gold medal and try dipping that in a cup of hot tea". Yeah! ...

Now I know that some of you are probably saying "Phew I think ol' Muriel's finally lost it altogether" but what you and Seb Coe don't realise is there is a different correlation between the Olympics and sweets. At the foot of Mount Olympus, where the games originated, there is a small shop. It sells statuettes of the twelve Greek gods regarded as living in Olympus. Also on sale, key rings, postcards, tea towels paying homage and guess what? Yes you've guessed it. Sweets! Furthermore, too significant to be coincidence the best before date on all confectionery sold in that shop is every four years. Bear in mind too, ancient Greeks competed not solely for the laurel wreath of victory but the rewards of fine wine and foods, represented in the shop now buy Kitas-Katos and Tobleros Eroneros.

But before you slip the "Curmudgeon" or "Off her trolley" sign o'er my head, to rest neatly on my chest, consider ye this. Which sport typifies that great British tradition of fair play, competition rather than combat, never triumphal, always magnanimous? No idea? Well then let me tell you, the sport I refer to is bowls. And which sport will not be represented at the 2012 Olympic games. Bowls!



Tell me, how can the sight and sound of a sweating, muscle bound athlete, running faster than a moped, possibly compare to the gentle click of woods on a carpet of green? Personally I don't play bowls but I applaud the modesty and fair play it represents. I don't know any bowls players (except Stanley Thomlinson) and yet I am constantly reminded that the fastest man in the world is Mr Bolt. Such is the media pre-occupation with winners.



I acknowledge that some people, given the choice, would rather watch the Olympics than a game of bowls, but for it not even to be represented is scandalous. So denizens of Borough Green, if you must line the route on 20 July, don't wave flags in accordance with those Whitehall tricksters' requests, instead carry placards displaying the message

"WOT NO BOWLS"

NB Stanley Thomlinson bought the greenhouse I sold through an advert placed in Shakti's window. Stanley happened to mention he played bowls.

June 2012



Late summer 1953, I was a tall, flaxen haired girl, just a few months short of becoming a teenager. For some while newspapers had featured articles relating to the Queen. Our new monarch epitomising the hopes and dreams of a post war nation, as she waved from the balcony of Buckingham Palace...

Mum said she would take me to London for my teenage birthday and, while we were there, we could pose for photographs at the Palace gates; and, true to her word, that's what we did. We caught the train, took in the sights, toured the shops, then had afternoon tea in Lyons Corner House in the Strand, close to Trafalgar Square. After tea we strolled through Admiralty Arch to The Mall, making our way to Buckingham Palace. I took photographs of Mum in front of the railings there and she did the same for me, making sure we captured that famous balcony in the background. The balcony where Kings and Queens stood dressed in their finery, bedecked in jewels.

Then, feeling a dampness in the air, Mum inclined her head towards the ominous clouds and decided it was time we made our way back to the station. As we were walking through a small side street, we came upon a man, shabbily dressed, sitting in a doorway. He had a flat cap positioned in front of him on the pavement, with a small makeshift sign beside it. The sign read "Thank you". Mum stopped by him, so I did too. He looked up at us and lightly smiled, a kind gentle smile that set his eyes twinkling, engaging us. He then looked away, almost as if he was embarrassed by the position he found himself in, having to beg for alms. Mum took a shilling from her purse and placed it in his cap. He looked up at us with a wonderful expression that I could best describe as innocence blessed. Mum took my hand and we walked on...

I fell asleep on the train journey home. I dreamt there was a balcony, a palace. On that balcony royalty, aristocracy, power, wealth and, not waving but smiling, a kind, gentle smile, a man who appeared un-noticed by the dignitaries assembled there. He was shabbily dressed, his pockets empty save for one small silver coin but, when the others retreated into the palace, he remained on the balcony. The crowd continued to wave at the man whose clothes were worn but who smiled that beatific smile.

At that point I was woken by Mum shaking my shoulder, "Muriel, Muriel, we're here". She went on to tell me that I must have been dreaming as I had had a big grin on my face for almost two train stops.

That was so many years ago and yet I still remember that day, and in my mind's eye see clearly the wonderful expression of the man on the balcony with only a shilling in his pocket.

JUST A THOUGHT

It's Jubilee year, the perfect time to be honoured by the Queen.
I am thinking of a knighthood, a Sir.

And who, you may ask, would be the recipient of such an honour?

