

Core Writer August 7th

I grow old, I grow old

By Mary Cutler

I was sitting on the top deck of a bus-always a good place for eavesdropping- when two Birmingham school girls got on. I can't say listening to the conversation of Brummie school girls counts as eavesdropping. You wouldn't have to drop very far from any eaves to hear them. Birmingham girls, from state or private schools, whether modestly attired in head scarves and trousers, or with school skirts hoisted so high you can read the label in the back of their knickers when they walk up the bus stairs- have one thing in common-loud and carrying voices which they are not afraid to use. I once overheard-I use the term loosely-one complaining she had fallen out with some-one because "She was always chatting my business", despite the fact she herself was chatting her own business at a decibel level that could be picked up by incoming aircraft to Birmingham International.

So these two girls got on, and, as is their custom, made quite sure we'd all be in the act by sitting at opposite ends of the bus to conduct their private and intimate conversation. My own ears pricked up. I had this piece to write. My luck was in. Well, said-shrieked- one-that's it. I've dumped him. Just couldn't take any more. Not after what he did. (Great.) Why, what did he do, asked- bellowed- her friend.(This was the stuff.) Oh, you can read all about it on my Face book page. I can't be bothered going into it all again. Do you want to get some chips? I'd certainly had mine. I couldn't read about it on her Face book Page. I'm not on Face book.

It's sad to be a social outcast. I don't want to sound immodest, but I never thought it would happen to me. I'm from a large family, I'm still in contact with twelve of my school friends-if the Net's down we just shout to each other across England-and, in one case, Wales. Apart from university, I've always lived in Birmingham, and the Midland writing community is close and friendly. Or it was. Until I started falling out of the loop. I missed publications- readings, performances, work shops. My friends would say But it was on my web site- all in my blog- written up in Face book. And it wasn't just people's work I was missing out on, either.

Scene; Boxing day party given by hospitable and generous friends X and Y. I am talking to another friend, the multi talented J.

J Are you coming to X and Y's New Years Eve party?

M They haven't asked me. I wasn't sure they were having one.

J Oh.(EMBARASSED) I think they are.

M Are you going?
 J Er- yes. They must have meant you to come.
 M But they usually mention on their Christmas card. Or email.
 J I can't think now how I heard about it. But I'm sure-
 M Maybe they want to keep it small this year-
 X (APP) Oh, J, while I think about it- can you give me a hand with the food for the New Years Eve party?
 J (STILL EMBARRASSED) Of course. Mary was just wondering-
 X (TO ME) Oh, you are coming, aren't you?
 M Yes. If you ask me.
 X (CONFUSED) Sorry. I just assumed....Of course we want you to come.

Generous hospitable X, of course she did. But I'm old, I can't just lurk outside houses I usually go to parties at with my nose pressed against the window, like Cathy in Wuthering Heights, to see if they'll let me in. I need –what's that old fashioned thing called-an invitation. And I'm sure generous and hospitable X issued one. On Face book.

The modern world is leaving me behind. I heard some Uni students on the train-see, I haven't forgotten this is supposed to be about eavesdropping. They were musing on the Distant Past.

Student 1 How did people manage before mobile phones?
 Student 2 I don't know. You couldn't do Uni without them, could you?
 Student 1 No! I mean, how would you meet people? You'd have to, like, say you were going to be at a certain place at a certain time!
 Student 2 Yeah, and then be there! Unbelievable!
 Student 1 I know. How would that work? (They laugh)

Mobile phone? My family didn't even have land line. The hours I've spent in draughty phone boxes. Or writing letters-remember letters? Much though I love it, no-one writes page after page of emails, do they? Or treasures them for ever. Oh, you can save the ones that mean a lot to you. Until your computer crashes. It's not that I don't understand the appeal of these new technologies-I totally do. If I was a teenager, I would be poking my friends every half an hour, and texting them every ten minutes, though to my anxieties about not having a boy friend, and not going to the right parties-bit of a theme here-would have been added worries I didn't have enough Face Book friends, or people didn't text me back fast enough. But I'd have loved a blog. I wouldn't have had to write three unpublishable autobiographical novels if I could have had a blog!

This is great project, such an imaginative and inclusive use of all this new stuff, and I was very flattered to be asked to contribute. I'm happy to offer my thoughts and my words But as anyone who has looked at the web site will see, I don't have many links-not virtual ones, anyway. Time's winged chariot is breathing down my neck- I haven't got enough real time left to make them. If my friends are going to break up, with some-

one I'd still rather they told me Face to Face, than read about it on Face Book. Because, as I found out on that bus, you can't eavesdrop virtually.