

SUNDAY



The next morning was a complete contrast to the day before: rain instead of sun, wind instead of calm...and no uncle, aunt or cousins!

Yes!

But what to do? A thought struck her. She hadn't seen Ida – her next-door neighbour – for a few days. Perhaps she needed some shopping and, anyway, Rebecca didn't care about rainy weather.

“Hello, love,” Ida's crinkly face lit up in a lovely smile. “Come on in from that rain.” She led Rebecca slowly away from the deep blue paint of her front door and down the dark corridor to her living room. “Have a seat, love. Like a cuppa tea?”

“Yes, please, Ida.” Rebecca glanced around the room that she had grown to know so well. It hadn't changed since she had first met Ida when she was only a toddler: the brightly patterned black and red carpet; the porcelain cats on the mantelpiece; the faded, family photographs in black and white; some colour ones from the sixties and seventies of her with her husband smiling, happily, out at her; the slightly stuffy but cosy atmosphere that pervaded the room. It was all still the same.

“Would you like a hand to bring the tea in?” called Rebecca.

“No thanks, love. I’ve got my trolley,” replied Ida. Within a minute, she was wheeling in the tea. “Got some of your favourite biscuits too, dearie. And there’s two sugars in your tea, as usual.”

“Thanks, Ida,” smiled Rebecca. “You make the best tea.”

“Earl Grey. Me Mum always thought I was a bit posh when I started using it just after I got married, but Shahin loved it an’ then I got a taste for it.” She stared over at her husband’s picture, her eyes misting over. “I still miss ’im, Becca.”

Rebecca smiled. Only Ida called her ‘Becca’.

“He was very handsome, your Shahin.”

“Yeah. Heart of gold, too.” Ida paused. “Becca, how come you don’t spend more time with people your own age? You shouldn’t be spending so much time with an old lady like me.”

Rebecca thought for a moment and then her answer rushed out of her in one go.

“I don’t know, Ida. The girls round here are into boys, boy bands, make-up and shopping. That’s ok, I mean...I like boys and boy bands too, but I want to do other things right now. I love my gymnastics and taekwondo. I put a lot of time into them ’cos I think I’m good at them. Most of the girls I know in school do the same sports that I do. But they don’t live anywhere near here. And...even they...well, they see the world in a really narrow way, like...anyone a bit different from them isn’t worth knowing and should be avoided. But I don’t feel that way about people...wherever they come from it’s what makes them interesting. But, as for my cousins! They don’t know anything. And Auntie Leanne and Uncle Gary are even worse. They really get on my

nerves... But you're not like that, Ida, I can talk to you about anything."

"You know, Becca," said Ida, raising her eyebrows, "You should give your cousins a chance. They might surprise you one day. Not everyone has the same chances in life as you have. And not all parents are as good as your mother and father."

"I reckon I was really lucky. Y'know, when Shahin asked me to marry him, back in the 1950s, I thought my Mum would never go for it, what, with him coming from Iran an' all."

Rebecca looked surprised. "Why should it matter where he came from? I'm friendly with lots of people from lots of other countries. Wasn't that normal, then?"

"Oh no, love," replied Ida, "It was different times, different attitudes. A lot more prejudice in them days. At that time, black people from the Caribbean was coming here looking for jobs. I remember some boarding houses, sort of like Bed and Breakfast places, putting up signs saying 'No dogs. No Blacks'. That's what lots of people felt like – they was scared and nervous of people looking different and dressing different."

"So I thought my Mum would be a bit shirty with Shahin. But I underestimated her. True to say, she was taken aback at first an' a bit suspicious of him, what with his different accent, slightly darker skin...anyway, she always thought I'd go for blond-haired Reggy Harris from down the road, 'cos we'd been friends since we was kids. He ended up running a chain of betting shops! Quite well-off he became: big house, lots of cars. Nice wife he had, too. We still stayed as friends, though. Died last year, poor Reggy and you should 'ave seen his funeral! Horse-drawn glass carriage...the lot!"

“But anyway,” continued Ida, “when my Mum could see I was determined – always stubborn, me – Mum decided to give Shahin a chance, an’ soon she really loved him. Maybe you could do the same for your cousins. I mean, they’re only young an’ they are family.”

Rebecca wasn’t convinced, but she said nothing. Ida always gave her something to think about.

“Did you know that a new family has just moved in to the Close, Ida?” said Rebecca, changing the subject. “They’ve taken over the Jordans’ old place.”