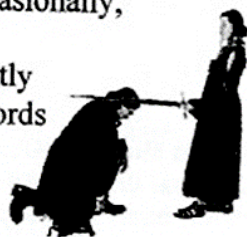
Well you do know him, everyone knows him. He is the proprietor of a business here in delightful Borough Green.

A commercial enterprise where, despite the odds, he maintains that glorious English tradition of an independent village store.

A premises where he dispenses not just merchandise but humour, technical knowledge, greyhound racing tips and, occasionally, medical advice....

Then imagine this. He is on one knee, the sword lightly touches each shoulder then the Queen utters these words

"Arise Sir Richard of Kent (Aloominom)"

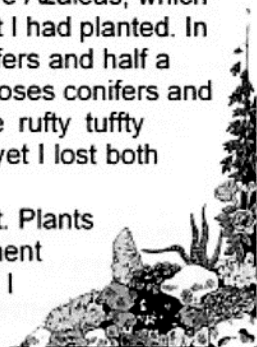


July 2012

Occasionally I mention my next door neighbour, Mary. I think the kindest way I can describe her is unusual, different. Fair to say though, I'm sure she hold the same opinion of me. We never argue but sometime silence born of displeasure exists between us. It could be that I have done something to upset her, not intentionally mind you, or she has equally offended me. Put simply, we are just not on the same wavelength. It's the Marmite analogy applied to people. But you know how it is, you don't actually dislike the other person it's just that there is no common ground and the harder we try, the more apparent are our differences.

This particular morning I was in the back bedroom looking out over my garden, delighting at the luxurious pink blossoms that were Azaleas, which compensated slightly for the failure of everything else that I had planted. In fact so poorly did I fare in my endeavours, I lost two conifers and half a dozen cacti. I know, I know, I can hear you now "No one loses conifers and cacti Muriel, no one". And they're right. Those are the ruffy tuffy scaffolders, bare knuckle fighters of the plant world and yet I lost both varieties. Why? What did I do wrong? ...

Next door, Mary's garden, it's wonderful, look at it. Plants I do not know the name of, let alone successful management of, thrive and are a delight to the eye. Mary, whose sanity I often question, has produced a garden of the Chelsea gold medal...



I kicked my old teddy bear across the bedroom I was angry, jealous. How does she do it, I asked myself as I descend the stairs en route to the kitchen and solace in tea and Kit-Kats. Yes Kit-Kats plural. Two four-fingered bars, dipped in tea. Dip dip dip, glorious dip. See if I care about your sparkly garden; dip. A garden isn't everything; dip.

And then it was gone, my comfort food just some red wrapping and odd flecks of chocolate on the tray, while Mary's garden was still there and I'm full of self loathing, chocolate wafers and a desperate longing to discover the secret of her green fingers.

Well amazingly I did not have long to wait. As it happened, on that particular morning I had taken my car into G&S Mechanical in the bumpy road so my little red Micra wasn't outside the house and Mary obviously assumed I was off on a "jolly" somewhere, this creating a prefect opportunity for her secret plant work. I heard her door open into the garden so quickly returned to the bedroom and spied on her through the net curtains. She had one of those

old wind up gramophone and , it would appear, two 78rpm records. She positioned the gramophone in the area where foliage only plants were situated. She then wound the old contraption, lower the needle on to the disc which suddenly burst into song. The recording was of that great Italian tenor Enrico Caruso. Not my cup of tea but each to their own I



suppose. Perhaps I might have enjoyed it slightly if it hadn't been such an awful recording. The sound quality was dreadful, so crackly was it as to suggest it had been recorded in the Four Wents chip shop. As Caruso strutted his stuff, Mary fell to her knees then, swaying slightly, palms out stretched towards the plants, she began moaning in supplication. This went on for some while until her mood was dashed by the racket of the 9.40 straight through to Victoria as it whipped by at the end of her garden.

When Caruso was returned to his manilla record sleeve Mary sited the gramophone adjacent to her area of fantastic colour, where a multitude of each flowering variety grew. There she played record number two which, to my surprise wasn't Maria Callus or Edith Piaf it "The Laughing Policeman". That fabulous old seaside attraction of the jolly red-faced policeman with his infectious laugh that brought squeals of delight from me as child. Now Mary was laughing, the policeman was laughing and, from the behind the net curtains, I laughed with them. Then bursting forth from the hysteria, my eureka moment. Mary had played disc two by the border of our boundary fence. The other side if her fence was where my beautiful Azaleas flourished. Every where else was pitiful so were my Azaleas responding to the Laughing Policeman? Should I track down a copy of Caruso and wind up gramophone for my foliage plants? Was it all just coincidence or, more to the point, further proof that Mary really is a "fruit cake"?

