A FOOD STORY – Hospital Food

Callie sat by her Mother's hospital bed after work, noticing for the first time how old her Mum looked, how lined, how drawn, how tired she was. Callie understood that her Mum needed to be in the hospital.
Mum been living independently since Callie's Dad had died twenty years before, but Mum had become increasingly frail the past two years since entering her nineties. It was as though her spark had dimmed and her energy couldn't be summoned. Her breathing was laboured and her chest hurt too. Callie gently held her Mum's hand, stroking it softly for reassurance and spoke kindly to her, telling her Mum any news she could think of that her Mum might be interested to hear.

Mum didn't show signs of enthusiasm nor even acknowledgement. It was as though it was all just too much effort.

The smell of food reached Callie's nostrils. She couldn't discern what it was, and then the trolley came in pushed by a smiling but weary support worker. A tray was pushed towards Callie's Mum. Callie took the tray and placed it on the bedside table.

“Mum, your dinner's here, let me help you sit up a bit.” Callie carefully helped her Mum move up the bed and placed pillows behind her back to keep her upright. Callie moved the tray in front of her Mum and took the covers off the food.

With more enthusiasm than she felt, Callie said brightly: “Look Mum, it's cottage pie with carrots and green beans, followed by stewed apple and custard.”

Mum looked at it without interest, she was weak, too tired to speak.
“I'll help you Mum” Callie said as she offered the first forkful to her Mother's pale lips.

It took Callie forty minutes, but slowly and surely she managed to encourage her Mum to eat the meal. Callie needed to cut the green beans small, and she needed to offer Mum sips of water when she struggled to swallow.
All through the meal, Callie kept up a light patter of conversation -
“Remember how you used to make cottage pie for me, Mum? It was one of my favourite meals. Remember the time I brought two friends home unexpectedly and you somehow had enough food for them too. I expect you gave us yours and Dad's servings and rustled up something else for you two. Have you had enough now? Well done, you've managed two thirds of it. That'll do you good; give you some strength. Now, would you like to try the apple and custard? I'm sure you can manage a little; you'll like it, you always

had a sweet tooth.”
Callie continued with the dessert, her Mum taking to that more easily, probably because it was quite mushy and soft, and yet smelling tempting just as apple and custard should.

When she had finished, her Mum leaned back on the pillows, exhausted. She still wasn't really talking. Not to mind, Callie filled the silence between them and continued to give her Mum snippets of chat about anything and everybody. When Mum fell asleep, Callie took her leave and departed to home and her own evening meal.

The days that followed were of a similar pattern. Callie would visit her Mum at the hospital straight from work and before journeying home. Every time Callie would smell the food before it appeared and would prepare her Mum. The meals reminded Callie of the foods her Mum used to cook and that she had had for school dinners. Callie spoonfed her Mum patiently every day, willing her to eat and recover. The nurses praised Callie for her dedication.
As the days passed into weeks, Callie realised that her Mum was becoming slower at eating and the amount that her Mum would eat was becoming smaller.

And then the 'phone call came from the hospital just before 6am one morning.
“We're so sorry but your Mum passed away peacefully in her sleep.”
Callie was distraught but in her heart knew she had done what she could and her Mum just could not go on.

When Callie went to the hospital to collect her Mum's belongings, she saw the notice: “Volunteers wanted to assist with helping patients to eat.” Callie knew she couldn't take this on straight away as she had too much to do and had to grieve for her Mum, but she determined to get involved in the future. She appreciated the time it took to help even one patient eat a meal and that there would never be sufficient nursing staff to do that.