



**Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2013**

Dear Customer,

Look, I'm all rant and no vegetables. Apologies, next week all vegetables and no rant, or scant rant.

I can't sleep at the moment because I feel physically sick with the worry of a vision I am having. I called my brother to explain my plans, my vision. I waxed lyrical, then there was an ominous silence..... then, ... " I DON'T LIKE IT".

He told me, verging on furious, how my vision was a just a bottomless pit of ruin and destitution. He reminded me of the time I had rented some organic land to try and do some of the growing ourselves and paid a fortune to a contractor to plough and sow crops but come harvest time he wouldn't come to get them out the ground as he was too busy and I tried to get manual labour but all the lettuces were bolting and the courgettes rotting and then the whole field flooded as it was next to a river. We lost a fortune. Well it was a 6-acre field and now I'm putting in a tender for the tenancy of a 370-acre National Trust farm in Northumberland adjacent to the beautiful Wallington House. At least that's what I've been thinking I'm going to do. The primary reason is that I need a permanent home for the sheep and for the dairy cows and little bull calves which will be making their way to me.

Farm tenancies never, ever come available, I have been looking for years. I contacted the National Trust a while ago and the man told me never while he'd been working there had one ever been vacated, so when he called me back weeks later to tell me of this one and the situation with my sheep being so pressing with Ernest giving up.....well. I have spent the last weeks disengaged from my normal work and concocting what I would do there and how I could make the money to support it. I thought I wouldn't have a hope in hell in the tendering process as there would be a thousand beef and arable men after it and when I asked the Trust if I should even bother – they told me that was exactly what they didn't want. They someone to do exactly what I wanted to do there - convert it to organic and have multiple businesses, create a visitor centre, maybe farm shop, caravan site. Well, if that wasn't enough to fire my imagination. In my imagination I have villages of eco pods – one for single people, one for families, one for couples. State of the art shower/ bathing blocks and comfy lounges and library – very glassy looking out over the stunning countryside, a cinema for when it rains showing Woody Allen, Art and French films in the evenings and childrens flicks in the afternoons. There would be animals absolutely everywhere, it would be a paradise for animal lovers, there would be teams of rescued pigs for cleaning the fields, rotovating and fertilising. "come on boys, we're in the West garden today" and they'd trot behind, off to work. The dairy cows would be hanging out in the pod villages like the sacred cows of India. The sheep would mingle and barge into tents looking for digestive biscuits and there would be moles and rabbits, squirrels and badgers, foxes and field mice. There would be veg growing, bees and butterflies, raspberries, blackcurrants, heritage fruit orchards, flower meadows and herb gardens and buffet food – fantastic wholesome and freshly picked with home made cordials, chutneys and jams. Food on the go all day. Local people could come and harvest their own vegetables – dig and pick their own. There would be daily events for adults and for children eg The 'Digging for Victory' Stew – children will be given little forks and will dig and cut vegetables which will go into a big cauldron on a bonfire and an announcement made over a loudspeaker system, the sort you get in French villages and Butlins, to announce lunch is ready. Or there will be the 'Disco in the Woods with organic pop and nibbles' with a tarpaulin suspended in the trees if it's raining. There'd be interesting talks about everything under the sun by visiting experts. It would be somewhere really geared for single people to come too, on their own. A place where they won't get 'funny looks' where anyone can do anything they want – participate or just mooch about having cups of tea with the pigs. Frankly the list goes on and on, the imagination has no bounds.

The problem is..... it is a big and costly project and I almost feel defeated as there is only so much one can do. To attempt it on my own – my brother might be right, it could devour me. I can't tell you how the last weeks have been...lurching between "I HAVE to do it, its the missing piece of the jigsaw" and "there's no way on earth I could do it". I think the reality is that I can do it, but not on my own. I would need partners.

My mate Liz was going horse riding on Friday to a riding school in Arkengarthdale. I haven't ridden for decades so decided to go along. We 12 yrs olds again standing outside the stable block, riding hats fastened in eager anticipation. I was shown Ellie, a stocky black and white gipsy pony who has tacked up and waiting. Except she wasn't waiting, she was eating her hay at the back of the stable. "Hello Ellie" I said and after stroking her a while, I took her reins and tried to lead her out but she wouldn't move. "Come on Ellie.....darling" .....nothing..... then she said "I'd just rather stay here and eat my hay". "Come on..... sweetie pie"..... "No, I'm not going to come" .....she said. I don't think she'd been out since summer trekking. I was feeling very guilty but eventually managed to extricate her. I refused a leg up and got up on my own, wrenching a muscle in my stomach. Ellie didn't want to move. Eventually she started heading towards the others in the outdoor school but instead of going through the gate, she barged straight past determined to go round the back of the stable block and back to her hay. I had to call for help and was led into the enclosure. I stopped there and gave her a rest. We then started trudging round in a circle, an ever-diminishing one, she didn't see the point of the whole circuit. It led to the centre where my friend had also arrived and we tried to move them but they'd advance 2 paces and swing back to each other bumping like dodgems. It was quite hard work. I wrenched my shoulder. I didn't want Ellie to do anything she didn't want to do so spent the rest of the lesson just standing there. I have been aching ever since.

A friend of mine was living and studying in Paris and having a hard time with anorexia ( not helped by me stuffing croissants and millefeuilles down me) and a fixation with dark French poets like Arthur Rimbaud. I went over to live with her for a few months in a flat in the rue des Archives. One day we went for a promenade and passed Notre Dame. It was undergoing restoration work but the workmen had downed tools and gone to lunch for the afternoon. We walked round the back marvelling at the architecture, then I happened to see a gargoyles lying on the grass – "wow", I thought, what a find, and I picked it up and put it in my bag. We set off back to the rue des Archives with the gargoyle in a Monoprix carrier bag under my arm. I had friends coming back from their travels

with horrible Buddhas and African masks – wait till they see this. As we approached the flat I felt a sudden terror – I would be cursed – the gargoyle would curse me. I rushed gargoyle back to Notre Dame. Youth !

I hope you're having a lovely week,

Kind wishes,

Isobel