Well I don't know and, as I said at the start, she probably feels the same about me - "fruit cake".



August 2012

Up early, the early bird catches the worm. Ablutions completed, today's mission - charity shop bargain.

Money - check. Glasses - check. Hat - check. Hat? Oh yes, all those old dears on Antiques Road Show, you know the ones that bring along fabulous Lalique glass, original paintings, bargains they paid pennies for; well have you noticed they all wear hats, lucky hats, and have you noticed the more ridiculous the hat, the greater the bargain they scooped? Now let me see, what sort of hats have I got? Bus conductress, no. "Cabaret" bowler, no. Oh look what's this at the back of the wardrobe, a Carmen Miranda style hat, wonderful, look at all that fruit on it. Must have been Mum's, well I never. Right, pop it on the ol' head, quick look in the mirror. Fantastic! Or as Carmen would have said "Fanteczemmo". She was Brazilian you know.



O.K. Here we go, next stop the charity shop. Making sure to slow down as I pass Kent Alloomnom and wave to Sir Richard and point to the hat at the same time. And there he is, smiling and waving back at me followed by the thumbs up. He's encouraging others to wave too. Customers, staff, they're all smiling, it's infectious. And here is the street, people I don't even know are smiling at me and I'm thinking isn't life wonderful when all of a sudden, just as I'm crossing the road, two of the hat's apples slip over my eyes. I'm unsighted, disorientated, a car narrowly misses me, and the driver hurling abuse as he passes. Phew that was close. I wonder how many Road Show punters were lost in that way, the result of a hat incident. Hmm?...

Passing the bakers now, gulping in the aroma that emanates from within but I'm still on a mission, can't be distracted, and soon I'm crossing the threshold of that most worthy of all shops, The Heart of Kent Hospice Shop where, to quote these words of Martin Luther, "I have a dream". I will find an heirloom in there, I will take it along to the Antiques Road Show, wearing my hat. It will sell for a fortune which I will donate anonymously to the hospice. Perhaps just keep ten pounds back for essentials. Sweets!...

Joyce is behind the objets d'art counter/cabinet, we have a

conversation, her right hand cupped to her good ear. Her bike is outside leaning against the shop window, it is not locked but will never be stolen. This speaks volumes for the high regard in which she is held, and the condition of the bike. I spot an interesting vase in the objets cabinet and ask Joyce if I could see it. She places it on the counter but, as I lean forward for closer inspection, a banana on



the hat pokes Joyce in the eye. She flinches and accidentally knocks the vase to the floor. It disintegrates, showering my feet in glass. The blood seems to be on a time switch. For a moment no crimson appears then slowly it seeps where the ankle meets the foot.

Judy is in the kitchen area out back, she hears the commotion but is busy scooping out the chocolate digestive that she was dunking in her tea. She is the official first aider and, incidentally, met her husband Arthur at resuscitation classes in the village hall. The blood is moving faster now so I grab a garment from the rail and tie a tourniquet around my ankle. Joyce is making safe the dangerous glass fragments as Judy arrives on the scene with chocolate on her top lip. She calls in a commanding voice "Everyone remain calm, do not panic, please leave the shop in an orderly fashion."



All the customers oblige, with the exception of Mrs Rackham, an octogenarian village firebrand. She is waving a hard backed book ("The Kray Twins") and a five pound note at Joyce, but Joyce is firm as she advises "Sorry Mrs R but you'll have to come back tomorrow". Harsh words are exchanged and Dorothy Rackman gives Joyce the two fingers as she makes her exit. (Mrs R refuses to make the transition to one finger). Meanwhile the bleeding has stopped, the injury is not as bad as first thought and Judy applies a large plaster while I drink my tea.

I decide to donate the hat to the charity shop, perhaps by the time you read this you may spot some one on crutches wearing it. The hat is jinxed, no wonder it has languished at the back of the wardrobe for years...

I wash up my cup and pick up the blood stained tourniquet to throw it in the bin. It's then I notice the label on the ruined garment. Karl Lagerfeld! The item is probably worth hundreds of pounds. WAS worth hundreds of pounds, now it is worthless... Walking home I notice people aren't smiling at me anymore, not even the Aloominom massive. Why? How could they possibly know I cost the hospice all that money.

September 2012

Lately I am inclined to frustration, melancholy, madness even. But I do take some comfort in the knowledge that it's a fine line between madness and genius.

