Like it or Lump It

stories and articles by

Valerie Thomé

This collection of stories was originally put together in 1998, for private circulation among friends. It contained six unpublished stories, and four published articles.

In 1998 I enjoyed putting the stories together, knocking them into shape with an audience in mind.

I have added two more stories to the original six.

I hope you enjoy your reading experience.

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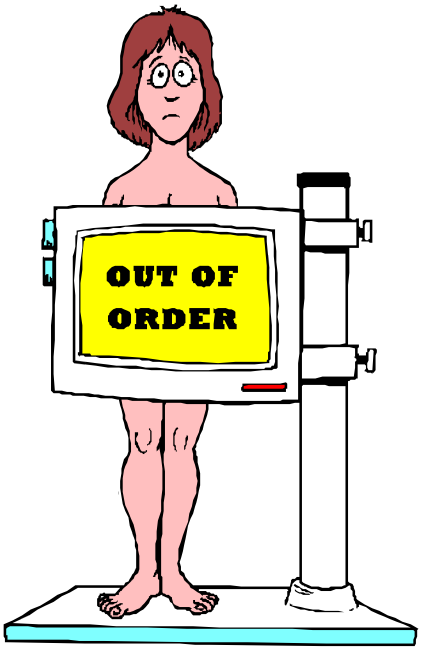
Like it or Lump it



I don't believe in being ill. My attitude to anything going wrong with my bodily mechanics is to ignore it, it'll go away. If you pay attention to it, that only encourages it to go more wrong. Visit the doctor, give it a label, and you're done for!

As for having routine tests, forget it! I only once had a cervical smear, and died a thousand times in the ten days it took for the results to come back. I decided never to have another, it was definitely injurious to my health, so when I became fifty, and received an invitation to a breast screening, I returned it with a note explaining that I was in the best of health, intended to remain so, and that this could only be achieved by having a positive attitude. If I ever needed their services, I added, I would call them. I never heard from them again.

As a health policy, it's okay so long as nothing *major* goes wrong. As it did with the Lumps.

I noticed the first about four years ago, when I started fitness classes, and in putting my arms behind my head - an unfamiliar movement - something went 'crick' and next day there was a tiny lump on my neck, only the size of a pea. Hardly noticeable to anyone else, but I knew it was there.

As time went by I forgot it. It's years since I stopped looking in mirrors - I used to like what I saw, not any more - and it wasn't until recently I noticed the Lump had grown to massive proportions, and was matched by another on the other side.

I worried for about a week, decided to take the bull by the horns, and investigate.

I still remembered my last visit to a doctor's surgery, finding plenty of reading matter on the walls. You could not avoid these exhortations to illness - "come along and have a test!" the posters

screamed, "you could find out you have something really interesting - and if you don't, well cheer up, you can try again in three months!"

Things had improved in the intervening years - they now had something called a Practice Nurse - so you didn't have to see the doctor at all. Young and charming, she put me at my ease, and I talked freely, particularly about my health philosophy.

"So what do you want from us?" she asked.

"I'd like an x-ray of my neck, and a breast scan".

"Just a minute," she said, "I'll have a word with the doctor."

"You're in luck," she said, returning with a couple of cards, "the breast van is here today - did you see it in the carpark?" I shook my head. Bikes park out the front. "Take this to the van," she handed me the first card, "and then go to to the hospital next door with this and they'll xray you."

"What, today?" I was surprised. Last time I had anything done you had to wait weeks for an appointment. I left, clutching my cards, and mentally taking back everything I'd ever said about the Health Service - maybe it really was the best in the world?

Feeling in better spirits, and that I was really being taken care of, I smiled at the young woman radiographer as I climbed the steps into her van.

"You can't come in here with that," she said, examining my card.

"Why not?"

"Where did you get it?" she asked, ignoring my question.

"From my doctor." I gesticulated in the direction of the Health Centre. "He gave it to me".

"He ought to know better than that. You can't just walk in here and expect a breast x-ray."

"Why not?" I said, getting a bit nettled, "Isn't that what you're here for?"

"Not for you," she said rudely, "you've got something wrong with you."

"Yes, and I want to find out what."

"We only see well people here," she said, "you're not well. You've got Lumps. It says so here."

"So this is the wrong kind of van, is it?"

"No, it isn't the wrong kind of van, you're the wrong kind of person."

"Look here," I said, "if I'd just come in and not shown you that card, you'd have given me an x-ray?"

"No."

"Why not? You'd have thought I was well."

"You're not on this List." She pointed down at her desk. "Only people on this list get x-rays."

"So how do I get on your list?"

"You can't!" triumphantly, "It's from Well Women, and you're not well!"

This was getting circular, and reminded me of the Monty Python sketch. "Is this the half-hour argument or the ten minute one?" I asked.

"is this the ten minute argument?"

"I need an x-ray," I insisted, "and I have a card saying I can have one. Are you going to do it?"

"No," she blustered, "we don't give them out like sweets, you know, they're dangerous things, we don't give them to just anybody."

"Who do you give them to, then? People who don't need them?"

"We give them to women between the ages of 50 and 65." Ahah! I had her there,

"I qualify. I'm 55," I said.

"Then you must have had at least two already," she said, eyeing me with suspicion. "I'll look you up in our records."

"Don't bother," I said, "I refused the others."

"Oh well," she said, "if you won't go through the normal channels...." she shrugged her shoulders, then decided to come clean - "Anyway," she said, "I can't give anyone an x-ray today because we've broken down. I'm only here to tell people to go away. In fact," she said, getting up, "I think I'll lock up now and you and me will go and see your doctor and get to the bottom of this."

"No fear," I said, leaping down the steps, "I'm not coming with you. Sort it out yourself. I'm off to see if I have better luck with this!" waving my second card.

The hospital buildings were deserted, maybe those waiting lists really did come down.

The receptionist was a lady of more mature years, who interviewed me as if I was a contestant on Master Mind - "You are Valerie Thomé, your address is 154 Regent Street...." I nodded. Correct so far! "What is your date of birth?" Was that the first question? If so I sailed through it.

Directed to go along a corridor and change, and be sure to strip

she interviewed me like a contestant on Master Mind

to the waist, I entered an equally deserted seating area with cubicles. Entering one, I found a blue terry gown hanging on a peg. Doing as instructed, I put it on, packing my clothes in the bike bag I always carried with me - can't be too careful - too many thieves about. I sat on one of the chairs and waited.

The door of the xray room opened and a young woman came out.

"Take the blue gown off and put the pink one on." I was getting tired of this.

"Why, am I the wrong sex now?" I asked. I've always objected to stereotyping. "What difference does it make?"

"Xrays go through the pink gowns, they don't go through the blue ones," was the simple answer, "so you'll have to strip if you insist on wearing blue." Okay, I thought, going back in the cubicle, you win.

Another wait, then two of them appeared and escorted me through the double doors, like someone on Prisoner Cell Block H going for a dusting up. They took the card, going off together to study it.

I rightly belonged in a hospital for the criminally insane

They returned,
"Where did you get this?"
Not again!
"Why, what's wrong with it?"
"It has two different kinds of writing on it, in two different colours of ink. This writing here is by one person, and this is by another. Where did you get it?" Both looked at me accusingly, arms folded. I had the strong suspicion they thought I had mugged someone on the way in and stolen their appointment card.

Having been troubled since childhood by a deep sense of guilt, instilled in me by my mother and her frequent assertions that I rightly belonged in a hospital for the criminally insane, and would one day end up there, I flushed crimson as I came out with the improbable version of the morning's events.

"Why do you want this x-ray?" the older one of the two asked. I did not think I did want it any more. I would be glad just to get out of there alive.

"I've got these Lumps," I said pathetically, baring my breast out of the pink gown. "Look."

"Aren't those muscles?" said the young one sternly, leaning forward to peer and prod. "have you been doing physical exercise?" She made it sound as distasteful as I usually find it. "We are going to phone your doctor," she said with an air of having made up her mind, "Stay there."

have you been doing physical exercise?

There was nowhere to sit except the x-ray couch, with the terrifying machinery poised above it, which, on every occasion I have lain beneath it, I have been convinced would break loose from its moorings and crush me to a pulp. Today it probably would, so I remained on the cold floor, staring at the bleak walls, without even a poster advertising the merits of the latest disease to entertain me, and waited for them to return.

"There is no one at your doctor's to take the call," they reported, and a mental picture flashed before me of the breast woman, the Nurse Practitioner and the Doctor rolling about in a rugby scrum on the floor, the phone ringing off its hook.

"But we have decided to give you an x-ray, so please lie on the bed."

By now so demoralized that I was actually grateful for their kindness, I exposed myself to the rays, reflecting, not for the first time, how my way of doing things, which seems perfectly logical to me, seems to throw a spanner in the workings of society.

Wonderbra

I didn't burn my bra in the sixties - but I threw it away with a sigh of relief. Me and bras never got on very well - I can't believe it nowadays when I go in lingerie shops and see those tiny pockets which can only be intended for pre-pubescent girls. There wasn't any allowance for the still-developing form when I was young - one day you were a child, next a woman, as far as bra manufacturers were concerned.

