



Monday 9th January 2017

Dear Customer,

It's been ages. I hope you had a good Christmas and 'Happy New Year'. I wonder what delights this one will bring.

Where do I start. I felt I had to get a Christmas tree because my friend Caroline who loves the festive season was coming up from the West Country and my friend Liz was also coming for Christmas dinner. I'm not a great fan of all the decorative razzamatazz and excessive twinkling upsets my eyesight. I have three long pieces of tinsel which I throw onto the chandeliers and hang in an abstract mass like mistletoe. It looks very 'moderne'. With guests arriving I went in search of the smallest tree I could find. They were all too big. Then in the pet shop I saw a tiny little faux one about 18" tall with its own lights, white and subdued. Perfect. I was starting to get really stressed about the meal. On Christmas Day, unlike any other day, I don't know how long anything takes to cook. It would be by chance if it all happened to be ready at the same time. It was anything sophisticated, a Christmas dinner with no twists - chestnut and cashew loaf in pastry made the previous day, sprouts, carrots, maple-glazed parsnips, mashed and roasted potatoes. I was in such a bad mood. I prefer on Christmas days to just go and walk on the moors.

By miracle all the components were ready at the same time and dinner was served. We sat down, pulled a few crackers, and my friend's dog wouldn't leave my other friend's dogs alone and while my guests merrily sipped on champagne and tucked in I spent the meal trying to stop the dogs from killing each other. "They'll sort themselves out" they said. Yes they would have sorted themselves out straight through the jugular. Myfa kept her head down and stayed in her basket under the piano. I spent the meal muttering things like... "this is absolute hell, I'm never, ever doing this again".

Caroline went to work in Birmingham for a few months last year, travelling back to Somerset at weekends. She didn't know a soul there so went to audition for the Birmingham gospel choir. A few weeks later she'd texted me to say she was on Songs of Praise in the 'Gospel Choir of the Year Competition'. They won it and then went on to perform in the Royal Albert Hall backing Ruby Turner. She sat down next to me on the sofa and showed me the clip - her little white face and tiny form swaying back and fore in the Gospel robes singing '...Jesus loves me...' or something along those lines. Then she put on playback a Christmas gospel concert with jazzed up versions of Christmas carols and I had to pretend to enjoy it with her. I don't like Gospel music but I was trying to be cheerful. I was still sodden with the Christmas bad mood. I suggested we take the dogs up to the moors. It was beautifully wild, blowing a gale. She has a massive, bouncy 2-yr old German shepherd. Myfa sat down and wouldn't move because 'Raj' was trying to play with her. She stayed in the car and we walked him. On the way back I suggested another stop where Myfa could have a walk. I said that I would take her into the wood and that if she just walked straight on she'd get onto another moor and I'd see her back at the car. Myfa was happy. I saw a metal toilet in the wood and thought I'd just pop in - the army come up here on exercise sometimes. I popped in then popped back out then felt excruciating stinging and stabling on the inside of my knee. My God! It didn't feel like a mosquito bite, it's the middle of winter. It felt more like a sting from a jelly fish. But it couldn't be. Was it a snake? Last time I was on these moors I spoke to a farmer whose sheepdog was blinded after being bitten by an adder when sniffing inside a stone wall. Was it an Iraqi or Afghan spider, poisonous, dropped out of a fold in a uniform, had they colonised the toilet. Was the toilet booby trapped - Agent Orange squirted out at me. I pulled my trousers down to make sure it wasn't my imagination. It was coming up - bright red with a distinct white sting area. I rushed back to the car completely freaking out. Luckily I met Caroline back on the path and we rushed back home.

As I pulled my welly off I saw a burr on my foot, 'did that bite me', then I saw it wasn't a burr, it was a big hornet. So during my drive back, it had made its way down inside my trousers and onto my foot. I rolled my sock off trapping it inside, flung it in the porch. I saturated a wad of kitchen towel in cider vinegar, got a bag of frozen peas and lay on the sofa. Caroline asked if she should go and let it out of my sock. I told her to just leave it there. Then I remembered that when my mum was painfully stung by a bee, all she could think about was that the bee was going to die. Then her sting completely disappeared without trace. "Actually Caroline, could you go and let it out". She came back and said it was dead. As the hours passed it seemed increasingly likely that I would survive. But I was now the walking wounded and cancelled the evenings arrangement. I felt like the unluckiest person in country. Who else went for a winter's Boxing Day walk, pulled down their trousers and got stung by a hornet.

Greg, my brother, sent a cheerful email on Christmas Day with pics from their bedroom window overlooking a very sunny Sydney harbour and one of his fiancé of 20 years sitting on a giant toy koala at Sydney zoo. This was obviously a 'round robin' email to his friends - he would never give me so much information - there were a whole 2 short paragraphs. They'd spent a week at the Sheraton Mirage on the Gold Coast where there was a brown snake on the loose, the second most venomous on earth. The snake catcher was called out, caught it, but then it wriggled free and disappeared in the hotel garden.

His email started 'Hi Isobel'. It is never 'Hi Isobel' or 'Dear Isobel'. It is generally 'Isobel' suspended on the page without even a comma to soften it.

I'm dreading him coming back. He's having a nice time not thinking about me, not worrying about me, but as soon as he's back in the UK and the drudgery of February kicks in, he'll start on me again

I ended up with a very bad 4-day migraine. In my semi-conscious state from under the duvet I heard the faint explosions heralding in 2017. I was still ill on the Monday, hence why no letter last week. I don't get migraines very often these days, certainly not as bad as this. One thing to be thankful for at least.

Kind wishes,

Isobel