Allow me to give you an example. Wordsworth wrote "I wandered lonely as a cloud". Genius! But what if he had written "I wandered lonely as a glove". We could appreciate the sentiment, the one lonely glove, normally a pair, but old William would never have made it into print with that line. And from that failure for him, just as sure as Lambeth North follows Elephant and Castle on the Bakerloo Line, madness would most certainly have ensued. As it happened Bill went on to write other stuff, not brilliant, rarely quoted, but, because of his cloud stunt, a genius status was bestowed upon him and he could do no wrong.

Shakespeare would never have got away with "The Tempest" had he not written "Romeo and Juliet" some twenty years earlier.

So you see there is always that madness patiently waiting in the wings of a genius mind. A self-destructive frustration that manifests itself by pushing things to the limit; wandering lonely as a glove. This is why I feel the way I do.

So am I mad or genius? Well dear reader I'll lay the facts before you and let you decide...

This last month I spent meticulously researching, perfecting and preparing for presentation my latest brainwave. And from the letter I received from Stannah, in response to my project, you will see why I am feeling the way of all tortured geni. My vision is "the Nirvana lift". A similar principle to the Stannah stair lift but the Nirvana continues beyond the top landing, onwards and upwards into that repository of memories - the loft. Home owners unable to clamber in there will once again have access to those cherished objects they oft' recalled in their mind's eye. At last the senses could be satisfied, able to explore mementoes hitherto languishing on an eiderdown of dust. And all this would be possible thanks to the "Nirvana Rurial Ascender". The N.R.A.

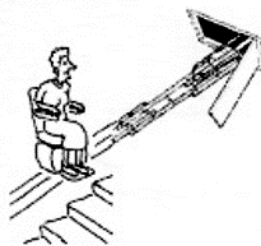
Now, here below, I reproduce the response from Stannah. A damning letter condemning me to frustration, melancholy, possibly madness. A missive, the tone of which clearly demonstrated their refusal to take me seriously...

Dear Ms Rurial.

Thank you for your letter and proposal for a new project. I'm sure you will appreciate we do receive a large number of submissions for new products but clearly your's is, shall we say, unique... We wonder, do you live alone? Have you checked the date on your tablets? Have you surrendered your driving licence? Have you won the Nigerian Lottery and forwarded your bank details to a Mr Adjahcocoa, Box 617, Nigeria... We thank you for your enquiry Ms Rurial and wish you well in the future. No further correspondence will be entered into.

Yours sincerely

*Edward Pamphlett
(Manager)*



I read the letter and immediately felt an affinity with Van Gogh. I could clearly hear Vincent's detractors "Oh no Vince, not more sunflowers". "What's that Vince, the sky? Looks like you put paint on with the handle". They mocked him, were not capable of sharing his vision, appreciating his genius. In the same way that Mr Pamphlett would not encourage or rejoice in my imagination of a lift that could journey to the landing, to the loft, to the stars... To Nirvana.

When we wake in the morning we have no sure way of knowing what each new day will bring. For the most part they are normal days. This particular day I describe began well. The kitchen sink was blocked, hot soapy water refusing to run away; a perfect start to my day, a necessary trip to Kent Aloominom. Yes necessary. Well Richard had been a bit funny of late, since his knighthood he actively discourages me from buying things in there, suggesting it's obsessional behaviour. But a kitchen sink plunger was now definitely required in the residence of one Ms Muriel Rurial, currently appearing at Western Road, Borough Green, TN15.

Of course I did already have five or six plungers but what if I needed them all? What if Hilda, Shirley, Daphne, Judy, Linda all needed one simultaneously? Yes, I reasoned, a perfectly legitimate reason to visit Kent Aloominom. You are not obsessional Muriel, you are being caring, considerate and practical. A plunger for all your friends should they need one (simultaneously), and then one for myself to cure my blocked sink. But to be on the safe side when I'm in there, I thought I might alter my appearance somewhat, perhaps look and act like a professional builder. Maybe Richard might not even notice me in K. A.

Plenty of women builders these days, I just needed some ruffy tufty builder's clothes and then Kent Aloominom here I come. "Top of the World Ma, Top of the World"..... From the charity shop I purchased an old "Guns and Roses" tour t-shirt and a pair of Doctor Martens' boots. I take a size six shoe and the boots were nines but I reckoned, if I wore a few pairs of extra thick socks and squashed lots of newspaper into the toe area, I would be fine. Some jeans I could spill paint on when I got home, a pair of heavy Roy Orbison sunglasses and the outfit was complete. Indoors checking my appearance in the mirror, I could hardly see a thing through those glasses but I imagined I did look the part.