That was the age of Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield - women with incredibly pointed breasts apparently endowed with independent suspension. Bras were conical and circle-stitched. We fourteen-year olds groping at life were supposed to fit into them.

It took all my courage to ask my mother to buy me my first bra. Everyone else in my class was wearing one and, although I hadn't anything to support, if the others had straps showing through their gym shirts, I wanted them too.

It wasn't like 'periods' - Mum had taken that in her stride, coming in the room where I was doing homework one night and throwing a booklet on the table:

"Read that!" she'd exclaimed in muffled embarrassment, hiding her red cheeks in a hanky and then running from the room. Calmly I examined it. In common with most youngsters, I had scoured the house on numerous occasions for any information there might be on the mysteries of life, and I had read this one some two years previously. When she returned half an hour later, ready to take questions on the chin, there were none.

"We did it in biology," I explained. No doubt she was grateful for the advantages of a modern education, which she never had.

This time it was my turn to overcome the hurdle of bringing up intimate female matters. There was no question of being fitted - after some weeks' silence, during which I continued to suffer the taunts and teasing of the other girls, Mum came home from shopping one day and handed me a brown paper bag with something white inside. My first bra!

I took it to the bathroom, locked myself in and tried it on. I felt utter despair as I stared down at empty bags hanging from my chest. It was worse than useless. But I was resourceful, and determined to have those badges of womanhood, straps showing through my blouse. Fetching a needle and thread, I folded the flaps of cloth to fit, and firmly stitched them down. Shoving a folded hanky inside each 'cup', it did well enough, and I showed up next day at school, straps proudly on display.

I was twenty-something in the sixties, and I've been free and untrammelled ever since. As for 'girdles' - those hideous strappings of rubber designed to force the stomach back where it belonged, they went the same way.

Until last year, when browsing in the local mill shop, I saw

something in glorious raspberry and couldn't resist trying it on. It was a Wonderbra. Living up to its name, the transformation was astonishing! Aroused by my own long-forgotten sexuality, I wore it under old shirts in the allotment, digging furiously away, the thought of my cleavage putting me in a menopausal flush! Admittedly I have put on weight since the sixties, but never suspected it might lead to something so exotic.

I wore my wonderbra every day for a month. No one saw it except my best friend who went "Wow!" and my husband who, in the manner of husbands, was unimpressed.

The novelty wore off, and it went back in the drawer, waiting for the 'right' occasion which, since we never go out, never came. It stayed there a year, gradually disappearing under a mound of vests and socks more suitable to my outdoor life, until, having my annual tidy-up, I tried it on again. Then, suddenly, I understood what the wonderbra was all about, and why it had done so much for my general posture and physique.

"Of course", I murmured as I studied my silhouette in the long mirror. The wonderbra was a device to make your bust stick out further than your belly. At fifty-something you might have a bulging midriff, but if your shirts hung from a point higher up, who was going to know?

And it keeps your chest nice and snug when you're digging in the winter winds.

I had a Friend . .

There are plays we can watch over and over, no matter how many times they are repeated. Like stories listened to as children, and never tired of, they hold some special message. One day, I decided to scratch the surface of one of my favourites, *The Dresser*.

From its opening moments on York Railway Station, to the Dresser's final anguished cry as he finds his master dead, I am glued to the screen. But why?

Is it the clever way the dresser's character is gradually revealed? Is it the slowly unfolding layers of his relationship with the old Shakespearean actor? No, it's one phrase, one line I am waiting for - the dresser bending over the still body on the couch, and uttering those words that send a chill right down my spine:
"I had a friend....."

She was small, rosy-cheeked, and five years old, peeking at me from behind her mother's skirts. I adored her from the minute I saw her. Our two mothers met in the street, each taking her daughter to school for the first time. They agreed that, once we were settled in, we could walk home together. We would be company for each other, and they need not turn out each afternoon to

fetch us. Funny thing, Fate. We liked each other on sight.

We were more than friends, we were inseparable. Our birthdays close together in the summer months, they christened us the Heavenly Twins - at the time, we did not know what it meant, but were flattered because it seemed to make us special.

Every morning I walked up the lane to her house, waited in her kitchen, and then ran with her through field paths to the village school. In summer the fields were full of wheat, higher than our heads, poppies and daisies strung among the stalks. Sometimes, specially on hot afternoons, we were late, having spent too long in our favourite pastime of making 'tunnels'. Kneeling down, and pulling ourselves forward with our arms, we flattened the corn into a warren of paths, ending somewhere in the middle in a 'den' -so private, no one knew we were there. It was too tempting to lie on our backs, looking up into the bright blue heavens, the sun burning our faces under the cotton sunhats, the lark rising and singing above us.

On one of these afternoons, horribly late and a little scared, we were running down the village street when a woman called,

"Hurry, you'll be late! Bell's gone!"

"It's alright," I called back, "they can't start without us!" It was true. When we finally made it in, panting, the whole class was sitting, arms folded, waiting. I don't know what got us such special treatment. We were never reprimanded.

Weekends we went to the woods, where we had a favourite tree - we swept around its roots, spread fresh grass between them, and hugged its rough, comforting sides. We stole matches and set fire to dry grass on the banks alongside the lane, fascinated by the crackling noise the flames made, and the way the fire always moved outward, leaving a blackened circle.

We sniffed wild lupins for their peppery scent. We read Enid Blyton, spied on men digging in their gardens, imagining they were burying treasure, or the cut-up bodies of their wives. When they waved us off and threatened to tell our mothers, we were convinced of their guilt, and worried what to do about it.

I never had another friend, never wanted one. Walking home from school, I made her climb a wall and, hiding behind it, I kissed her on the lips. I don't know why I did it in secret, I didn't have a sense of guilt, at five. I just thought it should be done in private.

Her name was Rita, mine Valerie. Both named for our fathers' favourite film stars. I thought Valerie Hobson plain, and envied Rita her more glamorous namesake, but she didn't like hers any better.

I must have loved her, because when I look back, I had every reason to hate her. She was everything I wanted to be, had everything I wanted to have. She was pretty, popular, sought-after. I made her be my best friend, but there was strong competition. She was invited to parties, I never was. She was popular at games, I was last to be picked. She had ringlets - her mother put her hair in rags every night - my mother took me to the local barber and asked for a 'basin cut - just the tips of her ears showing,' before departing to do her shopping. No amount of pleading could get me out of this monthly deflowering.

Rita had grownup cousins, and was bridesmaid at their weddings. I never even knew what a wedding was - an unattractive child, I was surly and too plain to be put in frills.

We both attended Sunday School, under protest, and when we were sent for "confirmation" by the bishop, our mothers were told to keep the dresses "plain and simple", befitting the Protestant ethic. My mother took this advice literally, paying a local dressmaker to run up the simplest shift in harsh, unbleached linen: Rita kept her gown secret, but appeared on the day looking like the fairy off the Christmas tree in flounced lace and "sugared" net, set off with a tiny seed pearl tiara, and sporting a silver charm bracelet.

looking like the fairy off the Christmas tree

At Christmas, like other children, we sent letters to Santa. I could never understand why Rita got everything she asked for: fairy cycle, roller skates, hula hoop, whatever the current craze, she had it, while my pillow case invariably contained an apple, an orange, a bag of nuts and a new Famous Five adventure. Since we were told that if we were naughty Santa would not heed our requests, I had to assume I had done something wrong, and that, like everyone else, he adored Rita.

Later on, Rita had "contemporary" wallpaper and furniture, a portable radio in her bedroom, went on holidays abroad, had piano and ballet lessons, and even was allowed to play the church organ. I had nothing and went nowhere.

None of this bothered me. I did not feel deprived. That was the

way life was. I was the leader in our friendship, I was the one who could walk on top of farm gates without falling off, walk a barrel round the apple tree, climb the oak, drive a go-cart with the boys down the dirt track. I decided what games to play, where we should go and what we should do. There was never any argument, Rita was happy to follow faithfully behind like a pet lamb.

Only once did I have something Rita didn't. Dad, back from a posting to Belgium, brought me an out of this world gift, something no one had ever seen the like of: a doll with sleeping eyes. This beautiful creature with its blonde curls, blue eyes, matching bonnet and dress was my most treasured possession. One day, I was playing with her as tea was ready and Rita arrived.

"Give her the doll to hold while you have your tea" said my mother.

Rita's eyes glittered. The doll was exclusively mine. Kept in its box in my bedroom, it was only taken out to be played with, then put away again. Rita had never held her, even under supervision. I wouldn't let her. I made a fuss, but my mother insisted there wasn't time to put it away, Rita would be careful, she must hold it.

While my back was turned, the operation was quickly performed, and after we finished our meal Rita handed back the doll with quiet satisfaction and the words

"Now she doesn't go to sleep any more". The blue eyes had been pushed into the head. The doll was useless.

Maybe I cried, I don't remember. I do remember hot rage flooding through me and the irresistible urge to murder which possessed my whole body - I had to be forcibly restrained. Afterwards I probably didn't speak to her for a while, but of course I forgave her. I wasn't a doll person anyway. I never knew why she did it, she wasn't usually spiteful. Perhaps she sensed the doll was a threat to the balance of our relationship - she was the one who had, I the one who did - and took remedial action.

