

**MURIEL
RURIAL
2008**

February 2008

LOST
WIRE HAired TERRIER
ANSWERS TO THE NAME
OF "BEN"

Shortly after Christmas, a knock at the door. Daphne standing there, her usual riot of colour; blue hat, red coat, green trousers and mauve gloves that tugged at a lead, the end of which held a small dog. "Say hello to Muriel, Ben. There's a good boy." The little dog ran round my ankles, sniffing at my legs, occasionally jumping up at my thighs. I knelt down to stroke him and he licked my hand then peed on the door step. "Bad boy," said Daphne. "Now look what you've done. You say sorry to Muriel".

Daphne was obviously more in tune with Ben than I was as, without any visible movement of his jaw or audible sound from his throat, she congratulated him on an apparent apology. "Good boy Ben. Gooood Boy".

Suddenly Daphne started to sneeze and, as she put a hankie up to her nose and watering eyes, Ben took advantage of Daph's loose hold on the lead and scooted past me into the house, knocking a small porcelain ballerina from the the hall table onto an old marble door stop. Thus ending, due to the loss of one leg, both arms and a head, any dream of a dancing career she may have harboured.

Daphne said she was sorry and began attempting to re-assemble her, mumbling something about glue. I took the pieces from Daphne and couldn't help softly mentioning, "That belonged to my mother". There was an awkward silence, swiftly broken by a loud crash from the front room. We ran to investigate, discovering the lead wrapped around a small pot plant table laying on its side, the plant and earth scattered across the rug.

Ben disentangled himself from the plant and shot off upstairs, dragging the little table with him, whacking every banister on his ascent. Daph was about to call after him but started sneezing violently again, causing her eyes to stream and nose to run and, holding her handkerchief to her face, I thought I caught her muffled tones declare, "I can't help it Muriel, I'm sorry, I can't help it".

As I went upstairs I heard the click of his claws on tiles so I knew he was in the bathroom. There followed an angry growling then a ripping sound with yet another crash for a finalé. He had torn the shower curtail then succeeded in bringing it crashing down on himself but, in his panic to be liberated, had become even more entangled, so I arrived in the bathroom to see this revolving, growling shower curtain knocking over all those items one accumulates in that little room. Briefly he stopped whirring and growling then suddenly set off downstairs still wrapped in the curtain, knocking a toilet roll into the pan, which swelled and distorted as it hit the water.

Ben made for the kitchen and I heard Daphne enquire, "Do you want a drink, Ben? Yes you want a drink don't you? Oh and look at you in that shower curtain you silly boy, come here and let me take it off you."

I stood at the top of the stairs, incredulous, listening to her having a conversation with that crazy dog. Speaking to it as if it were a mischievous child. Then I heard it lapping at the water. "Good boy, Ben, good boy." Good boy? He's wrecked the home and now he's enjoying refreshment. Good Boy? I don't think so!.....I wandered into the kitchen, he had finished his bowl of water and was running

his tongue over his teeth, looking up at me, innocently, as if he had just stepped off a birthday card. One of those sickly cards with dogs, sheep, teddy bears or fairies on them. And a verse that tipped you over the edge if the pictures didn't. But one saving grace, for the moment he was calm.

If Daphne would stop spooking him with her sneezing perhaps we could persuade him towards the front door, then out into the street, the beginning of a journey a million miles away from Western Road. Down to Dover, across the channel, into France, Germany, Panama, Brazil. That's it Ben knock over pot plants in Colombia, smash ornaments in Paraguay, wreck bathrooms in Yugoslavia. Bon voyage Ben. Au revoir, don't forget to write. Yes then you really would be a "Good Boy".

At that moment the luxury of my fantasy was banished as the washing machine stopped rotating its contents and there at the glass door, precisely opposite Ben's gaze, were my slippers. The ones designed to look like cats, complete with whiskers at the toe end. "Good Boy Ben" went berserk. Barking hysterically, leaping up at the glass door, trying to get at the cats, occasionally breaking off from this to chase his tail. This set Daphne's sneezing off again, so violently that her hat came off to be savaged by Ben as he vented his anger at those inaccessible slippers by destroying Daphne's headgear. The machine clicked into spin mode, 1600rpm maximum crease, impossible to iron anything spin. And as the cats disappeared in the blur of luxury spin, Ben chased his tail even faster, then at that moment I had one of my brainwaves.