“Oh, really? What do they look like, then? ’Ow many of them are there?”

“I don’t know. The van went behind the trees so I couldn’t see anything. But,” said Rebecca with a grin, “I’d like to find out.”

“’Ere, what’ve you got in mind, young lady? I know that look!” Ida couldn’t stop smiling back at the twinkle in Rebecca’s eyes.

Half an hour later, the two friends were making their way towards the large, closed gates, with a couple of packets of chocolate biscuits between them.

“Well, love, we’re here.” Ida looked steadily at Rebecca. Rebecca grinned back at her, then, taking hold of the gate handle-ring with the ridged pattern, she turned it. Or at least, she tried to turn it. It wouldn’t budge. Putting her whole, athletic body behind it, she tried again and this time felt it shift, rustily, in its housing. The gate, juddering heavily and loudly like an antique washing machine, gradually opened.

“Needs oil,” remarked Ida, “and weedkiller,” she said, eyeing up the pathway. “The Jordans really let things go to the dogs over the last couple of years.

I s'pose they just got too old to look after such a big place. Yeah...I know just how they felt."

Rebecca caught the note of sadness in her voice and stopped in her tracks. "You're not old, Ida!" she said, putting a hand on Ida's arm.

Ida hesitated before she spoke.

"It's like, I still feel and think I'm twenty, but Becca, I look in the mirror every day and it doesn't lie to me about the bags under me eyes and the crinkly skin. I get up in the morning and it gets harder to put one foot in front of another: I ache in me joints and...and...I still miss Shahin!" Her eyes welled up. Rebecca hugged her.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. It's made you sad, coming here to a house where your friends used to live."

Ida gently removed her arms and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

"No, I'm just being stupid and selfish an' Shahin wouldn't thank me for that. Come on, Becca, let's knock on that door!"

The pathway, lined by huge fir trees, stretched away in a dark, sinister line next to the towering walls of the house. A chill ran up Rebecca's spine. Was it the rain? She wasn't sure. They walked on, arm in arm till they reached the entrance to the house. It was immense. A giant, brick-edged arch surrounded by a white, smooth cladding, with more bricks set in geometric patterns in different parts of the wall. Underneath the archway at the top of four marble steps, stood massive, oak double-doors with small, stained glass windows above door handles that were sisters to the one on the gate. Beside the right-hand door was a long, black rod of metal

– with the same ridged design from the gate – which hung down from the ceiling of the arch. Rebecca looked at it, uncertainly.

“That’s the *door-bell*,” said Ida, raising an eyebrow at her young companion.

“Oh,” replied Rebecca, feeling very stupid.

“Give it a pull, then.” Ida nudged her. Rebecca felt in awe of the size of the house. Reluctantly, she reached out and tugged it, gently.

She heard nothing.

“Give it a *proper* pull!”

Rebecca went bright pink and yanked the rod hard!

Distantly, she could hear the resonant tone of a bell, somewhere deep inside the ‘mansion’. Rebecca and Ida waited...and waited...and waited. Rebecca began examining her sneakers for dirt, while Ida shuffled from side to side, uncomfortably. How long were they going to take? The wind swirled around the entrance, chilling the air, unseasonably. Rebecca glanced over at Ida, again.

“Maybe we should...”

CLUNK, CLUNK!

The sound of heavy bolts being drawn back stopped her in mid-sentence. The door began to open, very slowly. They raised their gaze until they were staring into two, large, very dark eyes, watching them from behind a narrow gap between the door and its frame. Rebecca shuddered.

“H-h-he-hello,” she stuttered.

The eyes continued their appraisal of the two friends. He, or she – they couldn’t tell which – said nothing.

“I’m Ida and this is Rebecca. We’re your neighbours and we wanted to say hello and welcome you to Pine Tree Close.” Ida felt no fear.

“Mmm,” came the reply from behind the door: a low, rumbling, like the engine of a massive lorry that made the whole entrance shake – hardly a human voice at all.

“W-w-we b-brought some biscuits for you,” Rebecca stammered, holding out the packets.

“Mmmmm.”

“Well, p’raps we should just leave the biscuits for you,” suggested Ida.

“Mmm.”

Ida motioned to Rebecca to place the packets near the doorway. Then they backed off, slowly.

“Well, goodbye!” called out Rebecca, hanging on to Ida’s arm. She was shaking, but trying not to show it. The huge arch receded as they carried on their backward trek, until they could no longer see the doorway. Then Rebecca turned quickly and practically dragged Ida to the gate.

