



Monday 1st January 2018

Dear Customer,

Phew, glad that's all over. It's exhausting isn't it, the festive season. I hope you have had a good one. It's January 1st, the start of a brand-new year, wipe 2017, we are allowed to start again. I hope it will be a fantastic one for you whatever it brings – Happy New Year

Tonight is my last night out of my house, the Airbnb guests depart in the morning and I am of the mind to never do it again. I will certainly never, ever do it at Christmas again. This time tomorrow I will be home.

I had planned to have the house ready on Christmas eve and then go to my friends. However, I hadn't finished cleaning. It's hard getting a place ready to rent when you're still living in it. Christmas eve came and went. It still wasn't ready, I'd cleaned myself into a small corner, didn't dare use the bathroom or kitchen and was still cleaning and tidying until 1pm on Christmas day. I chucked some miscellaneous stuff in the car and left feeling utterly exhausted. I'd been up all night with Myfa who wasn't well, had hurt her shoulder, she was wincing all night. I hadn't wrapped any presents, hadn't bought any wrapping paper. All I could think was 'what the hell is the point of all this!' And that next year I'm going to go and volunteer somewhere and stop participating in this ridiculous, soulless ritual.

I arrived at my friend's house where other friends had arrived and dragged my stuff in. They were on with preparing dinner - nut roast made, roasted vegetables were going in. Myfa was in a really bad way and there was nothing I could do to comfort her. They had some dog pain-killer so I gave her some and it made her go weird and uncoordinated. In front of the roaring fire I nodded off for a while in the evening. Just as well as Myfa didn't let me sleep for the next week. Up and down the stairs with her all night every night, or trying hopelessly to sleep downstairs with her on the sofa. As soon as I could, I saw a vet but the medication made her ill so she had to stop that. Preoccupation with looking after her and exhaustion meant I made no contribution whatsoever to making or cleaning away any meals. I wasn't a very good guest. Then the migraine came, on the same day that a friend from Nice was coming up to stay with me for the day. I went out for a meal with him, showed him round Richmond, with what felt like a dagger sticking through the back of my neck.

The day after that the snow came, we were snowed in and I was supposed to have gone to my brothers in Harrogate, my nephew was going there too. I was so bloody relieved to be snowed in as I hadn't yet bought any Christmas presents for them or their partners. Before Christmas I'd asked my brother what chest size he was these days. 'I don't want a sweater' he said, I don't need anything, don't get me anything, or just a small token gift'. I had also spoken to my nephew, asked him the same question and got exactly the same answer. It's in the genes, my father used to say the same. So here we are having to spend money we don't have buying things people neither want nor need - just for the sake of it.

A photographer was coming the next day for a magazine. I texted him and told him I was ill, the lane to the sheep would be impassable with snow and was it possible to change the date. 'Mmm, can we talk' was his reply. I called him and he told me it was already a week overdue and they had to have it by Monday. He told me he could 'photoshop' so I agreed. I remember the last time I did a photo shoot for a magazine with a migraine, I had to beg them to take the photos off the internet.

Next morning I tried to get myself ready, put a bit of make up on. I still hadn't slept and was feeling so weak that the weight of the mascara was pulling my eyelids shut. I was meeting him in the layby opposite my house. There were cars in my drive, one of the Airbnb men fetched something from his boot, my neighbour was busy in her garden. It was like I didn't live there anymore, life was carrying on as normal without me. It was like being a ghost looking across at my former life.

I'd had to call Ernest to ask him to take us up the lane in his land rover as the lane was blocked with snow. I'd checked the website of the photographer – stunning portraits of everyone from David Hockney to David Attenborough. I was going to ruin, or at least embarrass, his portfolio. A gale was getting up, it was absolutely brutal. We walked up to where it was the most exposed, and he set up his lights. They kept blowing over. I then had to stand in the same place frozen solid in the sleet for about 3 hours with Storm Dylan pummeling me, grimacing, with my wet hair blowing straight across my face. Ernest brought the sheep into frame with sheep nuts. He'd run out of the sheep nuts, the sheep would go off and he'd have to walk back down to get another bucket of nuts to get the sheep back... over and over again. I had to keep feeding them by hand to keep them round me. One unintentionally bit me, I had blood pouring down my hand.

I was supposed to have organised for him to photograph a knitter on his way back to London but I hadn't rung to arrange. So when he asked me for her address, I went out of earshot and rang her asking if she would mind. She said it wasn't very convenient as she had neighbours round for sherry and mince pies. She could hear the gale blowing and the desperation in my voice and agreed, I'd said it would only take 5 minutes! Oh well, c'est la vie.

Today I finally felt a bit better and more normal. I drove back through the parkland to the Jane Austen house. The full moon was rising and I stopped next to a group of cows lolling by a tree looking bored s. I wound down the window to see what they thought of Maggie May which was playing on the car radio. They listened, their ears flickered with interest.

Celery and Potato Soup

25g margarine or butter
100g potatoes, peeled and chopped
700ml vegetable stock
300ml semi-skimmed milk

5 celery sticks, chopped, leaves reserved
1 leek, trimmed and sliced
1 bay leaf
salt and freshly ground black pepper

*Melt the margarine or butter in a large saucepan over a low heat. Add the celery, potatoes and leeks and cook gently for 5 minutes. Pour the stock into the pan and add the bay leaf. Bring to the boil then reduce the heat, cover and simmer for 20 minutes or until all the vegetables are tender. Remove the bay leaf. Cool slightly. Using a draining spoon, lift out the vegetables and put them in a blender and whizz to a puree. Return the puree to the pan with the rest of the liquid, add the milk and heat gently. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Ladle the soup into warm bowls and grind a little more black pepper over the top.
Scatter over the chopped celery leaves to garnish.*

Well we will see what this one has in store for us all.

Kindest wishes,

Isobel