



Monday 21st May 2018

Dear Customer,

I hope you are well and enjoying the beautiful May weather.... and that you liked the dress. Finally we've got the Royal Flush in the bags – all the ratatouille ingredients.

Ratatouille

3-400g red peppers	olive oil
1 medium onion, cut into small dice	400g tin chopped tomatoes
3 sprigs thyme, plus 1 tsp thyme leaves	1 tsp balsamic vinegar
400g courgettes, thinly sliced	1 aubergine, thinly sliced
3 tomatoes, diced, with juices	4 cloves garlic, minced

Heat the oven to 230C/ 450F/ Gas 8. Cut the peppers in half, remove the seeds and pith and place them cut-side down on a lightly oiled baking tray. Roast for 20 minutes until the skin has blistered then remove. Leave to cool and reduce the oven to 160C/ 320F/ Gas 3. Meanwhile heat 2 tablespoons of oil over a low heat, add the onion and cook until very soft but not browned, about 8 minutes, adding ¾ of the garlic after 5 minutes. Stir in the tinned tomatoes and the fresh tomatoes and the sprigs of thyme and simmer until much of the liquid has evaporated. Peel the pepper, cut into small dice and add to the pan. Remove the thyme sprigs, season to taste and stir in the vinegar. Spread the sauce on the bottom of an ovenproof dish then arrange the sliced vegetables on top. Mix the remaining garlic with a tablespoon of olive oil and the thyme leaves, season and sprinkle over the top. Cover tightly with foil and put in the oven for 2 hours until the vegetables are tender. Remove the foil and cook for a further 30 minutes, putting the foil back on if it starts to brown. Serve drizzled with olive oil and crusty bread.

A friend came down to see me from Durham on Friday, an old friend from my London days, a fashion designer and lecturer who moved up here a few years ago. We were going out for lunch. She said she could drive us, having an open top car and being a lovely day. I didn't want to be a passenger, I can't stand it, but I tried to put that aside, I could have Lainey on my lap, her big ears could flap in the wind. We set off, she was driving practically in the middle of the road and very fast. Did she have bad eyesight? Was she on something? We approached the first and busy junction at speed and seemed only just to stop in time. Was it me, was she just driving normally. This was going to be hell. Through Catterick village she was going too fast. I asked her what speed she was going. We got onto the single lane country roads, she was tanking along, didn't slow down at any bends. By chance only, we didn't meet anything coming the other way. When we were nearly there and going down hill on a gravelly lane we met a massive piece of farm machinery round the bend. She braked, the car slid to a halt. I said it was a near miss, she said it wasn't. I was already dreading coming back. There would be traffic, people coming back from work. It ruined my lunch. I am never doing that again.

It reminded me of coming home from Paris with my brother once. We had been to an event and left Paris in rush hour, in the dark, in torrential rain. In the dense traffic and with barely any visibility in the blur of wipers, headlights and the downpour, he was driving at about 80mph an inch behind the car in front. I was completely terrified, he knew it, and didn't care whatsoever. My car failed its MOT the other week on emissions. The garage man said it was because I chugged about and that it needed a good blow out. He took it and blew it out and it passed. How did he know I chug about. But you have to on these country lanes, there are pheasants and hares and rabbits. I drive so carefully. In the whole time I have lived up here I have never met another driver who beeps when they go round a blind bend. I am the only one. I the only person who doesn't want a head-on collision, no one else bothered.

While I've been focusing on the garden the housework had been suffering. I just can't do both. Two weeks ago I lugged the quarter-ton Sebo vacuum cleaner upstairs with good intentions. My ex-partner bought it after researching long and hard on the internet – it's what they use in the Russian embassy. It's been sitting there ever since, on the wrong floor. Yesterday I couldn't bear any more the sea of soil and shredded paper all over the downstairs but in order to Hoover downstairs I had to Hoover upstairs first. I had to make a morning of it. And I did all my washing. Lainey skipped down the garden with me to hang it on the new line. But the line wasn't long enough for a full load. Where the line ended the apple tree began and I found that I could quite nicely peg the clothes and pillowcases onto the branches. I was so pleased with myself, it looked lovely. There is nothing quite like hanging ones washing out to dry in the sun.....on an apple tree.

I went to Kirkby Fleetham to see my sheep. Yet again there were no cars, the farmer was out. There was no sign of Diesel the Bull Mastiff. I climbed over the fence and walked the outer perimeter. In a little dip I found the sad remains of one of my sheep – it hadn't been there when I last went round them, the birds had been quick to strip it of its flesh, it was a skeleton and a head. I could see it was one of the ancient Shetlands. I carried on round. A big metal gate had been bolted in place where Diesel had pushed the fence down trying to get to me. I was on my way back to the car, then I saw Diesel and she saw me. She headed for where she'd pushed the fence down. She started manically working her way down the fence trying to get her massive head through the pig wire. I didn't look at her, just carried quickly on. Then I did look. She was forcing herself between the pig wire and the barbed wire and she managed to squeeze herself through and started coming for me. I managed to get over the gate to where the car was before she reached me. She was delirious and I greeted her from the other side of the gate. They say she should be fine, she is with them of course, they are her family.

Diesel sat in the sheep field and I sat in the car. The wife pulled up at the gate I went across to tell her what Diesel had done. She told me that she only does that with me – she isn't bothered about anyone else. She told me the sheep were all fine. 'Good' I said, the sight of the skeleton fresh in my mind. As she was speaking to me she opened the door of the 4 x 4 and a small child fell out head first onto the road and started screaming. She didn't realise the little girl was leaning on the door.

I don't often remember my dreams but last night I was dating Tom Jones (I don't know what to take from that), and there was a boatload of sheep with dog collars on, so tight they couldn't breathe !

Well that's my exciting news. I hope you have a good week and may this glorious weather continue,

Kind regards,

Isobel