Childhood idylls can't go on for ever, and ours didn't. I overhead Rita's mother telling mine one day she was worried about the low 11-plus pass rate at the village school. Shortly after she took Rita away and sent her to the smart, modern school in the town,

where the pupils did better, and learnt their tables up to fourteen, instead of twelve. I heard my mother telling my dad that night "if it's not in 'em you can't put it there".

I missed her, how much I don't know because there is no memory when I look, perhaps a pointer to how deeply it affected me. I kissed her one last time, and told her we must both work hard and pass our scholarships, then we would be together at Grammar School.

We both made it, and on the first day of term I set off, more elated at the thought of seeing Rita than at the bright educational prospects before me. But I had reckoned without streaming. Rita was put in B, I made A. I was disappointed at this hitch in our plans, but eager for breaktime when we could be together.

When the bell went I ran to the cloakroom, put on my coat, and waited in the doorway, pushed and shoved by hundreds of chattering, laughing girls. Some looked at me, wondering why I stood there in the thick gaberdine coat, ridiculous bowler hat and striped scarf. But I stood my ground. I wasn't going to miss my friend.

She went by in a sudden rush, in the middle of a group of strangers, laughing and talking. She never even saw me, never knew I was there.

I still remember what a fool I felt, standing alone in the empty hall, after the crowd had gone by. But more than that, the feeling of desolation that swept over me, the desolation I experience again, every time I hear the Dresser cry:

"I had a friend....."

How to be an MP

No one could have been more surprised than I was when the phone rang one evening, I picked it up and a voice asked how I would like to stand as MP for our town.

Of course it wasn't a national, or a well-known party. Sadly, it wasn't even the Monster Raving Loony party, but it was the next best thing, Dr Sked and the Anti-Feds. Some local anti-Europe activists had been campaigning for him, but when it came to emerging from the closet and putting up for election, none of them had the courage. They looked around for a fall guy - and their eye fell on me.

I'm nobody of consequence, but I write for the local paper and this has resulted in some surprising contacts over the years. I'm not political, I write about organic gardening, and I'm not stuffy, I say what I think and stand up for my principles - so maybe someone thought I might stand up for theirs.

cheap wine

When I'd picked myself up off the floor, I asked what the party was about. The anti-Europe slant worried me a bit. At the Labour referendum I'd voted to be in, but only because I thought we'd get cheap wine. We never did, but I still felt if I had to swing either way it'd be towards. I've had a lifelong love of France and would like to live there if I had the means. Still, as long as I didn't violently disagree with anything they believed in, I'd do it for the laughs. An opportunity like this doesn't come along every day. The anonymous backer would pay all expenses and write my election manifesto. I could more or less say and do what I wanted after that.

I was honoured some days later by a telephonic communication from the Great Doctor. A faint and faraway voice calling from some university in London. A bit vague and la-de-da. Where were my party? I asked, imagining them coming round nights and licking envelopes, or whatever it is they do. Giving me their support.

a man in Ramsbottom

He wasn't sure, said the Doctor, but he thought there might be a man in Ramsbottom. Only one? So they wouldn't be coming round then. No. l was on my own with this one.

"I've heard", said Doctor Sked, "that your husband is German. How does he feel about your anti-Europe stance?" I thought they'd stopped asking questions like that when the sex discrimination laws were brought in, but let it pass.

"No problem there", I said, "he doesn't want Britain in Europe, he says they'll only spoil it for the rest".

There were some surprised looks on the reporters' faces when I went in with my gardening copy. The editor wanted to see me. Not to

remonstrate but to land me with an extra piece to write each week: "My promises to the electorate".

headed for disaster

I had to produce a publicity photo at short notice. The economy drive has hit the local press like anyone else, and they don't send a photographer round these days, they hire him by the hour and make sure his time is well used. I once told the editor that Nelson was headed for a huge disaster in 2001 (I worked it out astrologically) and he replied:

"Will it be on a Tuesday?"

"I don't know," I said, "does it matter?"

"If it isn't it'll miss that week's edition."

I left a couple of pictures with the chief reporter - a lad who looks like a rugby prop, wears boots and red braces and has the conversational style of a standup comic. He came to Nelson on the back of a forklift truck one night when he was drunk, saw the advert for the job on his way to the station next morning, and decided to stay.

The pictures were pretty average, I admit, so perhaps I shouldn't blame him for using one he kept in his drawer for emergencies - like when the editor was on his back and he needed a good laugh. This portrayed me impersonating Marlene Dietrich in heavy makeup and bad light - it was taken at a karaoke competition where I won the title "Worst Singer in the Borough".

who was the old trout?

When the paper came out bearing this monstrosity under the headline "Contests Nelson Seat" the editor received an indignant phone call from a fellow gardener asking who was the old trout passing herself off as Mrs Thomé?

"I know Mrs Thomé," he said, "and she's nothing like that."

During the next four weeks I almost regretted saying yes. There was so much to find out, do and organise. Apart from the piece in the Nelson paper, reporters from the other boroughs were ringing up asking for copy, no doubt put up to it by my editor, who found it faintly amusing that anyone whose

literary horizons included recommending lining potato trenches with his weekly paper should aspire to rulership of the nation.

His master stroke was to get me invited onto a panel of all the candidates to appear in the municipal hall on a kind of "Question Time". This threw me into the worst panic. What did I know about current affairs? I haven't bought a paper in years, and only use other people's to soak up the droppings in the bottom of budgie cages. I calmed down when someone pointed out to me that I might not know much, but I had an opinion on everything (or did they say I was opinionated?). And I've never found talking a problem. I'll go on for hours if anyone will listen.

The trouble was I knew nothing about the policies of the anti-Feds, and cared even less. My only hope was to bumble my way through without making a serious hash of things.

his answering machine knew less than he did

My only problem to date had been a phone call from an irate Irishman demanding to know what I meant by claiming in my manifesto that Britain had "helped out every country in Europe at some period in history". When had we helped Ireland, he asked? As the script in question had been written by the man in Ramsbottom I hadn't a clue, and Doctor Sked proved difficult to contact. Only his answering machine was usually available for comment, and that knew less than he did.

Commonsense told me there wasn't the remotest chance of being elected, but stranger things have happened. I was already worried as to how I would cope with gardening our three allotments and travelling to London, and decided on a three-day week in the capital. In the event of a "hung" parliament, I imagined all the corrupt MPs anxious for my vote queueing up outside my London flat with bottles of wine and boxes of chocolates, not to mention offers of money and holidays. But I nobly resolved not to be bought - I've read the cards for many years, and let them make all my decisions - the way I look at it, they can't make a worse mess of it than I did when I ran my life on my own. I wondered how the citizens of Nelson would feel should the tv cameras focus on me laying out the cards on the benches for a decision as to which lobby to go through!

I needed an agent - not that I was getting popular, it is something you have to have when you stand for parliament. No one seemed to want the job. My anonymous backer didn't want to

be seen in the town (someone suggested Margaret Thatcher was at the back of all this; ironic if the woman I hated most in the world was now responsible for the furtherance of my career!), even the woman who had put my name forward to the party refused the job, and I had to fall back on a disabled Scottish lesbian, the only person brave enough to 'stand' out front with me - actually she was in a wheelchair. Even she refused to do any campaigning, though she did her bit at the booze-ups at the town hall.

Margaret Thatcher was at the back of this

A big stumbling block was the requirement to find twenty citizens to put their names on a piece of paper stating I was a worthy and reliable person. Not easy for someone who is a byword for weirdness. Having achieved it, I was told to go and find another twenty, in case some of them had signed for two candidates, resulting in my disqualification.

A friend rang to sympathise over the newspaper photo, and to suggest I engage her son - who was doing a photography course - to take a new set. He hadn't progressed as far as colour, so I chose a black jacket and dug out of the bottom of my wardrobe a hat I once bought in Harrods - a kind of black felt bowler sprouting grouse feathers. I came out like a demented Mary Poppins, but at least it was a step up on the old trout.

A demented Mary Poppins

I was a bag of nerves as the "Question Time" ordeal approached, and it did not help when a 'briefing letter' arrived telling me it had been arranged by the federation of Christian Churches. My status as an ordained priestess of wicca looked slightly shaky. Still, no one would know.

In spite of thinking I had an opinion on everything, the first question, on education, threw me, especially as they put me on first. My own children are in their thirties, and I've never been interested in anyone else's. Had I been more experienced, I could have asked someone else to go first - the others all had prepared speeches. This later turned out to my advantage. I could say whatever I wanted without fear of anyone breathing down my neck - they couldn't. I floundered through the first question and after that it got better. It

was then that I discovered a previously unsuspected gift for comedy. After receiving my first remarks in a sticky silence, the audience decided I was funny (perhaps the Harrods' hat?) and everything I said was greeted with unconfined mirth, even when I was being perfectly serious.

When asked what I thought about the shocking state of the Health Service and the long waiting lists, I replied that it was a good thing - the longer people stayed out of the doctors' clutches the greater their chance of survival. They thought the notion of the ancient Chinese doctor, who only got paid when his patients were well, was funny too.