I opened the back door. Come on 'Good boy Ben', he who speaks the language of humans that Daphne may understand. O wiry one that wrecks homes and pees on door steps. Rush out in to the night in search of other dogs to lick and sniff, and seek out little furry things, innocent little hoppity poppities to chase and maul. Lampposts and trees to tempt you... Go on out you go, far far away, a million trillion miles from Borough Green.

Ben moved to the threshold of the back door and by expression I willed Daphne not to sneeze, and we waited.... And waited. The suspense was unbearable then, just as he looked as if he was about to leave, disaster struck. From out of nowhere a jet black dog appeared. Somehow he had gained entry to the back garden and picked up the scent of 'B'. He was an ugly shifty dog. A ticket tout in a previous life, a drinker, a fighter and coming face to face with Ben his hackles rose, before a brief growling and posturing, then battle commenced.

It began there in the kitchen, went on into the living room, the stairs, back into the the kitchen then out into the garden. Clearly losing the struggle Ben attempted to make his escape over the fence towards the railway line with ticket tout in hot pursuit and that, your honour was the last we saw of them...

It was in the early hours of the morning before Daphne and I finally restored some order to the place and over tea explained that it was her daughters Clare's dog and she had asked Daph to look after it while she was away. Daph agreed but soon realised she was allergic to him and came round to see if I would foster the black and white menace for the weekend. I said "It won't be necessary now Daphne he'll probably soon be in Brazil, chasing his tail then relieving himself on South American door steps."

March 2008

At my age, 67, I shouldn't have any demons apart that is from the obvious health concerns. But I do. I have demons, unnatural aversions to Jigsaw puzzles, Schmaltz, Hospitals, Knitting, Dogs. Inane chatter eg Helen: My Stan can't eat a boiled egg without salt on it..... Silvy: It gives it flavour, I suppose? Helen: It's amazing, our David doesn't have salt on any of his food. Takes after his Nan, I reckon. Silvy: I'm the same with vinegar on my chips. Won't touch a chip unless I can splash vinegar on it. WHO CARES! What possible interest is this to anyone?

Anyway, I felt it was time to face my demons so I drew up a list and was going to tick 'em off one by one as I conquered them. Numbers one and two, jigsaw puzzles and schmaltz, could be dealt with in one fell swoop: and to make it all the more meaningful I wasn't going to buy a bargain priced puzzle from our charity shop, no sir, I'd pay a lot of money for the biggest, schmaltziest j.s.p. I could find, and complete it. Oh yes! So off I went to Woolworths in Sevenoaks.... "Can I help you Madam?" "Yes I'd like to buy a jig -. A jig -". "Yes madam?" "Do you sell - ohhh".

I ran from Woolies, I couldn't even say the words that conjured so much misery for me. I needed strength from somewhere, I mustn't fail at the very first challenge on my list. I know, caffeine, that's the answer. Cafe Nero in the High Street. Double, no treble, espresso. Loooads of caffeine, heart rate up, adrenalin pumping, storm into W H Smith (couldn't go back to Woolworths), scoop up the cheesiest j.s.p., go home complete it, two demons banished. Applause. Now can we have the next demons step forward please. Thank you. Ah a dog. Stroke him, pet him, kiss him (ugggh!), take him for walks, knit him a jacket, that's two more demons gone. Dogs and knitting, excellent.

I was on a roll now, psyching myself up, and, as I queued for espresso, I imagined my world without demons. Immortal, invincible, the way I felt as I teenager, not a care in the world, not a demon in sight....

I left Cafe Nero, the bitter taste of strong coffee lingering in my mouth despite the gratis mint, and by the time I reached the threshold of Smith's the caffeine was working its magic making me feel and walk like an old gunslinger come to confront a young pretender. And d'you know that coffee was so strong I could almost hear spaghetti western music and the jangle of spurs as I approached an assistant.

"Excuse me d'you sell jigsaw puzzles?" The words followed like a Shakespearean soliloquy. Pleased with myself I spoke the words over and over. Showing off, rearranging them, speaking in a foreign tongue. "Pardonez moi, je desire un puzzle, le jig de la saw, s'il vous plait, avec beaucoup des petits hoppity poppity, et fils. Jig, puzzle, saw. Jig, jig, jig, puzzle, puzzle, puzzle. Puzzle, puzzle, puzzle. Thank you".

