



Monday 23rd July 2012

Dear Customer,

What incredible weather. I am writing to you seated on the wrought iron emergency exit staircase of the Crown Hotel in Exford on Exmoor. I can barely see the screen from the sun's glare but refuse to be inside on a day like today.

I took one look at the weather forecast on Saturday – saw that Richmond wasn't making the cut and decided a meeting with our Devon dairy farmer was imperative. I packed and headed for the sun.

On Sunday morning I threw back the curtains to greet a perfect summer's day, not a cloud in the sky, birds singing – utter bliss! I then went to the bathroom to brush my teeth and brushed one of my teeth out. It must have been out before, in fact it might have been one on a post as there seems to be a perfectly round, mechanically formed hole where it was. It came out and went straight down the plughole before I could get a good look at it. Normally this would have filled me with horror but not today, I decided I wasn't going to let it ruin my sunshine.

I'd asked Ernest if he wanted a trip down with me to get him out from under the thick cloud. And as you know, he has long, miserable winters feeding my sheep and of course he is good company. I met a friend and we went to see her sister in Dulverton. She kindly brought us in a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits. She offered Ernest a biscuit, he thanked her and took the plate thinking they were all for him – four lovely handbaked cookies. Alfie her Labrador sat next to him and he carefully broke each biscuit into four pieces and gave the whole lot to the dog. "You don't mind do you", he said to the sister "I just can't resist". Ernest knocked back his cup of tea in one swig like a shot of tequila and put his mug back on the tray "aaargh, that was loovly" he said. I took my first sip of tea., and was – mortified.

Next day, on my own, I remembered what he'd done and burst out laughing. I later brought it up with Ernest and he looked really shocked and went off to his room no doubt to contemplate and replay the evening was he just being offered a biscuit, not the whole plateful and was it not appropriate to give them all to Alfie.

In one very nice B and B, I came down to breakfast. As I came in I spotted Ernest making his way over to the buffet, no doubt starving having been up since 5am. I saw uncut loaves on the table with serviettes over them. I sat down and watched with dread. He took the serviettes off which were obviously to stop hand contact with the bread. He picked a loaf up, then the other, couldn't decide whether to have brown or white. Was about to start cutting one end then decided to cut the other. Put a slice in the toaster then plonked a screwed up serviette on top of the loaf. It was hilarious.

I don't know how many cream teas I've had, coming straight after the enormous breakfasts. Skimpy clothes because it's so hot. I look in the mirror and I am a tellytubby. But who cares I am not the only tellytubby out touring the Exmoor tearooms. Far from it.

I told Ernest to go and sit in the sun in the water garden and read the paper while I write this. I heard him coming down the corridor "now don't laugh" he said. He appeared with what he believed to be shorts – but were just very short trousers, mid-calf. I only laugh at Ernest when he's being serious and told him he'd done right and to go and get some sun on the exposed 2" of leg between hem and sock. Off he toddled. Myfa is asleep on my bed with her head on the white Egyptian cotton pillow. She's whacked, us having walked the circuit around Tarr Steps at full speed on a clotted cream ice cream with two flakes rush.

Excuse the brevity of letter, my postcard, but this is as close to a holiday as I'm likely to get this year. I'm waddling off to find my next cream tea.

Kind wishes,

Isobel

PS On a more serious note, I've been delighted to see the farmers out protesting their rights for a fair milk price. As you know I have proactively campaigned on this subject for a long time as their low return has been impacting cow welfare and the move towards low cost factory dairy farming. I thought yesterday, on such a beautiful summers day, of all the dairy cows in these new battery units, who will never, ever feel the joy of being turned out into the fields in the spring, to graze grass and be in nature. The only time they will have a glimpse of the world outside is through the slats of the lorry on the way to the abattoir.

PPS Due to some technical issues at the dairy we haven't been able to supply any milk this week and are sorry for any inconvenience.