Similar amusement greeted my solution to homelessness - use setaside land to give everyone who wanted it an allotment, seed for a year's crops, and a pile of logs with which to build their own homes.

give everyone an allotment

I was beginning to enjoy myself, becoming more outrageous by the minute, to the consternation of the other candidates, one of whom leaned over and whispered:

"If they held the election now, you'd win hands down", when someone came to the front of the hall and handed a piece of paper to the Chairman.

First apologising for the departure from procedure, he announced a surprise question which we need not answer if we did not wish:

"On what personal faith do the members of the panel base their lives?"

They left me until last, so I had plenty of time to consider. I felt like Peter before the cock crows. Witches are pretty reclusive about their faith, not because we're ashamed of it, but due to the bad press we get when we "come out".

I was surprised to hear one candidate I'd always believed to be Jewish, professing himself a Christian - whether he perjured himself I don't know, but I knew I wasn't going to. I declared myself a believer in the "old religion", and in the powers of earth, rocks and trees, and said my faith was my business, just as theirs was theirs. To my relief I heard someone shout

"Quite right!" and then the applause came. I was not about to be lynched!

The highlight of my campaign was the Parade. The anonymous backer wanted to splash out on the 'ire of a 'all, where all

comers could ask questions of the candidate. I disagreed with this on the grounds that not only would I not be able to answer said questions, but as an entertainment it would be the height of dullness, even should anyone turn up, which I was sure they wouldn't.

A lifelong trad jazz fan, my dearest wish has always been to have a jazz funeral, though the way my finances go, it's doubtful whether I'll achieve anything more than a pauper's burial in a paper bag. I now saw a way to have my funeral while I was still alive, by hiring a marching band. I'd always wanted to be the "man with the umbrella", and it was my parade, so that is exactly what I was!

We hired the band for two hours. I wore a pink leotard and spangled tights, and a short black circular skirt that stood out round my waist when I spun. I unearthed a huge multicoloured golf umbrella we once rescued from the river, where it must have blown during a gale, trimmed it with white silk fringes off an old lace shawl, and I was ready!

As the parade waited in the spring sunshine for the band to emerge from the pub so we could strike up and start off, our staunchly British slogan was mistaken for the National Front. A small crowd of boys had collected to stare at us.

"What does that mean?" one asked, pointing to the banner that the man from Ramsbottom had run up in his spare time. I was struggling for an explanation when a spotty child cut in:

"Does it mean all t'Asians gerroutta Nelson?"

"No it doesn't", I said firmly, but before I could lecture him on the values of integration:

"Yer no bloody good then, are yer?" he said disgustedly, like a latter day William Brown, leading away his troops in search of better fun.

At the count, all candidates started equal, with four long rows of tables waiting to receive the ballot papers. As time went by, and Conservative and Labour's piles grew in length, my tables began to be taken away to be added to theirs. I lost my deposit, but I got more votes from my constituency than the Great Doctor did in his, so I think I could at least have been elected Leader of the Party.

After it was all over, I received a letter of commendation from the

Party, and a telephone call from my backer asking me if I would consider standing in the European elections the following summer. For a moment, but only a moment, I was tempted.

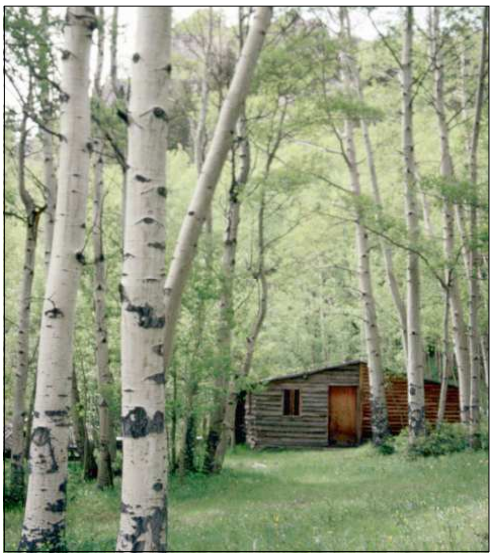
"But what would I do if I won?" I asked him, remembering that the sole purpose of his party was to keep Britain *out* of Europe.

a flat in Strasbourg

"You would refuse to go, of course," he replied - refuse to go! Just try me! The vision of a flat in Strasbourg swam before my eyes, just over the Rhine the Black Forest, Wolfram's home, and all those orderly German cycle lanes! But no, standing for Parliament is a thing you can only do once for laughs, the second time you have to be serious about it, and I wasn't prepared to put in the time.

I put down the phone, considering, not for the first time, that there are people in this world madder than I am.

Rites of Passage



My first taste of France was at the age of 14. This was the era of ponytails and rock around the clock in England - (in France it was Gilbert Becaud) - and I hated being torn away at such a formative time (for me as well as the music).

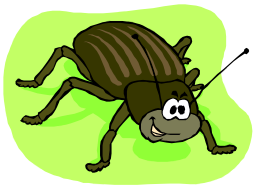
The *Yorkshire-Lille* exchange is a big undertaking, and I was the only pupil deposited in my area of France. Lucky, as it turned out, as I had no option but to speak French. No one in the village spoke English, and my penpal said she had spoken my language at my home, now it was my turn. In the three weeks I was there, I learnt to chatter like a native. Michelle's brother and sister, ten-year-old twins Bernard and Bernadette saw to that.

In 1955 we in England weren't long over rationing (the only sweets we knew as children were liquorice root and cough candy) and I think the French had it worse. Michelle's family lived on soup, which started the week thick and solid, and ended it weak and runny. For breakfast we had crusty bread fresh from the baker's, spread with sweet farm butter, and dipped into milk still warm from the cow. It was the twins' job to fetch it from the farm. This took some getting used to, it still smelled of the cow. But once I overcame my initial nausea, I grew to love it.

Crawling with beetles

Where I could not overcome my nausea, however, was in the outside toilet. The smell was one thing. I could have held my nose and survived. But the beetles were another. Still, after all these years, the hair on my head stands on end when I recall them, especially the huge stag beetles.

The toilet was in a small stone outbuilding at the end of the yard. Opening its wooden door, I peered through the gloom towards the wooden seat at the back, where I was expected to sit under canopies of cobwebs draped from the roof timbers. Beetles, I knew, clustered on walls and floor. The smell was appalling. Screwing up my eyes and holding my breath, I rushed in, did what I had to, and rushed out into the blessed light. I could just about bear to go in and wee, but never in this world could I remain long enough to pass a motion.



Smeared excrement

I was never one to "go" regularly. Three days was normal for me. We would be bound to visit a town soon, I reasoned, and I would ask to go to the toilet and do it then. I was in for a surprise.

Although a beetle-free zone, the toilets in town were as revolting as the outhouse. Imagine a shy fourteen-year-old, used to English sanitation, confronted with the open drain, the two concrete footrests, not to mention the stench and smeared excrement that is a feature of such places. I could not perform there either.

We played *"jokari"* a lot that summer. It was all the rage. The two of us, Michelle and I, stood in the burning heat, on the white road that led out of the village, batting the ball on the end of an elastic string fixed to a lead weight between us. It was two weeks

since I arrived, and my legs felt as leaden as the jokari weight, as I tried to run for the ball. Something had to give.

"je Suis constipe"

Back at the house, I asked to borrow the dictionary. When I was ready I approached Michelle's mother, "Madame," I announced "je suis constipé". *("I am constipated")*

"Pendant quelques jours? - *how many days -?*" she asked unconcernedly, but my reply,

"Pendant deux semaines - *two weeks* -" had an extraordinary effect. Putting down the baby, she leapt several feet into the air, crying *"Mince!"* (untranslatable) before ransacking the medicine cabinet and forcing various potions down me. I don't remember the details, but relief was no doubt sweet and confounded even the beetles.

God Save the Queen!

My parents, like most of their generation, never passed up an opportunity to save a penny, and when it came to packing for my departure, Michelle's frequent assurances that "you can buy this in France" had my mother taking everything she had bought me for the trip out of my suitcase, thinking, no doubt, that these would be provided for me on my arrival, thus saving some of her housekeeping money.

But Michelle meant exactly what she said, that I could buy these things in France, and duly wheeled me into the village shop, announcing "she wishes to buy....." and reeling off the whole list of toiletries my mother had removed!

My parents' idea of spending money was three pounds for three weeks. I know it's a long time ago, but I'm sure it wasn't a lot even then. When we left the village shop I had hardly any of it left. Michelle's parents' faces fell when they realised they were stuck with an impoverished English visitor who could not afford to pay her way on any of the outings they had planned - a break in Paris had been mentioned. I was confined to the village from then on, and I heard their concerned murmurings from the downstairs room where Michelle and I lay. Perhaps they had hoped I could contribute something to my keep. They seemed very poor. I drew the line, however, at singing for my supper, point blank refusing the many requests I had to sing *"God save the queen"*.

The principal attractions offered me were two: graveyards, and

the inhabitant of any village in the area who spoke English. I was toured round the former until I got sick of it and asked Michelle why her parents were so obsessed with the dead. "It is not they" she replied "everyone knows the English like cemeteries."

obsessed with graveyards

"Well, I don't" I replied, "and I wish they'd stop it."

