

**Fly Joe! ©**

***By Jackie Buxton***

Hesta placed the food on the table in front of him, took the napkin and shook it to reveal a worn square.

"I've brought you lamb with redcurrant sauce and dumplings," she said, tucking the napkin into his collar. "Well, strictly it's not lamb but a couple of pieces of rubber from the bottom of me boots. I gave them a quick spruce up with the hose before of course, although being in the chicken pen, some of the poo does get a bit squashed in the grooves. We didn't have as many redcurrants as I'd have liked - been too hot, surprisingly - so I had to take the ones from near the ground; the ones you tell me not to touch because the fox might have pee'd on 'em. And the dumplings? Well, they're just dumplings, like me Mum used to make, the very finest with snips of bacon. But you were never too keen on dumplings, were you? Anyway, there we are, shall I feed you now?" she asked, finally sitting down on the edge of the bed and picking up the spoon.

Joe would have smiled if he could. Instead, he raised an eyebrow.

'This stomach was expensive,' his t-shirt shouted through thick white lettering buffering up to the mound of his stomach. Her eyes lingered on the hillock; a perfect sphere. Ever since this beanpole of a husband had been introduced to steroids and constipation, he'd stuffed a bowling ball underneath his clothes.

She whispered again, "Shall I feed you?"

Joe blinked once for no and then several times in rapid succession.

"Ok," Hesta said, jumping from the edge of the bed and snatching the napkin from his neck and the plate from where his hands should have reached. "I'll leave you with the snooker." Joe blinked twice.

"Day one," she said, as she darted from the room with his dinner in her hands. She sat herself down at the two-drawer table in the kitchen, and stabbed her fork into the lamb. "Day one accomplished," she repeated. How long would it take?

She looked around her kitchen which hadn't been decorated for over nine years and tutted. She took in the poppy speckled wallpaper, peeling itself from the wall where it met the yellowing tiles around the chipped Belfast sink. She would re-decorate. In fact, she'd do the whole house. It would mark the new start.

The second day Hesta made brown spaghetti with a spicy ratatouille sauce full of onions, burnt to a crisp, just like Joe didn't like them. Really, he was a 'meat and two veg' man. He was a farmer. 'Farmers eat meat, Hest,' he'd said in the early days, smiling at the thought that she could consider serving him anything else. He had a voracious appetite back then, being outside all day, running around the fields rounding up the sheep, 'Braveheart', in particular. Braveheart was the only sheep he'd ever named due to her valiant and most un-sheep-like attempts at darting for freedom.

Once Hesta had removed his untouched meal, she returned with his glass of water. Silently she held the straw up to Joe's lips but today, he didn't drink. She removed the water, went into the kitchen and ate his dinner.

"Breakfast TV or a DVD?" Hesta asked cheerily on day three. Joe didn't respond. "A look outside?" she suggested, and Joe gave two blinks. "No problem," she said, adjusting the backrest to raise him up to window height. She looked into his eyes and asked if he'd like to be taken into the garden today. She hoped the answer would be no. The carers had helped her transport him yesterday and they'd been shocked how 'wan' he looked, how his cheekbones appeared to be jutting out which was astonishing when you considered the amount of steroids he was on. Was he drinking enough? Should they call the doctor? And Hesta had been forced to lie.

Joe blinked once. "Just the window, then." She pointed towards the small area of light. "Raining, I'm afraid." She wished the sun would shine.

When Hesta took Joe his plate of cod in a creamy dill sauce on day four, his eyes were closed. She placed the plate on the table but didn't wheel it under his chin. Instead, she sat herself on the edge of the bed and leaned over him. She put her ear to his chest. Still breathing.

"Time to eat, Joe," she said, struggling to speak loudly enough. "Fish in a congealed, gloopy sauce which would make a good flour and water paste." She looked at him. His eyes were still closed but his chest was moving even though she could hear the saliva clattering around at the back of his throat. She winced. "No it wouldn't," she said, faltering for the first time. "It's nothing like flour and water paste. It's a proper white sauce, with a thimbleful of white wine." Still his eyes didn't open. "It's how you like it," she whispered.

She pressed her lips to his, held them there, her hands curved around his cheeks.

"Fly Joe!" she said, pulling away just far enough to speak. "It's time to find your legs." She wished him well on his journey. She kissed him again, laid her head on his heart. She felt the tiny beats fade to nothing and held his hand until his spirit had flown.

Then she went into the kitchen, scraped his dinner into the bin and poured a drop of washing up liquid into the bowl. And then she wept. She wept until her tears had melted all the bubbles. She wiped her eyes with the tea towel, made a cup of coffee and sat down to write the letter.

*Dear Joe,*

*'Assisted Suicide,' they'll call it, the neighbours, the ones who don't understand. They said they'd see me hang if I ever tried it, once they'd heard talk at the post office. I'm not sure where that came from. I told some I'd help you if you asked for it - it didn't seem shocking to*

*me. Why wouldn't I help you? If being your carer is to help you do what you want because you can't do it; if being your wife is wanting you to be happy; if making our marriage vows to love and honour in sickness and in health is something I believed in right back when we stood together at that alter twenty three years ago, then yes, of course I would help you be free if that's what you wanted more than anything else in the world.*

*For the record, it wasn't 'assisted' was it, because I never laid a finger on you or gave you any drugs and it wasn't 'suicide' either because you didn't kill yourself.*

*You just didn't fancy what I was cooking.*

*I wish you hadn't gone out that morning chasing after Braveheart, beyond the fields and over the road, like you'd done a thousand times before. But I don't regret that you were paralysed. Is that selfish of me? Maybe. But we got to say our goodbyes and for that, I'm grateful.*

*And now? Well, I'm excited for you, Joe, because you've been let loose and by heck, I hope you can fly again. That's all I ask, really. Fly, Joe, far away from your painful world.*

*Goodbye my love, my friend,*

*Hest xx*

Hesta used a corner of the tablecloth to dab at the smudges in the ink from her tears. She breathed out, used both hands to lift herself from the table and strode into the lounge where his bed swamped the whole space. She switched off the snooker.

"Joe, you've got post," she said, as she had almost every day since they'd moved the bed downstairs. "You can read it yourself now." She placed the page on his upturned hand, kissed him on his forehead and then on his lips.

She studied his face. The pain had gone. The more she stared, the more she thought she saw his first smile for nine years. She looked up at the ceiling; it was more than a smile. It

was a beam stretching the width of his face from where he was watching over. His arms were outstretched. He was floating. He reached down and pulled her to him, nuzzled his face into her neck. She took in his smell from before; lime shower gel with a faint hint of sheep poo.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and felt his final squeeze before he let her go.

Hesta looked back at his face, the warmth gone. "You big sappy arse," she said, and pressed her lips to his once more. Her tears slid off his face. "No regrets."

She walked directly to the table as planned, to the base where she'd checked a little too often that the phone was charging. Her hand on the receiver, she breathed out and smiled. Joe had flown.

**Words: 1499**