

Aunty Joan

JOAN WAS at the 'reduced to sell' section of the bread and cakes. She went for a Brandenburg and a nice Warburtons white medium. Then she bought her bottle of sherry. No one she knew was on the checkouts except for the nasty one, but she had more luck at the news and tobacco counter where she went for her scratch cards. Young Cheryl was on and she always had a friendly word, and didn't hurry Joan while she was choosing. On this occasion she bought two each of the silver and gold cards, and two of the more expensive blue ones. And, of course, the new 'Ideal Home'.

Cheryl wished her luck with the cards, and Joan said, 'Well someone's got to win, dear. I'm in it to win it.' She chuckled. 'D'you remember that on the telly? They always said "in it to win it" on the lottery adverts.' Cheryl didn't remember.

After a grilled potato cake with butter, Joan settled down at two o'clock with a glass of sherry and her magazine. She was saving the cards for when Alan came. She put the television on too but only for company. 'The room feels cold without the telly on,' she always told Alan.

She dozed off and woke to the sound of the doorbell. It was her nephew, Alan. On the dot as usual. Three o'clock.

He sat in his usual chair while Joan was in the kitchen. He wasn't particularly happy being there but knew it was his duty. Aunty Joan had no one else now. He noticed the slightly unpleasant smell in the room, and the dust, and the sad age of the china ornaments.

'There!' said Joan coming in with a tray containing teacups and slices of Brandenburg cake. 'Tuck in, love. I know it's your favourite. How're Nicola and the kids? You'll have to bring them with you next time. It's ages since I've seen them. Go on, have another piece of cake. I know it's your favourite.'

Alan ate dutifully. 'I can't stay too long,' he said. 'We're taking the kids to the pictures so I need to be away soon. Bit of a flying visit this time, sorry.'

'Well, I know how busy you young people are. Enjoy it while you're young I say. Me and Bob had good times but we both had to work so much we hardly had time for fun.'

Alan knew what was coming.

'It was hard in the old days. But d'you know what, we were happier then. I feel sorry for young people today, always rushing around and busy even when they're not working.'

'That chair you're sitting in, that's where Bob died. He'd been into town. A Saturday it was, like today. He came home with a tray of seedlings. He always did the garden on Saturday afternoons. Couldn't get him out the greenhouse.'

‘Anyway, he put the seedlings on the table and sat in your chair and I made him a cup of tea. Then I was in the kitchen getting the washing together, and he shouted through, “Make us another cup of tea, girl.” so I shouted back, “What did your last slave die of?” but I made him one five minutes later and took it through.

‘Well, he was just sitting there. At first I thought he was asleep but his eyes were open. I touched him and shook him a bit. Then I thought, oh, he must have died.

‘So I went next door and Bill Smith came back with me. “Oh, you’re right, girl,” he said. “He’s dead.” Well, I didn’t know what to do so Bill says to phone the doctor so I went to the phone box and phoned Doctor White. When he came him and Bill took the tray of seedlings off the table and lifted Bob onto it.’

Alan had heard the story so many times he knew that it didn’t matter how he responded, so he simply said, ‘You must still miss him.’

‘Oh I do. He was a bloody nuisance but he wasn’t too bad to have around. It’s a bit lonely without him.’

Alan guessed it had been around 20 years since his Uncle Bob, a stoker in the local power station, had died of a heart attack. He remembered his own parents talking about it when he was about eleven, and his father saying, ‘She’ll be better off without him. Should never have married a Catholic.’

‘Anyway, love, you haven’t come to hear your Aunty Joan moaning and feeling sorry for herself. Have some more cake, and I’ll go and make another cup of tea.’

Alan was not superstitious but he thought that sitting in that chair while a second cup of tea was being made was not a good idea. In any case, he was in a hurry to leave, so he declined patiently, politely resisting several entreaties.

‘Well, let’s do the cards. You’re my lucky little pixie. Have you got a coin? I find two pences are best. Here you are. Three for you and three for me. Now, I’m counting on you to bring me some luck.’

They scratched the cards. Nothing.

‘Well, look at this one, though,’ said Joan. ‘*Two* £10,000. I only needed one more. So close! I just feel it in my bones that I’m going to win soon.’

Alan, sensing his imminent release, enquired, ‘What will you do when you do win?’

‘Oh, I’ll give it all to you and the little ones. But I may buy a new rug and one of those chairs that tilt back. You see them on telly. Called recliners, they advertise them in Ideal Home. Get rid of that old chair you’re sitting in. It was in a rotten state when Bob sat on it. He wasn’t the cleanest man either so some of his smells seeped into it.’

Alan took that as a cue, and began the five minutes process of leaving. He made the ritual promise to bring the children next time, a promise so worn down by time that it was no longer a lie.

When he was gone, Joan poured herself another sherry. She said to Bob, 'Don't you be scoffing all that cake. You're fat enough. You're terrible eating all the cakes and biscuits. I'm going to have to start hiding them. You should be ashamed of yourself. Do you remember when Judy Smith was in here that time, only five she was, and eating a fig roll, and you said it was made of mashed spiders? Poor lass was crying all day after that. She probably never ate a single one for the rest of her life after that.'

She looked at the scratch cards on the table, and an idea came to her. She went back to the supermarket and bought another £20 worth. It was all the money she had but she was going to win so it didn't matter. She came home and drank more sherry. She said to Bob, 'What will you do with yourself when I'm away on my world cruise? You probably won't even notice I'm gone you dirty pig.' She scratched, scratched, scratched. Nothing. Just so close every time.

She fell asleep. When she woke it was dark. She turned the light on. Feeling sick, she looked at the table. The Brandenburg, the empty cups, the dead scratch cards. She turned to Bob. 'It's all your fault. Everything. I wish I'd never met you, you useless tub of lard.'

Joan went up the stairs to the toilet. On the landing, about to come back down the stairs, she felt dizzy. She grabbed for the wall. Her hand slid along it and she fell, step by step, to the bottom. There she lay, twisted and unable to move. The phone was on a table just in front of her. She couldn't get to it. A feeble sound came from her mouth as she tried to call out for help. She could do nothing except weakly scratch on the carpet, scratch, scratch, scratch. Joan died on Sunday afternoon and her body was found the next Saturday.