The assistant eyed me suspiciously then glanced up at the security camera, her expression pleading with staff behind the lens to "keep an eye on this one". I followed her to the rear of the stall where the range of j.s.p's were displayed. "There we are Madam, jigsaw puzzles" adding sarcastically "Puzzles

des jig". I studied them briefly then enquired "Humm, do you have any snowing ballerinas, and children, and bunny rabbits, and pixies, and snowmen, and ice cream and, and - " She narrowed her eyes at the same time as compressing her lips and then reached to the very back of the top shelf "Phantasmagoria". 2000 pieces that could be painstakingly interlocked to form a picture perfectly displaying all the characters I had described. In silence she offered me the box, glanced up at the camera and smiled smugly. Then she jabbed the box at my midriff, daring me to take it, almost as if she knew my plight. Perhaps there were other sufferers like me who would never ever be truly rid of this particular demon unless they conquered "The Phantasmagoria" (dramatic music now please). This was Captain Ahab's Moby Dick, David's Goliath and Stan's boiled eggs without salt....

In the presence of Phantasmagoria, caffeine deserted me, my eyes were filling with tears but, with amazing resolve and defiance, I asked her to wrap it for me. My silent reasoning being, if I couldn't actually see it I might be able to carry it home and tackle it there with a new strategy more robust than caffeine.

In silence I sat with it next to me on the bus (still haven't got a car), its menace apparent from the shape of the blue and white Smith's bag and the occasional rattle from some of the pieces. I suppose I could leave it there when I get off, for a cleaner to discover at the depot or some unsuspecting passenger to chance upon it later. But that's a coward's way out Muriel and you would have to live with the knowledge that you fled rather than faced your opponent. "Borough Green!" The driver's voice roused me from my reverie and, with the puzzle under my arm, I headed towards Western Road. That night I couldn't sleep, knowing it languished on the dining room table still in its bag, teasing, tormenting. For hours I lay there and suddenly at 6 o'clock in the morning I threw back the duvet, slipped on my robe determined to confront "Phantasmagoria". Tearing off the stationer's bag, then slitting the sellotape that held its lid in place, I stared at the illustration. For ages I gazed at the hideous colours and characters displayed, and slowly I began to feel contempt rather than fear for the whole concept of j.s.p's; and this in turn emboldened me to remove the lid. Thousands of pieces, millions and billions and zillions of pieces. A life's work there to complete it. Can't let it beat me though. How would I feel? What would people say? "She gave up, yeah. Muriel gave up. Phhhh!" I screamed out "No I won't give up. I WON'T GIVE UP. NEVER!". And Marie next door banged on the adjoining wall equally loudly "Turn that telly down, 6 o'clock in the morning".... Oblivious to Marie I reached in the box, my head hovering over the villions of pieces as I mumbled the puzzler's mantra " Start with the edges" and eventually with a trembling hand I plucked out a piece with not one but two squared edges. A corner piece! But I could not place it down. For 20 minutes I tried to lay that piece on the table, that symbolic first piece, but I could not do it. Eventually, resigned to failure, I calmly returned the piece to its box, sellotaped the lid and dropped it in the recycling bin.

Perhaps I might tackle knitting tomorrow.

July 2008

I cleared the loft of heirlooms, I did several boot fairs and, most lucrative of all, I sold Mum's jewellery. I'm not enamoured of jewellery, I've never worn it, I don't find it attractive on others so I knew that Mum would have approved of its sale, rather than me occasionally opening that big old cigar box and gazing at its contents whilst thinking of her.

So what did I do with the proceeds of my sales efforts? Well, I bought a car. A Nissan Micra. The advert in Shakti's window proclaimed, a bargain, but no price detail**OXFORD CONCISE DICTIONARY** "BARGAIN - A thing bought or offered for sale for a lower price than normal." Hmm? The address was impressive, suggesting the car's pampered life, anointed weekly with liquid polish, caressed lovingly with a chamois, driven with care.

Walking up Crouch Lane with only £243 in my pocket I felt like an imposter. Oh well what had I got to lose. I dressed to play the pity card but in so doing I did look a bit blokey. The old jeans, paint splattered sweat shirt, Mum's old trainers. Poor but blokey. Yes a poor bloke. Too late now though, I'm here. Wow, the house in the distance was magnificent. Hope no dog comes bounding down the drive at me. No, just an inquisitive cat that lets me pick her up and stroke her all the way to the front door.