“Slow down, love!! I’m no spring chicken! You’re killin’ me arthritis!”

“S-sorry, Ida,” mumbled Rebecca, pushing her into the street and hauling the gate shut. “I-I just felt...”

“...we was in danger?” proposed Ida.

“Mmmmm,” came the mumbled response.

“Yeah. Wasn’t what I’d call a *warm* welcome. Let’s go and have another cuppa tea and some cake...they’ve ’ad all me biscuits!”

“What! You CANNOT be serious!!”

“It’s no good shouting, Rebecca! There’s no other way...Your Mum and I have already discussed it.”

“Don’t *I* get a say?”

“Of course you do.”

“I say NO!”

“You’re outvoted.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Your cousins are going to be staying here for the next few days.”

“But *why*?” Rebecca fumed.

“Because...” her father took a deep breath and ran his hands through his thick, dark hair, “...because your Auntie Leanne has had an accident.”

“Oh yes?” Rebecca raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “What *sort* of accident?”

“She...was rushing after Emily and Jamie who were trying to stop the ice-cream van, when she slipped on a...banana skin...”

“Ahrrech!” A noise erupted from Rebecca that was a cross between blowing her nose and a cough. One hand went over her mouth and the other leant against the kitchen breakfast bar, as she tried not to laugh. A grin played, edgily, at the corners of her father’s mouth. Even *he* had to admit that the thought of his sister doing a comedy slip on a banana skin while running for an ice-cream was hilarious.

“...and...she landed...on her coccyx!”

“Mmmha-ha-hmmm!” Rebecca doubled up and stuffed a tea towel into her mouth.

“REBECCA!” Terry Roberts did his best to look stern in front of his daughter; it wasn’t easy. After wiping away the tears from her eyes, Rebecca calmed down, slowly removed the tea towel and attempted a serious face. “She’s in pain and has to take it easy, so we’ve agreed to take the kids till she can walk again.”

“And poor Uncle Gary isn’t old enough to take care of his own children?” she asked sarcastically.

“Well...”

“Uncle Gary couldn’t start a fire with a flamethrower in the middle of a bonfire covered in petrol and firefighters!” interjected Sarah Roberts, narrowing her green eyes. Her husband blushed; his wife was right.

“Whatever his weaknesses, Sarah, he needs our help, OK? Rebecca?”

“OK!” Rebecca snapped in exasperation.

“They’ll be arriving in the next couple of hours,” he continued, “and Jasmine’s going to share with you.”

Rebecca groaned inwardly, then stomped up the stairs to tidy her room and hide her valuables away from Emily’s grasping fingers: she hadn’t returned her ring yet.

Two hours came and went rapidly and – surprise, surprise – Uncle Gary was on time. He was always on time when he needed a favour. And this was a major favour as far as Rebecca was concerned!

BRRINNGG!

“Open the door, Rebs!” called her father.

Heavily, she made her way down the stairs, counting them, mechanically, as she drew nearer and nearer the dreaded moment of...

“Alright, Becksy-Babes!” Uncle Gary gave her a whopping, wet kiss on the cheek; inside, she felt sick. He always gave wet kisses and she HATED ‘Becksy-Babes’! What was he like? She wasn’t a kid any more!

The rest of the hoard pushed past her. Jasmine ignored her; Emily avoided her eyes and kept her hands behind her back; Jamie waved another matchbox in her face and grinned. Her father gave his brother-in-law a brief hug.

“They’ll be fine with us, don’t worry,”

“Oh, I ain’t worried, Terry, boy. I trust yuh. I ’preciate the ’elp: what, with Leanne in hospital and I’ve got so much work on...” Uncle Gary shook his head, sadly.

“Yeah, yeah, no problem, Gary,” replied Terry Roberts, not commenting on the fact that when Sarah Roberts was in hospital for a minor operation, Gary and Leanne had been ‘too busy’ to cope with Rebecca for a couple of days.

“The roof building business ain’t going to run itself, y’know?” Uncle Gary had said at the time. Nor would Terry Roberts’ landscape gardening business run itself and so he lost several days of important work and a lot of money. But as usual he brushed over Uncle Gary’s excuses – then and now. But he could feel Sarah Roberts behind him, bristling with anger.

“Don’t let us keep you from visiting Leanne,” Sarah Roberts said more loudly than she had intended. “Visiting hours aren’t on much longer.”