From my home in Western Road to Kent Aloominom is not far but I made very slow progress. Several times I almost stepped out of the boots and I did walk into the display of Cosmos on the forecourt of the florist in Western Road. Which got me wondering how on earth did ol' Roy manage with those sunglasses for so many years. Hmm?

Making my way by touch, slowly, gingerly, past the pavements displays outside K.A., I entered that Mecca of hardware stores. It was darker still in there, I could not see a thing but I breathed in the aroma, I sensed the ambience, then tripped over a copper pipe leaning against the counter. A tradesman helped me up, handing me the glasses dislodged in the fall. I had caused a commotion, Richard came over to me, signalling I follow him to the small, private, key cutting area.

For a while he didn't speak, his expression condemning me, then at last he offered a wan smile, a smile that conveyed caring with a tinge of pity. In that small key cutting area the tension was unbearable. The chemistry, the intimacy, I

couldn't stand it any longer, I blurted out "I need a plunger, Richard. A sink plunger. A plunger for the sink. It's blocked, it won't run away ..."

"Muriel, Muriel, easy now, easy" and with calm restored he continued in sympathetic tones "I'm sorry Muriel, I can't serve you. I thought we agreed it's for your own good". I interrupted him "But I love Kent Aloominom, I love hardware, I love....". Thankfully at that moment Des called out "We got any half inch elbows Richard?" Richard left me there, the emotionally charged atmosphere slowly evaporating. Phew!

Before too long Richard returned, carrying something in a plastic bag. He spoke softly, sincerely, "Like I said Muriel, I can't serve you, sell you anything, but I can "give" you something. Help you conquer your obsession". He handed me the carrier bag and nodded towards it, suggesting I discover its contents. I felt a tingle of excitement, I wondered what it was, then tentatively slipped it from the bag. It was a sweatshirt, the most wonderful item of clothing I will ever wear. The colour was mauve and letters across the chest perfectly arranged to form the words "Kent Aloominom". It was the official livery of the bestest store in the whole wide world.

It wasn't a job offer, but as Richard said "Wear it and pretend" and then guess what? Yes, he embraced me. As I said at the beginning "We never know what each new day will bring".

I wandered into the charity shop. It was a little after ten thirty, the early morning rush over. Dealers posing at regular punters had left, having scoured the rails, cabinet and shelves for Prada, Omega and Meissen. The till was cooling down, a civilised atmosphere returning, people now browsing for a bargain not a profit. It is after all a charity shop, not the stock exchange...

Perusing the book shelves I came across a book that caught my eye. "Famous phrases, speeches and people". I opened it at random. Martin Luther King "I have a dream". I couldn't help but read it aloud. People interrupted their bargain hunting to gaze in my direction. I felt emboldened to begin again, louder, impassioned, playing to the gallery. As new customers entered the shop they were "shushed" by my audience and soon captivated by the reading, sometimes moved to call aloud "Yessir" or "Praise be".



It was going so well, I had them in the palm of my hand and should have stopped there but no, I continued, urging the American nation to go forward while losing the Borough Green few. At last I recognised the signs, the impatient shuffling of feet, the scraping of coat hangers as they returned their attention to the rails. Yes I was losing them so I threw in the famous line again, fortissimo. "I have a dreecam".

I turned the page and continued "That's another fine mess you've gotten me into" Laurel and Hardy??? Move on quick Muriel, move on, next page.

Ah Scott of the Antarctic and his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole. Reading from the book with passion and improved sound effects (mistake really, didn't sound much like a polar bear) I described the dire freezing conditions and hopeless situation as the expedition battled against the elements. I then went on to tell how Capt. Oates, recognising his sickness would hamper their progress to the pole, stepped out into the wilderness and certain death.

A long pause for affect led customers to urge me "Carry on, carry on", and Judy at the till dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. I was milking it, building the tension and, at last, uttered Oates' famous line "I'm just stepping outside, I maybe"



I turned the page and continued, "Over the moon Brian when that third goal went in" Geoff Hurst 1966 World Cup ??? No wonder the book

was in the charity shop, it had been collated wrong. Pages were not in corresponding order. Some customers, feeling cheated, having given me their rapt attention, left the shop deliberately knocking things over on their way out while others returned to their bargain hunting, unanimously shunning me.