I put the cat down and rang the door bell but no response. I didn't want to appear too keen so left it a little while before ringing again. I left it a long while actually, in fact I stood there so long looking up at the windows and round about I probably looked like an old criminal coming out of retirement for that one last job. Eventually the blunt stumbling sounds from within heralded the arrival of a rather strange looking man, perhaps in his seventies, at the front door. He was wearing jodhpurs, a Rolling Stones' tee shirt, plimsolls, an old leather aviator's hat and spoke in a loud booming theatrical voice. "Yes?" "I've come about the car."

A long silence as he looked me up and down before replying. "Hmm. You'll be wanting a test drive no doubt. Follow me son." "Son!?"

We walked towards a double garage. Garaged, I thought, but then we continued beyond and there beneath a huge chestnut tree decorated by the birds, was Monsieur Nissan Micra. We climbed in, he let the hand brake off, we rolled down the sloping drive and with a shuddering bump start it burst into life and we were away, on the most hair-raising journey I've ever had in my life; during which I noticed he never once used the indicators, the hooter, the wipers or third gear.

Returning to the chestnut tree he slammed the driver's door and bellowed, "Well, what d'you think. Will you take it, or will you leave it?" I considered its faults and then further considered the Oxford definition of bargain and blurted out "I'll take it", then remembered we hadn't determined a price so added meekly, whilst picking at the spots of paint on my old sweat shirt, "Depends if I can afford it".

There was an awkward silence, not uncommon at these moments, then suddenly he kicked a tyre, hammered a fist on the roof and declared, "I'll not take a penny under two hundred".

Excitement made me kick the opposite tyre in response, then he walked to the rear of the car and kicked a different tyre, so I kicked the opposite tyre and we met at the boot and laughed as we shook hands on the deal. The laughter subsided and, still holding my hand, he looked wistfully beyond my shoulder, into the past. I thought for a moment he had had a change of heart and was not able to part with the vehicle but, as he slowly released my hand he spoke, though softer now, "You remind me so much of my son. I wonder if you share the same Christian name as him. His name was Jonathon?". "Mine's Muriel," I replied, and with that he turned and without a word walked slowly towards the house.

Suddenly I realised, of course, he had spoken of his son in the past tense, and all at once I felt ashamed at having spoken out so sharply. And then that prickly sensation at my forehead which I get when I've spoken out clumsily like that. I stood there for a while, wondering what to do. Should I follow him to the house, was the deal off, what was going on? Then just when I resolved to leave, he re-appeared, carrying a large manilla envelope. "It's all in there," he said, "MOT, service history, everything. Now you take care". Then he tapped the side of his nose, knowingly, as he concluded, "Jonathan"...

On the journey home to Western Road I tried the hooter, the wipers, the indicators and third gear, and d'you know something, they all worked perfectly and, what's more, I noticed the car had only driven 2,000 miles, despite its age. Even with my limited knowledge about these things I know that £200 was far too cheap for this lovely little car. But if I reminded him of his son...?

Ah well, I'll never know if that was the case or he was simply an eccentric. Anyway now I'm mobile again I may go BIG shopping. Perhaps I'll even buy a dress. Or perhaps not.

I took to studying the birds. I felt I should know more about them, to be able to identify them from their appearance, their song. I began examining the clouds, the portents from their colour, their formation. I puzzled over the moon, the sun, the stars. What did it all mean? I bought books, DVDs, charts, note books, everything. But was I any nearer to knowledge, enlightenment? Not really. In fact I became so confused trying to assimilate all that information, the result was chaos in my mind.

It was the same when I was at school, there were some things I just could not grasp no matter how many pencils I chewed. I did eventually partially understand mathematics, struggle through geometry but, when they fiendishly married those two subjects and trigonometry was born, I acknowledged I was no academic and carved my name in the desk top to prove it..

They say "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing" but what they don't tell you is "loads of knowledge, all jumbled up, is even dangerouser". So was I really qualified to declare loudly and with conviction that a lunar eclipse is imminent if the collared dove sings at high tide. And how many times was I soaked to the skin wrongly interpreting the clouds obeying that old adage "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight. Red sky in the morning, red sky in the morning..."