“You said you was going to watch the football on the telly, tonight, Dad!” shouted Jamie, gleefully.

“Wha’? Oh, no! You must’ve misheard me, Jamie, boy. I said I’d be visiting your Mum in the ’ospital, so I *wouldn’t ’ave time* to watch the football on the TV, tonight.” He looked uncomfortable. Jasmine looked daggers at him, but said nothing.

“Anyway, I better be off. Visiting hours, like you said, Sarah, an’ Leanne with that crack on her coccyx. Be good you lot...” His voice trailed away as he realised that his children weren’t listening to him. He nodded at Terry and Sarah Roberts and sidled out.

“Well,” said Terry Roberts to the children, “what would you like to do, now?”

“I wanna go home!”

Rebecca rolled her eyes to the sky.

“Jamie, that’s how you play the game...”

“But I want money!” Jamie started wailing.

“You lost it all because you landed on everyone else’s properties...”

“Waaaaah!”

Rebecca looked, pleadingly, at her Dad.

“Give him some money from the bank,” he said, “he’s only little.”

Where’ve I heard that before? Rebecca thought, angrily. *Aunt Leanne and Dad really are sister and brother.*

She handed over £500 to Jamie, whose greedy eyes lit up.

“I want more, too!” Emily piped up.

“Go on then,” said Terry Roberts, pretty much knowing what was going to come next. He was right.

“Well if they’re having more, then I want more, too!” Jasmine’s green eyes flashed dangerously. Her Uncle Terry knew that look and didn’t want to risk more strops and yelling. Jasmine in a temper was an awful sight. He handed both sisters £500.

“What about you, love?” he asked Rebecca, with a wary smile.

“No thanks. *Someone’s* got to play this game according to the rules!” She gave her father a menacing grin.

The game lasted another hour. As Rebecca expected, Jamie quickly lost his money, but, despite his protestations – and to Rebecca’s amazement – his sisters ganged up against him and refused to give him another ‘loan’. He stormed off in a huff and mournfully tried to catch Uncle Terry’s eye for sympathy; Uncle Terry ignored him. Rebecca suppressed a smile.

Emily went next as she tried to buy a house on Fleet Street, but instead got caught on Jasmine's hotel in Mayfair.

And then there were three. The competitors watched each other, intently: Rebecca sat, unblinking; Jasmine sat, unblinking; Terry Roberts sat, sweating. He was in a difficult position – his daughter on one side, his niece on the other. He would have to be completely even-handed. One hint that he was taking sides and his life would not be worth living. The two girls were rivals and deadly ones, at that.

“Come on, Dad. Throw the dice!”

“Uhh...actually, love, I just remembered. I've got to help your Mum with something in the kitchen. You two carry on and finish the game.” He departed, rapidly, before she could challenge his lame excuse.

“All right 'Becks, your turn,” smiled Jasmine, sweetly. The smile reminded Rebecca of a song that she could not quite recall; but she knew it was about a crocodile trying to lure its prey to its doom with its friendly grin. One wrong throw of the dice and she would be out. Amongst many others, Jasmine had hotels on Bond Street, Oxford Street, Mayfair and Park Lane! All the most expensive ones just waiting for Rebecca to land on. Rebecca, meanwhile, only had hotels on the Angel Islington, Old Kent Road and a house on Fleet Street. She shook the dice shaker, praying to land on ‘Community Chest’ and maybe win some much-needed cash. The dice clattered and bounced on the Monopoly board, scattering her hotels.

“Five!” yelled Jasmine, triumphantly, grabbing Rebecca's car and moving it straight on to Park Lane. “Gimme your cash!”

SIMON TRICK

Reluctantly, Rebecca handed the last of her money to Jasmine. The bank had no money left so Rebecca wouldn't be able to pay her any more on a future throw. Jasmine shook the dice shaker and rolled them.

"Eight!" That put her just past Old Kent Road. Rebecca sighed. This was it. Only a miracle could save her now...

"All right, you two. Bed! It's half past ten!" It was Mum.

"No! I'm going to win the game!" screeched Jasmine.

"Finish it tomorrow."

Jasmine opened her mouth to argue, but shut it quickly. The icy gleam in Sarah Roberts' eyes said, 'Don't mess with me'.

Jasmine backed down, sulkily and rushed out of the room. Rebecca smiled gratefully at her mum and put away the board and its pieces into the box.