

Homework 10/3/2010

His hand grips the banister hard and he carefully lowers one foot on to the next stair down. I stand in front of him a couple of stairs below to right him should he lose balance and threaten to topple over.

‘What was the food like in the hospital?’ I ask when he’s settled for the evening in his reclining chair, having grimaced through the pain of lifting his swollen leg on to a footrest.

‘Good,’ he says as I remove the cardboard sleeve and run a sharp knife round the foil of the lamb roast (serves two to three).

‘I stopped off in Ashbourne at this new Marks and Spencers to get this food on the way up,’ I say.

‘Ashbourne? You’re a bloody idiot driving through Buxton and the Peak District when there’s snow forecast. People got stuck in six foot snowdrifts there last week. No wonder you were late.’

‘I knew exactly where the snow was. I drove through it on the M40 and M42 near Birmingham so I was ahead of it. Besides I can’t stand the M6,’ I say.

A frozen reporter in a lay-by near Worcester appears for the third or fourth time this evening on the BBC News channel.

‘Look at the snow there, you soft sod. You should have stayed at home. I’d be alright here on my own.’

I take him a plateful of lamb accompanied by M&S’s Mediterranean Roasted Vegetables and Potatoes Dauphinoise.

‘The hospital food was alright but it was nothing like this,’ he says. ‘Find that bottle of red in the kitchen. I can’t drink anything when I’m on this Roxanol but you have a glass for yourself and tell me what you think. I saved it for you.’

I pour myself the wine. ‘It’s good,’ I say. It’s a Barbera d’Asti but the back label is mainly written in German. I guess he bought it from Aldi or Lidl to try and fool me – to prove that good wine doesn’t have to be bought at Waitrose.

‘See if you can find the stopper to keep the rest of the bottle fresh for tomorrow. You won’t want to finish that tonight.’ No, I think, I’ll nip out later and top myself up with the M&S special offer wine that I’ve left in the car boot.

Unusually he doesn’t clear the plate. He’s tired and perhaps for the first time in almost seventy years he feels old and vulnerable. He’s used to being the carer, devoting progressively more of his time to the task. Over the last six years it had become a full-time job until, suddenly, nine months ago, he wasn’t needed any more. Now he’s been the one in the hospital bed, having to put his faith in the doctors, although he says he feels a fraud: the unexpected intensity of pain a suitable match for his guilt. After all, a replacement knee isn’t the sort of life or death medical treatment that he’s been a close witness to over the past few years.

I tell him it will feel better soon – that his leg’s recovery will accelerate away like a sine wave. I pour another glass of Barbera as the morphine settles him and he sleeps knowing that tonight someone will be watching over him for a change.

552 words.