The English-speaking inhabitants were, if anything, worse. I couldn't understand a word they said, at which they appeared to become extremely angry, I think at the loss of face they suffered consequent to my visit.

Michelle and I had not many social outlets, and the arrival of a fair in the village caused a flurry of excitement in our teenage breasts. Fairs in France were different affairs from those at home. I watched, fascinated as gypsy-looking youths started knocking up a temporary dance floor on the edge of the village.

I had my eye on the local blacksmith, whether it was his black curls and red, wet lips, or the smell of his sweat, I wasn't sure, but he made my head swim when he gave me one of his lingering looks as Michelle and I passed his open door.

The village boys were a different breed. Thin and immature, they called after us in the street. I did not like some of their comments, but Michelle said it was the custom, they meant no harm.

It was the first day of the fair, and we were hanging around watching the final preparations for the dance in the evening, and wondering if we would be allowed to go, when Michelle's father came steaming up in some kind of a rage and hauled us bodily off the scene, shutting us in our room with much shouting.

I was disturbed at his attitude, up to then he had always been kind and smiling, and I could see Michelle was very upset.

“I can’t understand it”, she kept saying, “it is not like papa.” And I had to agree it wasn’t. He was a jolly man, full of laughter. He was a member of the village band, and sat playing his saxophone at the kitchen table late into the night.

In the end, disobeying orders, she left the room telling me to stay where I was, and went to find her father.

Sitting miserably on the bed, feeling somehow to blame, though not knowing why or what I had done, I felt for the first time really miserable. I wasn't having a hot time, exactly, although I loved the country and wasn't homesick, I felt cheated of the opportunity to have a bit of fun for once.

When Michelle returned she was more put out than me.

"It is your father who is to blame" she said, "he has written a letter to my father saying you must not go near any boys. Now neither of us can go to the dance".

exiled to the forest

Perhaps they thought it safer to remove me from all temptation, because the next day Michelle and I were loaded in the car and transported to Aunt's cabin in the woods. This was put out to be a great treat, but was even more isolated and primitive than the village. Cabin was right. It was built of trees from the forest in which it stood. Had I been in normal health, it would have been idyllic. I was a country child by inclination, and the cabin stood on the shores of a lake, fine and fit for swimming.

Nature chose that moment to visit me with her "curse".

This caused another major fit of consternation. I had not come equipped with sanitary towels, not having expected this visitation of the goddess upon me, though my mother might have thought of it, considering my age. But it was not a subject she had ever been able to bring herself to discuss with me - like bras, and where babies came from.

At the age of six an older girl told me that when I was twelve my wee would turn to blood. Terrified, I rushed home and asked mother if it were true - "No it isn't" she said, "something will happen but it isn't that". In spite of all my pleading she would say no more.

" You will know when the time comes" was all she would say, leaving me to fear the worst. That had been the sum of my information on the subject until biology lessons at school filled in the gaps.

her finest cloth

Aunt did her best. The car that brought us had departed, and would not return for another week. There were no shops. We had to manage with what we had. Aunt produced a thick linen cloth and a scarf, and we did the best we could. I bled copiously, and next day asked for a fresh towel.

"Aunt wishes to know what you have done with the other cloth?"

Michelle asked me.

"I threw it away". I was horrified when they demanded to know where, went and got it and washed it out.

"You know, Aunt gave you her finest cloth...." Michelle said reproachfully when she returned.

The period to end all periods lasted the whole time we were there, and I could not bathe in the lake, having to remain on the bank while the others splashed and laughed in the deep cool water.

I should think the family put me back on the train with a sense of relief, wondering, had I stayed any longer, what else could have gone wrong?

"Barking mad

never ask a German to do a simple job

"It's difficult getting to the bird feeders on rainy days," I said to my husband. "How about making a winding foresty path through the trees? There's not much left of the lawn now. We could take a little of the grass off the top and put grit down, or forest bark would be nice. What do you think?"

To my surprise he agreed at once, and went out to survey the work. When I first took over this house, before I met him, the back was all lawn, or rather meadow, as a pedantic neighbour informed me, telling me that anything consisting of mixed grasses did not qualify to be called a lawn. I thanked him much for this information, what I could see of him over the hay.

In those days, I wasn't interested in gardening. The most I did was to spread a blanket on warm days, flatten a few of those 'mixed grasses' and get some air to my skin. I noticed that the neighbour chose these days to clean his windows on the inside, and took a long time over it. He was a perfectionist, I expect.

One day, he and his wife told me they had an old lawn mower

inside their shed, and asked if I would like it.

"Old" was the right word for it. Museum piece more like. It had a huge solid roller behind small rotating blades. If nothing else, it was good for building up the muscles.

"It's just the thing for grass that length," they said, "anything else wouldn't cope."

It did have an unexpected sideline in getting rid of unwanted boyfriends. Like a kind of virility test, it awaited them in the middle of the uncut meadow the lawn had become.

Until the German put in an appearance. An experienced weightlifter, he declared the mower "light as a feather". I married him at once, and he spent the honeymoon on the old railway track, uprooting trees with his bare hands, and recreating the forests of his homeland in my back garden.

Almost without noticing, over the years the lawn dwindled away, gradually eroded by encroaching flower beds, until one day, looking out of an upstairs window, I spied my representative of the Master Race skimming about with a small, rusty heap of tin.

"Where is the shining, beautiful Black and Decker you made me buy?" I enquired, thinking he had swapped it for something more interesting, as he was wont to do.

"You may not have noticed," he replied, "but what's left isn't wide enough for that machine any more."

It was true. The once vast lawn was now little more than a mean dering path between trees and shrubs. Very few flowers grow in thick woodland, though an unexpected benefit has been the arrival of squirrels, and the odd hawk has been seen to plummet from the skies - not usual on a council housing estate. And when it rained, we had a muddy path in need of upgrading.

Germans love improving things. They have improved their country until it has become too tidy to live in. Little is left that is natural, and they have achieved the almost impossible feat of creating roads that go uphill while to all intents and purposes remaining level. *"Alles in Ordnung"* as they are fond of saying.

The Master returned from surveying the work, saying he would need two bags of bark chips.

"I'll order four," I said. I had learned from past experience that he always did things thoroughly.

When the work began I kept well out of the way. He hates what

he calls 'criticism', and I call 'enquiring after progress'. I have to admit that though conditions look positively dangerous if you come out at the wrong moment, he always turns in excellent work in the end.

I should have been alerted when he started talking about 'digging out' and 'foundations' but I put it down to terminology, or language barrier. I did wonder vaguely what foundations a mere path could require, but left it at that. I had other things on my mind, and plenty of projects to get on with.

After some hours, I went to hang out the washing, and almost fell in the hole. There was no path, it had disappeared along with any remaining grass and large portions of adjoining beds. The soil from the hole had been disposed of under the trees, knocking for six my bleeding heart bushes which I try so hard to keep alive through frost and wind.

Knowing he gets infuriated if I start to complain when a job's half done, I peered down into the chasm, which he was lining with roofing felt. To keep the weeds out, he said. Germans are paranoid about order, and cannot bear weeds due to their habit of popping up in unexpected and verboten places.

Though I did not complain, my expression spoke louder than words, and the anguish I felt at the harsh, straight lines he was driving through my gentle garden, as he lined the sides of his trench with stout pegs and wooden boards was extremely apparent.

"I know you think it looks bad now," he said, "but I'll soften the corners with bark and trailing plants - it'll be lovely, you'll see."

I returned to the house silently, pain at the desecration filling my heart. His words did not comfort me. He'd said much the same thing when he cut down my beautiful flowering currant - "it'll be all the better next year." It wasn't. It was never the same again. But I wasn't going to give the neighbours the satisfaction of hearing us have a row.

He came in later to say he was going to need more bark - another six bags he estimated. It took that, and more. Far from being the pleasant, meandering path through the trees that I envisaged, it is a monstrous chasm, at least eighteen inches deep and six feet wide throughout its length. It swallowed the entire bark reserve of a small European country and wiped out the gardening contingency fund. The stone garden seat, which once stood beside the path, is now so far sunken in bark that sitting on it involves having your knees touch your chin.

There it sits, soaking up water like a giant sponge, not even of

any use as a reservoir for plants, hermetically sealed as it is from all possible root invasion. Inevitably, it will rot down and have to be replenished, unless it spontaneously combusts and saves us the trouble.

Perhaps we could set up a sideline preserving corpses in it, like the Bog People of Denmark, or was it Norway? Somewhere they had plenty of bark, anyway.

Or perhaps I could register it as the Millennium Bark Pit, the North's contribution to the fin de siècle, since the Nation does not seem to have any better ideas, and attract a hefty grant from the National Lottery?