But here's a thing though. How on earth did those ancient mariners cross continents with nothing to guide them but the stars and the moon? Although I maintain it was serendipity at work when they discovered those new lands and realised too they would not fall off the edge of the world. In reality they were really plundering tobacco and rum from the West Indies but became hopelessly lost.

When I propounded this theory at one of our little soirees, Linda was quite scathing in her criticism of such a suggestion, then she always is a little tetchy when she's on the wagon. Hilda was less critical, merely advising me to "Check the date on your tablets, Muriel"; but Daphne, well the debate between me and Daphne became so heated she threw her favourite ornament at me - Aphrodite at the Water Hole - which she later clumsily repaired and I christened "Araldite at the Water Hole".

As usual the evening ended acrimoniously and I went home determined to gain more knowledge before I spoke publicly on those subjects that had seized my imagination. And amazingly the very next day, poring over my books, I had my eureka moment. I read how a clock was perfected that was accurate at sea, enabling them to determine the line of longitude, and

from that day navigation was a doddle. And I reckoned that line of longitude gave rise, centuries later, to the District, Circle and Bakerloo lines - yes!

At last I felt confident enough to speak publicly on the subject. I would have some dummy runs first. Smaller practice venues, just engaging people in the shops before I booked the village hall though. I'd show them, Daphne, Hilda and Linda. I may even get to be guest speaker at one of those WI nights. What a turn around that would be eh? Thrown out five years ago, now celebrity guest speaker. Exit Muriel Rurial stage left, to rapturous applause, thank you goodnight.

I was excited by that prospect and I suppose the adrenalin was flowing and wham, I thought what if I engaged people more readily with some sort of prop or exhibit? Brainwave, oh yes. A poster of my hero Christopher Columbus, handsome, daring, pioneer, which I could produce when regaling customers in those village shops... I couldn't locate a large coloured poster of CC so I had to make do with one of a chap I'd never heard of but none the less looked very similar to Chris Columbus. I pencilled a moustache and pirates earring on him, held the poster at arm's length and said "Hmm I don't know who you are Frank Lampard but then no one else will, so you'll do very nicely, thank you".

I produced this likeness as I held punters enthralled in the charity shop, the post office and the flower shop, and then disaster struck, just when I was about to book the village hall and discuss terms with the WI. Just one last rehearsal, the acid test for all performers Kent Aloominum. I wandered in, chatted to Karl and Roger the plumbers, then launched in to my patter. More customers entered that hallowed establishment and immediately joined my enraptured audience. I held them in the palm of my hand and then ... And then I produced the poster and their mood changed immediately, from wonderment to mocking laughter and steadily my fickle fans melted away, the chuckles still audible as far away as the sandpaper aisle. As I stood there alone, dejected, Richard came over and draped a consoling arm about my shoulders. "There is an uncanny resemblance, Muriel, but why would Christopher Columbus, fifteenth century mariner, be wearing a Chelsea football shirt?"

And with that he gently led me from my favourite shop in the whole wide world. A world made smaller by Christopher Columbus, not Frank Lampard.

October 2008

Acting, that's the thing. Lots of money, being made a dame, fêted; for what? Well Noel Coward famously said "Just remember your lines and don't trip over the furniture, that's all acting is". O.K. Muriel Rurial, put yourself to the test. Join a theatre group and try it. Look there's one in Sevenoaks advertising for players now. There you go, no excuses, no prevaricating, get on and do it now...

"Hallo I'm ringing in response to your advert"... "Yes, yes, blah, blah, blah, well we'll see you on Wednesday then, bye."

I put the phone down, I was excited and a little nervous. Perhaps it was my imagination but I did feel she sounded a little "orf", precious even. Anyway, I went to the bookcase to pluck out a work that would contain the perfect audition piece but before long I realised that all the best soliloquies and rants were written for men. Fair enough, only one thing for it, write my own piece. I would do it in a Marlon Brando, mumbling, method acting style. Long vacant looks into the distance, unintelligible dialogue and pass it off as a contemporary work by a brilliant Czechoslovak director, Petrov Grolonskya; whoever that is? Sounds convincing though, I thought.

I'd test those luvvies, they wouldn't know, they wouldn't challenge it either, for fear of showing their ignorance. Emperor's new clothes. Brilliant! Actors, smactors. Phhh!