I examined the book further. It was full of unfortunate sequences.... On page 47 Churchill condemned a "Monstrous tyranny never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime..." Page 48 asked "Was it Bill or was it Ben?" Flowerpot men???? Page 86 described Hitler marching through Czechoslovakia, Poland, France and Belgium, and Noddy remarked on page 87 "What a busy day".

I returned the book to its place on the shelf, reckoning there it would remain, its occupants, heroes and villains smiling wryly at their juxtaposition, then strolling home I got to wondering:

What would Hitler have made of the Flowerpot men? I'll tell you. He would have ignored them. He did not have a sense of humour or ever experience those moments of Christmas cracker wonderment we occasionally have. So why are there people like him? Bad people! Well as the poet William Cowper famously said, page 106, "Variety is the spice of life", while unfortunately on the very next page, 107, Napoleon Bonaparte whined "But not tonight Josephine".



December 2012

I wanted to be positive, rise above it all. You know, those things that happen, happen as if to deliberately thwart us. Thwart, thwart, thwart. And I was doing really well, ignoring people jumping the queue in the bakers, cutting me up on the road, wedging the letterbox open with a million pizza leaflets. In the beginning I felt serene, majestic, impervious to fate's attempts to despond and yes I was rising above it, but it became increasingly difficult as the day wore on.

Eventually there I was, at the end of a busy day, hanging on to my calm by the slimmest of margins as I entered The Palais de Western Road Sanctuary TN15. Phew, just made it. Kettle on, Kit-Kat at the ready, time to relax, no longer forced to run the gauntlet teeming beyond the street door. Ahhh!...

Sipping the amber nectar, dipping chocolate coated wafers, I thought I might put the telly on. Not really enamoured of television programmes so, as it crackled and buzzed into life, I pleaded with it. Please, please not a cookery programme, gardening, talent show, quiz, panel game or celebrity promoting their play, film, autobiography tosh. How, abandoned aged four, left to fend for themselves, they were brought up by a family of squirrels but against all the odds went on to star in films, win Baftas, Naftas, Oscars. Suddenly the telly lit up and it was worse than the aforementioned horrors. Yes you've guessed it, the dreaded S.C.D. Strictly Come Dancing. Just saying those three words out loud threw a wet blanket over me. It was the closed sign at the cake shop window. The diversion sign that means a twenty mile detour. Milk boiling over on the hob. Going out to the car that's listing on a flat tyre. All those things but there it was flooding into my living room. Celebrities showing off, supported by professional dancers, like children riding bikes with the aid of stabilisers.

Couldn't find the remote that had slipped down the side of the sofa so I reached for the telly's on/off button but froze with my finger on the switch. Not so fast Muriel, so quick to condemn. Could you do it, learn to dance like that? I paused for a moment then, with a resounding "Yes", hit the off button. And not only could I do it, I would prove it...

I chose flamboyant clothes from the charity shop and a salsa club in Sevenoaks advertised in a flyer. There was a woman sat behind a paste table at the door, took my five pound entrance fee and quickly made her way to the other end of the chilly, cavernous hall, where she doubled as disc jockey. Through the sound's system whistling and buzzing feedback I could make out occasional bursts of Spanish style music, drowned out now and then by traffic noises from the busy road outside.

There was only one other person in there and I couldn't really tell if it was a man or woman. I think they felt the same about me as we stood on opposite sides of the dimly lit hall, shifting slightly now and then like a pair of fighting cocks weighing up our opponents. Eventually he made his way over to me, in his imagination looking and walking like John Travolta, but in reality more akin to a Stringray puppet. "You ready to roll?", he enquired in a cod

American accent. "Roll?". "Yeah roll", he replied, swiveling his hips. "Roll, I'll lead you." And we rolled for three horrendous minutes during which he tried to subject me to so many things anathema to this ol' maverick.

"Feel the music, make romantic eye contact with me", he urged. "No way", I replied. "Let me lead you, follow my lead", he said impatiently. "You lead me, you're joking".

And then the final straw. I'll put it politely, he invaded my personal space. I suppose encouraged by the split I hadn't noticed in the charity shop leggings. Well things happened quite quickly after that but, in a nutshell, I slapped him, he called me some unflattering names, the woman on the door gave me my five pounds back and within half an hour I was home in good old B.G. (Borough Green)...



In the armchair, sipping tea and dunking biscuits, I reflected upon the evening with this conclusion. I congratulate those who seriously perfect the art of dance. I say hurrah and good for you to others who simply enjoy it but, I'm afraid, it's not for me. Well, as they say, "Each to their own" and "We all have our strength and weaknesses". Apparently Fred Astaire couldn't ride a push bike.