A Roof-Terrier for Christmas

There is a special art in living with a blind person - you learn new ways of being. I'm naturally untidy, so I have to follow myself around picking various items off the floor so 'he' will not fall over them. I get tired of remembering to shut cupboard doors and always putting the bathplug in the same place - yes I know that for a blind man anything as little as one foot out of place might as well be lost for eternity, but it is irritating to spend your whole life doing it. A little consideration the other way would be a kind thing I think, as I go searching for where he left my scissors last time he trimmed his moustache. We have had some sharp words over the years, like when he bent down to pick my discarded jeans off the floor, and hit his forehead smartly on a sewing cabinet suddenly out of place in the middle of the bedroom - well I would at least have thought THAT big enough to see!

Luckily for me, Wolfram was brought up the hard way - in a German blind school where he was made to run races, jump hurdles and play football without fear. Years of martial art training followed, to equip him to stop the mouths of village lads who called 'Blinde-Kuh' (blind cow) after him. The Germans are an insensitive race. So bangs and bruises were not entirely new to him.

The first thing I had to learn was not to nod agreement when he was talking to me. I wondered why he kept repeating questions I had already answered, was he deaf as well as blind? Until it dawned on me that he couldn't actually see my head move. I had to vocalise.

After years of marriage we have settled into a pleasant routine, and I thought I had the business of living with the blind completely sorted, until he got the idea of going back to college. With modern technology, he told me, he could learn as well as anyone else. My son, helpful chap, had told him that the local college could get their hands on lots of money to assist disabled learning. So we went along to an interview.

I was impressed by the staff, who seemed desperately keen to have him - and it wasn't just the extra funding, or that they could add him to their cv's, I was convinced their enthusiasm was genuine. They identified his needs as a minidisc recorder, a computer with voice recognition program, and, should he feel he needed them, a selection of nice ladies to sit with him and take notes. He accepted all offers unconditionally, especially the last, and appeared considerably cheered at the prospect, especially when the older ladies refused to go on field trips, and a young blonde creature in thigh boots was drafted in. 'Not much good at identifying pond life, her,' he declared on his return, 'screamed every time I put something wet in her hand'.

The staff's eagerness was not matched by that of the technicians, whose responsibility it was to produce the goodies, and the bursar, who had to sanction purchases. There was, it appeared, a budget, and this was not exclusively for the disabled, as we had been led to believe, but had to provide special equipment for the whole college. Voice recognition programmes are costly, and I think there was a certain element of cold feet as they waited to see if his study intentions were serious. Be that as it may, aids appeared in ascending order of expense, the lady note-takers being on hand from the beginning, the minidisc recorder appearing after two months, the computer after four.

There are six voices in the computer, all male. They purport to be six different individuals, called Jim, Phil, Derek, Peter, Dave and Tony, but I am sure it is one voice which has been distorted in different ways. Although we still have not had the voice recognition program installed, I can type the ladies' notes on my computer, save them to floppy and then load them for Jim, Dave or Phil to read. Are we teaching Jim and Dave, or are they teaching us? Their pronunciation is strange. We now call a floppy disc a *'falopian'*, and

still have not discovered what their favourite word, *'blistmogs'* means, though we have taken to using it as a swearword.

Their manner of speech delivery is idiosyncratic to say the least, and every dot and comma is read. A word at the end of a line is drawn out, like a vicar chanting a psalm, and I have stopped using hyphens as it can be disconcerting to hear *'ear dash ache'* or *'re dash use'*. I only once inserted a question mark in a document. Poor Jim sounded as if he were about to have a nervous breakdown as he struggled to make his voice rise at the end of the line, ending the sentence with a quavering bleat of *'quaaayshtyuuun?'*

I can only get them to read things the way they should by taking words apart and spelling them phonetically - names are a problem -

"Who are these guys *Frood, Junk,* and *Anestane?"*, Wolfram wanted to know after hearing his psychology and science notes. (*Freud, Jung, and Einstein).*

I cannot blame Dave for that, but I can blame him for his peculiar intonation that made Wolfram suddenly look up from his work and ask, "What on earth is a roof-terrier?"

I went over and looked at the words on the screen, while in my head a rough, wire-haired dog skipped merrily over red tiles. On inspection, the phrase was 'roofed area' - but it's set me thinking.

Can I have a roof-terrier for Christmas *quaaashtyuuun?*

The Best Cockatiel in the World

Only a minute before I'd watched him trip up his mate with a shoelace - seizing one end of it he ran across her path and she fell on her face. Sunny, like the yellow poppies growing in the garden, with bright vermilion cheek patches, I was watching his throat only that morning, marvelling at the way it swelled with life as he produced those sweet sounds. His mate, who sang even sweeter, and

invented songs for them both to sing, and taught them to him, had sung him a beautiful new one as he ate his breakfast - his last, if we were to know it. He was puzzled to receive such generous treatment - she usually pushed him out of the way when he wanted to eat. Now, she sat outside the cage in the tree branch we had put for them to climb on, singing into his face as he filled his crop.

Last night they found a new place to sleep, on top of the big lampshade in the corner, where they were not supposed to go, but looked so cosy tucked up under their feathers that we relented and let them stay. They were still there this morning when I came down, and Koko came for his cuddle, putting down his butter-yellow head to be nuzzled, then nibbling my lip with his beak before submitting to more stroking.

Now, suddenly, he's dead. Only minutes before he'd been running and playing, now he was dying in my husband's hands.

For love of a little yellow budgie, pale as lemons, who lived in the kitchen, he'd watched his moment, as so often before, to swoop through the open door and spend a few minutes in her company before we chased him back.

He had perfected the trick of the silent glide, and Wolfram never noticed him as he banged the door behind him. Realising Koko was not in the room, he went back to look for him and found him on a branch. He put out his hand and Koko climbed on. But something was very wrong, his movements slow and painful, his legs sinking under him.

I was upstairs but ran down at Wolfram's distressed cries. The little bird was wheezing, coughing, his tongue protruding from his mouth. We didn't know it but his lungs were crushed, and he was breathing out all the air he had. His agony wasn't long, only seconds passed before he briefly stretched out one wing to support himself against Wolfram's chest, his feet gripping tighter to his finger in a last attempt to hold onto life, until at the last his head drooped slowly and gracefully downwards until it rested on the hand he trusted.

We wept over his still body, beautiful in death as in life. His mate had alighted on my husband's shoulder and watched the last moments. He died surrounded by all those who loved him, who could only helplessly watch his struggles.

We buried him beside the garden seat made from an old laburnum tree, in a small box, strewn with yellow poppies, yellow as his perfect plumage, dotted with a single red Sweet William.

On the following pages are four articles which were published in national magazines. I set out to see if I could do it - and I did.

But there is no satisfaction in manufacturing something just to see it in print. I always want to write my experiences, what I know.

I have reset the articles as near to the original as possible.

Tour de force

Last summer, German-born Wolfram Thome packed his rucksack, got on his bike and headed for home. This is his story.

I am registered blind with some peripheral vision. If I look straight at something I can't see it. If I look past it I can see shapes but not details. Anything in front of me might as well be at the back of my head. I know it's there but cannot see it. My blindness was diagnosed at my village school in Germany where I had difficulty keeping up with the other children. A visit to a specialist confirmed my deteriorating sight and I was transferred to a school for blind people.

I live in England now and this summer I returned home for the first time in ten years. Last time I went by plane, like everyone else. This time I cycled 600 miles across Europe with my sighted wife Valerie. I don't ride a tandem: they take away your independence. We each rode our own bike, and camped on the way.

We did the journey in two stages. Lancashire to Felixstowe took six days, and was physically punishing. For me, there

was a good deal of mental strain. I rely on my ears to tell me what is going on. I can see the white lines at the side and in the middle of the road and I try and keep a straight course using them. But I need my ears to tell me when something is coming, and there was so much traffic it blotted everything out, I just had to keep going and hope it got better - it didn't.

I also rely on my sense of orientation to tell me when I'm going in the right direction. At home in Germany I have a sense of geographical location. I get this from the position of the sun. I have the same sense here, but it doesn't work as well because Britain is much further north and the sun is not as high in the sky. In winter it is impossible to cycle on sunny days. The light is so low it gets in my eyes.

I cycle best on territory I know. I always cycled in Germany as a kid. When I grew up and started working, I would go to work on my bike. There is a network of cycle tracks through the countryside connecting all the villages, and even into the bigger towns, so you never have to go near cars. In Britain it's different. It's not safe for *anyone* to ride here, never mind a blind person!

After the crossing from Felixstowe to Zeebrugge we got the train down to Strasbourg and tried to recover.

We spent three weeks with my mother, touring around the places I used to know. Then we headed back through France. This took ten days and was, again, very different from cycling in England.

There isn't the same amount of traffic and it's quieter. The roads are better and the cars do not make so much noise. Besides, the drivers are more courteous and they do not come too close when they pass you. I can hear better what Valerie is shouting to me and relax.

I can feel that I am in an open space by the wind in my ears and on my skin. I know what direction it's coming from, and feel the different air currents.

Valerie asks me what pleasure I get from cycling when I cannot see, but I think sighted people miss so much. She's not aware of all

the other things. For instance, when you pass through a forest, the quality of sound and air changes. I can hear the cracking of branches, the sounds of animals running for cover and birds flying from trees. I can tell the types of road surface we pass over, and what kind of crops are growing by the road by sound - like the crackle that corn makes. To me, cycling represents total freedom to listen, hear and feel.