"Good evening and welcome to the Sevenoaks Theatre Group. I'm Verity Palladin." Verity stood on the small stage, clipboard in hand, addressing us in bossy, sometimes patronising, tones; and I took an instant dislike to her. "Well we have a lot of auditions to get through tonight so could we hear first from", quick glance at clipboard, "from Terence Williams who I believe will give us his audition piece, that sublime opening soliloquy from Richard III".

She shook her head in disbelief, incredulous that any newcomer might attempt such a walk in the shadow of Larry. "So over to you Terence".

Mr Williams ambled on to the stage, clearly nervous and not used to the "spotlight". He was wearing opaque tights, a sort of Beatles wig and had a cushion shoved up the back of his jumper; a Primark label clearly visible hanging from the cushion. But Terence Williams' biggest mistake was Richard III wearing glasses. There was general tittering amongst those gathered, which eventually subsided, then Verity broke the agonising silence by calling loudly that clichéd phrase "when you're ready Terence". And at last he was ready. "Now

is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by Made glorious summer

T.W. dried, blinking pitifully at the audience through those harsh theatre lights. Then a long embarrassing silence as Williams removed his wig and tugged at the cushion before pushing past us, out into the street, anonymous, where no witnesses to his failure lurked.

Verity looked smug rather than sad, as if to say "Y'see it's not so easy is it, being an actor, to do justice to the bard". She consulted her clipboard again "O.K. could we see Muriel Rurial now, and Muriel will be giving us and excerpt from that celebrated Czech dramatist's masterpiece "On this field I lay dying " .

I made my way slowly to the stage. I was confident, empowered by my contempt for this woman Palladin and her attitude. This pretentious amateur who I would delight in deceiving with my Czechoslovakian mumbo jumbo. I stood centre stage, wearing a leather zipper bomber coat and woollen docker's hat. Brando was my role model for Grolonskya's words. I peered into the spotlights "Could we have the lights down please? Lower, lower". Now it was almost pitch black, ridiculous, "Thank you".

Long pause, perhaps 30 seconds, an eternity in the theatre then "Mamma I done good. Look at me Mamma, I done good didn't I?" Then mumble, mumble, mumble for ages, followed by dropping to my knees and looking up tot he heavens. "Contender Charlie, coulda been a contender, coulda had class". Pause before standing erect, reaching to the heavens and declaring "Top of the world Ma, top of the world".

And this is how it was for a full six minutes. Mumbling, pausing, quoting lines from classic films and sometimes just throwing in random nonsensical dialogue like "that's fool's gold son, fool's gold" or "she's gonna blow!". Eventually I stopped, bowed slightly and began my exit and, as the lights came up, Verity screamed her appreciation "Wonderful, wonderful, bravo", all the while clapping wildly.

Unanimously they followed suit and I could still hear the applause as I left the theatre, glimpsing a Beatles wig and Primark cushion dumped at the exit doors.

Driving home I felt pleased with myself and smiled at the thought of Verity Palladin searching the Internet for Petrov Grolonskya.

November 2008

Some years ago, on Remembrance Sunday, I cycled to Meopham Green where a small brass band was conducting a service. I sat a few benches away, took my pad and pencil from the saddlebag and I started work on the following poem.

Until recently it has been languishing in a folder, forgotten, but now I thought was the right time to bring it out.

Smiling

He trod the steps to rise in tact, above that musty trench
A rifle and his terror, the company he kept
And a snapshot that she gave him, buttoned at his breast.

She is smiling, she is England, in all its perfect state
She has no cause to frown, or know, the marksman who in wait
Without shame, and careful aim, will seal her lover's fate.

She is smiling, she is England, she cannot feel his pain
Nor stem the flow of crimson life that slowly ebbs away
Or shudder now to kiss, those lifeless lips of clay.

She does not hear him calling, beneath the sulphur skies
She does not see her perfect face, swimming in his eyes
She is smiling still, at his breast, smiling as he dies.

December 2008

I climbed the steps into the loft, switched on the light and surveyed its clutter. It was that time of year again. Christmas - wrapping paper, cards left from last year, sellotape, crackers and a list of names, some of whom would not see this Christmas. It was all there in an old cardboard box that had served over the years, its limp sides and tattered corners testament to its service.

A cobweb hung from a naked bulb set in the rafters, the harsh light clearly defining the intricate work of a spider who, for some unknown reason, never returned to claim the tiny insect hanging there, lifeless. Then, through a small gap in the tiles, I glimpsed the stars and, as I imagined life beyond my roof, beyond the constellation, I became both melancholy and philosophical, pondering that age old mystery, life's purpose.

It was at this point I missed my footing and stepped through the ceiling... From the hole I created in the ceiling, through a galaxy of plaster dust, I could see my bedroom below. There was my wardrobe and dressing table, chest of drawers and bedside cabinet. Yep, that was my bedroom alright and my blood dripping on the duvet. Hmm.

I was starting to feel a bit of pain at this point so, with some effort, I extricated my leg from the ceiling. Nothing broken but, clearly, "Houston we have a problem". Gingerly I descended the loft ladder, went to the bathroom, cleaned the cut and put a plaster over a wound that wasn't as bad as the blood suggested.

Right, next job, clean up the bedroom. Hoover, brush, Mr Sheen, change duvet, order restored. Done! So why wasn't I upset? Why, when I sat on the bed gazing into the loft through a hole in the ceiling, why wasn't I distraught? For a while it puzzled me, it didn't seem normal, then I realised — Kent Alooominon! This was a natural disaster so, when I went to my favourite store in the whole wide world, they wouldn't dismiss me, albeit privately, as a hardware groupie. Tomorrow I would be a legitimate purchaser of all things hardware. Lots and lots of hardware. Hooray.

At last tomorrow arrived and with high excitement I crossed the threshold of KA. Spotting me, Richard glanced at Des then inclined his head towards me, signalling my arrival. In my pocket I had a list, gleaned from information courtesy of Reader's Digest DIY book, a consolation prize for not winning the car, holiday or cash. "Muriel, what can we do for you?" With a flourish I produced the list and, after a long pause for dramatic effect, I said, "Richard I need lots of things. Bags of plaster, thin wire mesh, batten, a float, a rendering tool"; I was on a roll now, playing to the gallery, the knot of tradesmen gathered round me, impressed by this old dear ordering, ordering...

"And I'll want white emulsion, a two inch brush. Oh and you better give me", (I'd heard builders use that expression, *better give me*). "You

better give me a dust sheet and fine to medium sandpaper. Yes I think that's about it." "Big job?" enquired Des, smirking. "Big job", I replied, winking to suggest a fantastic project....

Efficient as ever, Richard delivered it all later that afternoon and in the morning I started work, following the Reader's Digest instructions. Late evening two days later I stood in my bedroom looking up at the ceiling, the finished job. In all honesty it wasn't very good. It bulged slightly and the join between old and new was noticeable, despite hours of boring sandpapering.

I sat on the bed, studying the blisters on my hand then glimpsed my reflection in the mirror and all at once I felt sad, tearful even. I was a failure, failed miserably. A straight forward, not rocket science job, and I had failed...

Come on get a grip Muriel, this is not like you, all sentimental and sappy. Crikey you'll be smiling at children and stroking puppies next. Snap out of it, for goodness sake. And I did, because at that very moment I was saved by one of my amazing brainwaves. MICHELANGELO, THE SISTINE CHAPEL, that's it. I would enlarge the area of repair to a huge circumference around the light fitting in the ceiling and paint it in the style of the Sistine Chapel. Not only would it hide the repair it would be a fantastic feature that I could gaze upon as I lay in bed at night. Brilliant! Muriel you are a genius...

Off to Sevenoaks specialist art shop in the morning, via the library to borrow books for artistic inspiration and then, let the performance commence. Yes!

For a whole week I worked, inspiration flowing from my brushes to the ceiling. Fantastic golds and crimsons, and reds, and blues and ambers. It was an amazing experience creating a masterpiece on my bedroom ceiling and, at the end of a week, physically and emotionally exhausted, it was done. The whole of the Sistine Chapel was there, replicated on my ceiling. Dramatic rolling clouds, Olympian men, long flowing hair, swathed in sheets: and then mythical creatures half tiger half lion, rampant. And the piece de resistance - Cherubs. An abundance of cherubs. Little fat jolly people, bloated cheeks blowing into trumpets; podgy fingers strumming banjos as they floated above gilt thrones. Ohh Muriel this is your finest hour, your greatest achievement. Bravo!

So all that remained to do was to replace the loft insulation, which I did, then surveying the loft area, confirming order restored, congratulating myself on a job well done, I missed my footing and stepped through the ceiling, AGAIN.

Merry Christmas