We shall definitely go to France again if we can raise the money. When we set off we thought it would be a cheap way to go, but it isn't. You have to eat and pay for accommodation. It all adds up.

We've bought a set of radio headphones for easier communication. We tried them out the other day. They were not so good in built-up areas, as they picked up interference from buildings - baby alarms, computers - and traffic. But in the countryside they are brilliant.

Val asked me if there were any changes I would make next year, or anything I'd do differently. I said yes, pack less luggage! Everything else was fine.

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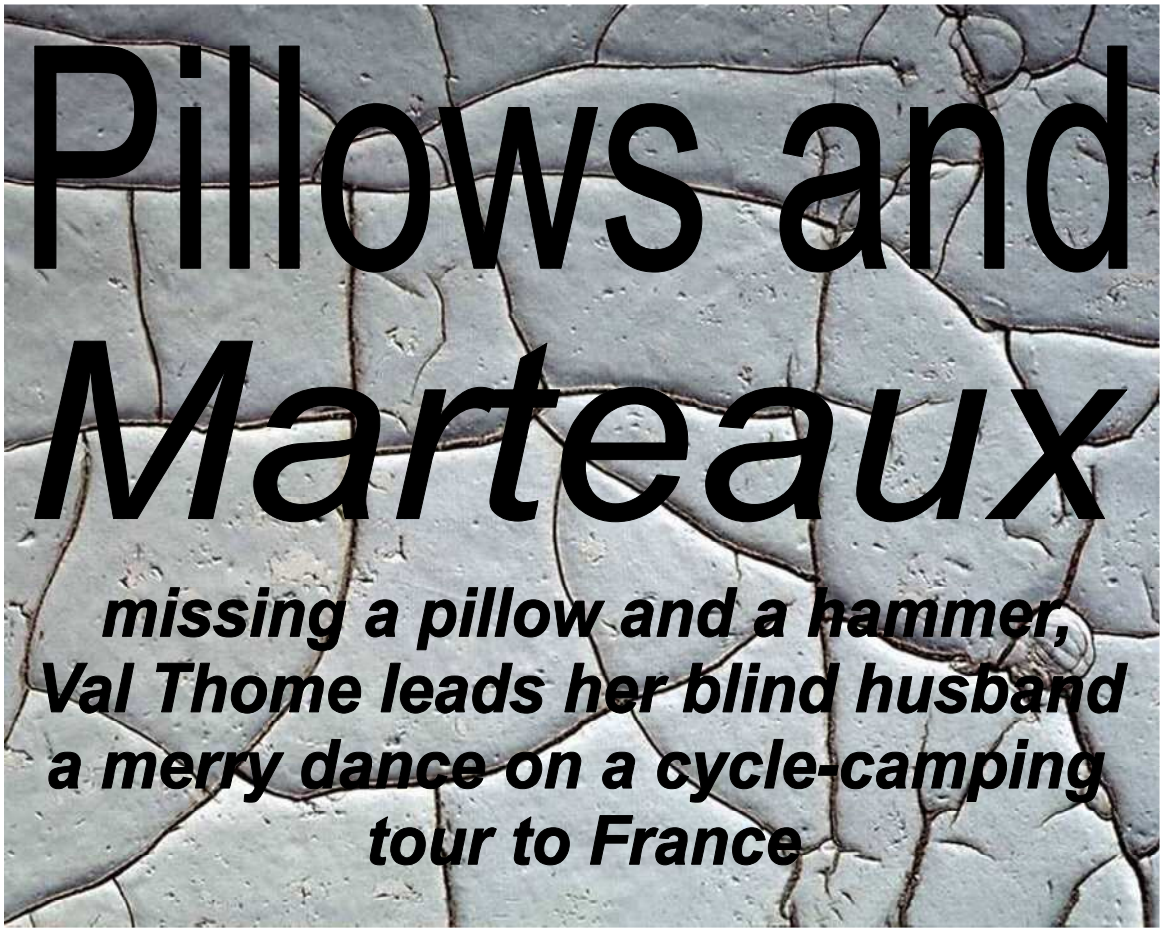
comfort stop, Cowling



Pillows and *Marteaux*

missing a pillow and a hammer, Val Thome leads her blind husband a merry dance on a cycle-camping tour to France

Two things worried me about camping; the impossibility of taking my electric blanket; and the mad assassin I imagined creeping up in the night to plunge his knife through my sleeping form (always supposing 1 could get to sleep without said blanket). Apart from that, I was up for it, as the Americans say. Previous experience was confined to spartan nights on Ilkley Moor waiting for the midsummer sun to rise, which it never does, or rather, you can never see it through the chill mists that arise shortly before dawn in these parts.

This would be different, promised my husband, whose idea it was to cycle across France. No big deal, except that he is blind and I am 54 with arthritis in my spine and hips.

Getting about on bikes is our normal mode of transport. Wolfram still has some sight, and so long as there are white lines at the side of the road he can maintain a more or less straight course. I ride behind shouting instructions like `parked car ahead' - he has been known to run into them! What he sees depends very much on light conditions and time of day, and I have to make some educated guesses.

As far as my arthritis goes, I find cycling easier than walking - the machine takes most of the strain. I was a bit worried about

getting my leg over the smart new bike Wolfram insisted on buying me for the trip - I haven't had my leg over a crossbar for years! I got round the problem by always looking for a convenient stone to use as a mounting block, to his great amusement, but as the trip progressed, my flexibility improved.

the author, ready for the off

`What about a tandem?' is Wolf's most hated question, after `Why don't you apply for British nationality?' He is as proud of his independence as he is of being German and, as he puts it, he would rather be the author of his own misfortunes than trust in a raving lunatic. He's never let me forget the time I told him it was safe to cross a road, and the next minute he felt the wind of a bus in his face. I said anyone can make a mistake once but, as he pointed out, that's not much comfort to him once he's dead!

Camping is outside our experience, but that did not daunt us. I have learnt during our nine years of marriage not to meet trouble halfway. It has a habit of getting here under its own steam soon enough!

The first night found us out in the wilds of East Yorkshire with darkness about to fall and still pushing into the wind. It was obvious even to a blind man that something was wrong. When Wolfram called a halt I confessed I was so scared of camping I dare not stop, and had no idea where we would spend the night.

He took over and, leading us down a lane, found a house with a bit of spare land and asked if we could camp there. After careful scrutiny the owners let us in and, once they'd accepted us, couldn't do enough, bringing pillows and mugs of coffee out to us, and cooking us breakfast in the morning. Impressed with this inexpensive method, I wanted to use it all the time, but as Wolfram pointed out, everyone wouldn't be so hospitable as to lend us fresh towels and give us the run of their bathroom and he wanted to be sure of a shower every night.

Planning would have gone better if I'd had up-to-date maps, but

Norfolk windmills

I'm a bit mean, coming from Yorkshire, and I was making do with those I used for cycle-touring 15 years previously. The drawback of these was that many of the sites marked on them had long since packed up their tents and stolen away. At least I'm not as bad as my Dad who, hearing we were passing through Belgium, brought us a map he'd used in the war!

Our second night found us stranded on a huge roundabout, beyond which roared several motorways (not featured on my map). Asking at the inevitable MacDonalds, we were directed to a site down a side road. It was not a good introduction to camping, sleep being impossible due to the local pastime of kicking beer crates around from 2am onwards, though the discovery of a nearby lorry park in the morning may provide a likelier explanation. As it was, I spent a sleepless night wondering in which of the other tents the mad assassin was hiding.

As it turned out, my fears were without substance, and we met with nothing but kindness on campsites, one man even offering to turn on his car headlights so we could put our tent up in the dark. I don't know what he thought of my husband's polite refusal, 'Makes no difference to me, mate, I'm blind, but thanks anyway!'

On the whole, proprietors were scarier than campers! At the end of a long dirt track we found a rambling dilapidated house surrounded by a few broken down vans. Several families of kittens

played around a door, which eventually opened to reveal a completely bald, fat man dressed in a short pink wrap (and nothing else) while behind him in the half-gloom I could just make out a monstrously fat woman draped on a sofa (or was it a bed?). We hardly waited to hear him say he `did not take tents' before heading back up the track a good deal quicker than we came down!

Wolfram found he was seriously handicapped without a hammer - the hot dry summer had rendered most ground surfaces hard as concrete and he found it impossible to push the metal pegs in by hand. I refused to buy one, on the grounds we had enough to carry already, though this was largely due to my habit of thrusting extra garments into already full bags with the cry: 'I'll take this, it doesn't weigh much!' Consequently it fell to me to look around for a large stone, or, failing that, borrow a hammer off someone better equipped. The first night in France my heart sank when I found I had to ask for a *marteau* - it sounded more like something for tea!

French sites varied, but were on the whole good. Price is no indication of quality - you can pay the same (or less) at a Michelin recommended site as on an open field. A feature of French camping is the municipal site, run by town hall officials judging by the leisurely attitude to getting booked in. Brush up your patience levels before tackling them!

While English site proprietors give you the impression they want to see the back of you as soon as they can, no doubt so they can return to their dressing gowns and dubious sexual practices, none of the French sites had a speedy route to signing in, municipal or not.

Master of the art was Monsieur Bernard, commandant of the most beautiful and superbly equipped camp we saw on our travels. You could spend a week there and never run out of things to do. Pitches are well set out with acres of space, in a thick, dark forest sloping down to the shores of a blue lake dotted with sailboards and water-skiers.

Monsieur Bernard has devised a method of booking in and a list of questions that defy completion in under two hours. To give himself added pleasure, he does not at this point take your money, as all other campsites do, but requires you to return in the morning and go through the whole rigmarole again. Immensely fat, but immaculate, in his police-like blue shirt and trousers, he seemed to have been shoe-horned into the space behind his desk, so tight was the fit.

Before we left his office, he handed us a four-page list of instructions, covering just about every act it is possible to commit on

a campsite, most paragraphs beginning `It is strictly forbidden...' Fires were `tolerated' but only under certain conditions. We hoped our tiny tin stove, which ran off firelighters, came within the regulations, but expected at any moment to see the huge bulk of Monsieur Bernard bearing down on us to tell us this was "*interdit"*!

Nevertheless, we spent the happiest night of the whole trip there, our bodies cushioned on deep deposits of pine needles, lulled to sleep by the sighing of the wind in the high tops of the trees, and the mad assassin finally laid to rest.

Next year I'll go back to France determined to argue about prices (I often felt I was being ripped off), not to buy ahead (there's always somewhere open, even on Sundays, bakers as well), to use my husband's blindness to get preferential treatment, instead of keeping quiet about it and having to accompany him to the toilet block across two fields!

And each of us is determined to make room for the one thing we most missed - in my case a pillow, and for Wolfram, a *marteau*!

Published in Camping Magazine September 1996

Le Lac des Vieilles Forges
Ardennes
France

An organic oasis

All of the senses are stimulated in Valerie and Wolfram's additive-free allotment

Why is it that most gardens designed for blind people consist of scented plants, flowers and gravel? Our allotment, designed by and for a blind gardener, is full of lush greenery. There are so many more senses to be satisfied than mere smell.

My husband, Wolfram, is registered blind, but has a little peripheral vision. Since I dragged him half across Europe on a bike ride last year, he has lost what colour vision he had. This disappeared in a spectacular display of electric blue and yellow lights, after which he has only seen in shades of grey.

In our organic allotment, now in its eighth year of cultivation, we grow vegetables that keep us going most of the year. The "fiddly" bits, like raising seed and weeding, are my department, while

Wolfram concentrates on things big enough to see, like flowering shrubs, fruit trees and bushes.

Wolfram loves building, and the relaxed style of architecture on English allotments means no-one expects perfection. Two greenhouses, several ponds, numerous rockeries, walls and trellises are the results of his inventive skill.

On our organic allotment we have fixed paths and permanent raised beds narrow enough to reach all the crops without standing on the soil - ideal for a blind person.

Because we use no pesticides or poisons, our wildlife stock increases each year. Blackbirds live nearby. Each one has its own distinctive call. One asks: "Is it open yet?", another calls "What do we do?", while yet another whistles the opening bars of the Laurel and Hardy theme tune, on cue, whenever the two men in the next allotment - one very thin, one very fat - come out to dig.

As evening approaches and we sit outside our shed relaxing, frogs croak under the stones at the edge of the pond. The garden is always full of insects. The poached egg flowers that line beds and paths literally hum with life. We especially notice lacewing and hoverflies whose larvae eat greenfly and other bad guys - natural pest control.

Being able to touch and hold things is great for Wolfram. His school in Germany had a collection of stuffed animals, which the children were encouraged to feel and describe, but they are no substitute for life. I often give him a frog, rescued from the path of a lawnmower to return to the pond. In his closed hand the cold, wet, jumpy body pushes and shoves to find a way out. When Wolfram releases it there is a tremendous splash as it leaps exultantly into the water.

Last winter we rescued a hedgehog. It was a cold night in October when we found it, weighed it on the kitchen scales (under a pound-and-a-half they won't survive outdoors) and placed it in a cardboard box until morning.

At around five am, we were wakened by the burglar alarm. When we checked,

nothing seemed amiss. We went back to bed but five minutes later the bells went off again. Wolfram spotted the dark shape moving against the back door. "Hedgie" had gnawed his way through the side of his box. Now he was looking for the way out.

So we installed him in a large wooden box, with a smaller cardboard box in one corner for his den. We lined the enclosure with newspaper and a thick layer of wood shavings from a local pet supplier. We
stuffed the bedroom box with hay, fed him on tinned dog food and water, and found he adored buttered peanuts - I mixed wild bird nuts with sunflower margarine, forming it into a cake. He ate lots and put on weight rapidly. Wolfram was able to see, hear, handle and photograph him.

But our greatest moment this year was when we arrived at the allotment early one morning to find the bluetit brood had flown their nestbox. Their high-pitched "tsee tsee" sounded from thick shrubs all
around, but one lone soul had missed the point. He was perched high up in the metal grid over a shed window. It was too high for me, but Wolfram put up his hand and the little creature climbed straight on,
tame as you like. Having never seen a bluetit (too fast and too small), Wolfram was thrilled to be this close, and to feel the warm feathers against his face.

The bird was quite happy to stay with him and in the end had to be persuaded to join his brothers and sisters in the thick hedge where they were sheltering.

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Sowing Secrets

To my father's despair - and my delight - hollyhocks appeared in his garden each year

When the first hollyhocks arrived, I was pleased, although I hadn't named them in my `wants' in the seed exchange scheme I belong to. I was more interested in introducing some colour into my aquilegia stock. But I might have asked for hollyhocks if I'd thought of it, as I've tried to get them started here, with no success.

I only took up gardening in my forties,and when I did, I uncovered a whole set of memories. I must have been a gardener waiting to happen as I found I could remember every plant and tree in the garden where I played as a child. And I wanted them all in mine, now I had one. Lily-of-the-valley, with their sweet scent and shy habit. Tiger lilies, fiercely striped with orange. Chocolate-leaved copper beech, where I climbed and had my swing.

Chrysanthemums I never wanted, because they were in Dad's

part of the garden, where he grew flowers for show, and where we children weren't allowed to play. I hated their great curly heads, on which he lavished so much care. They wore paper hats to keep out the cold, and lived inside tented frames of net curtain. Silly, pampered things I thought them.

He grew them for a year or two, hoping to make his name at local shows, but when he hurried home from work to check on his `babies' he often found the best ones missing. The church ladies had their eye on them for their flower arrangements, and Mum was a pushover for a few compliments and a promise of rewards in heaven.

In the end he gave up and grew tobacco instead, thinking it would save him money. He hung the leaves all over the kitchen, on lines and even on the pull-down clothes rack. I thought the big, green leaves wonderfully exotic, like living in a jungle. When they were dry, he put them in a press in the cellar, shaking what looked like liquorice juice over them. I don't know if he ever produced anything fit to smoke.

Hollyhocks were my thing, not his. We didn't have our `own' bit of garden - that was grown-ups' business. But I saw them growing, unbelievably huge, in other gardens, bees going in and out of the cup-shaped flowers, pollen bags bulging. "Why can't we have hollyhocks in our garden, Dad?" I frequently asked. But he didn't like them.

"Common as muck", he called them.

In the autumn, green packages replaced the fallen hollyhock flowers, and, opening them up, I discovered seeds, tightly rolled together in a ring, and done up in the way the baker twisted the top of a bag of yeast. I prised the seeds apart, and from then on sowed them secretly, in a narrow strip of soil next to the warm brick wall.

As I looked at that first gift of hollyhock seed, I could see Dad scratching his head every year as he pulled up the plants and threw them away, wondering how they got there. After he died, I realised I'd never told him where `them dratted things' came from.

I wasn't missing him. We'd never had a good relationship, and although he'd taken months to die, neither of us had got round to patching things up.

The nearest we got was the one time we were left alone, and I sat holding his hands. He smiled with closed eyes, and told me he remembered coming home from the war, walking up the lane and seeing a little blonde-haired girl peeping at him over the top of the garden gate. That was before it all went wrong. I don't know how

many years there was coldness between us. It wasn't his fault, or mine. Life's like that. So much to do, and not enough time for what really matters.

Since he died I've been busy. I'd never been in the habit of visiting much, and he wasn't a great talker on the phone, so I can't say his death left a gap. The seed swap list comes out in December, and, as I grow unusual things, I get a big response. It's exciting opening the pile of mail to see what unexpected gifts it contains. But the hollyhocks keep coming - even one packet from Australia. I checked my seed catalogue entry - only aquilegia was against my name.

Perhaps I should have realised when the first packet arrived and Dad popped straight into my head. This is going to be a great year for hollyhocks, Dad. Thanks, I'll put on a good show for you.

And I'm sorry it didn't work out, too.

Published in Choice Magazine March 1998

Thankyou for reading me.

If you liked the stories, look me up on Amazon.com or .co.uk

My name is Geraldine Murfin-Shaw.
I changed it on 1 Jan 2004
for personal reasons.

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