

The Letter

I followed Mum into the kitchen. She was turning the letter over in her hands, but not reading it. Dad, like Silver the cat, has an uncanny knack of knowing when to appear and when to disappear. He had missed the visit from the neighbours, now he came in followed by the man with the red BMW.

'I met this ...' Dad started. But when he saw Mum's face he left the man in the hall, closed the kitchen door and asked abruptly, 'What's up?'

'No 9 just gave me a solicitor's letter,' Mum told him.

Dad took the letter from me and read it through swiftly.

'Are they suing us?' Mum asked.

'Suing? Who?' Dad replied.

‘The neighbours.’

Dad looked baffled. ‘Why should they? They didn’t know your uncle Albert, did they?’

It was Mum’s turn to look baffled. ‘Uncle Albert wouldn’t complain about the noise we make. He lives hundreds of miles away in Waltham Abbey. Anyway he’s tone deaf.’

Her face brightened for a moment. ‘He wouldn’t mind Ian being an Oily Rag. He’d be a wonderful neighbour!’

Dad was re-reading the letter from Higgins & Stop. ‘Uncle Albert live next door? It’s a bit late for that, I’m afraid,’ he said, handing Mum the letter to read.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘He’s dead.’

‘And he’s left his entire estate to me,’ Mum said slowly, looking at the letter again as if she didn’t quite believe it.

I’d only met my great uncle Albert a few times. He lived in Essex in the south of England, too far away for a day visit. And we never stayed overnight with him, Mum said it was too unhygienic. Great Uncle Albert was a miser. He kept deep

within his house, surrounded by the junk that was stacked high all around him. Narrow corridors wound between the piles of newspapers, overflowing boxes and souvenirs from his travels. He had some brilliant things too. My favourite was a sailing ship woven out of glass. About a metre high, it stood on the mantelpiece in the sitting-room, covered by a glass dome. The sea was also glass, spun like white candy floss. Pirates – Long John Silver; sailors – Admiral Lord Nelson; all the swash-buckling films ever watched were compressed into that ship in my imagination.

‘It’s a death trap, that place,’ Dad said once after we visited. ‘One dropped match and that lot’d go up like a bonfire.’

‘It’s too damp for that,’ Mum snorted. ‘Did you see the mould on the walls?’

Great Uncle Albert looked like a city gent who’d fallen into a pile of coal dust and carried on without stopping to wash himself. The suit he wore was constantly thick, dark and shiny.

‘Great Uncle Albert’s very old and frail,’ Mum always said, but this made him sound

weak and to me he was the opposite – fascinatingly different – a true eccentric. He talked about his dead brothers and sisters as if they were still alive, and confused all our names. We hadn't visited him for years and, since he never wrote or phoned ('a waste of good money'), we didn't know he had died until the solicitor's letter arrived.

"Estate" means everything he owned,' Dad was explaining.

'Dear old Albert,' said Mum affectionately.

'How old was he?' I asked.

Mum tried to calculate. 'Let's see. He was Granny's older brother. She was seventy-seven when she died and that was when you were still in a buggy, so that's ...'

She gave up. 'Oh, about ninety.'

'Not bad, considering he still rode his bicycle until last year,' said Dad admiringly.

'He used to say "I'm ready to go any time",' Mum recalled, looking weepy.

'The ones who say that always last the longest,' said Dad.

'But I never thought he'd leave me

everything – dear Albert!’ said Mum.

‘How much?’ asked Ian, entering the kitchen. The drums had been silent for some time, he had obviously overheard the news.

‘Thousands – when we’ve sold the house.’

I let out a whoop of delight, then picked Mum up and twirled her round. Ian was chanting, ‘It could be you!’

Just then Helen entered the kitchen with the BMW driver trailing behind her. ‘This is Harry,’ she said.

‘Nice to meet ya, Harry!’ said Ian, slapping him on the back. Though he was a strange-looking bloke, we were in the mood to welcome anyone.

I put Mum down. ‘What’s going on?’ asked Helen. ‘Have we won the lottery?’

‘As good as. Great Uncle Albert’s dead!’ Ian replied.

Very carefully, Harry said, ‘Presumably he was not a favourite uncle.’

That changed the mood.

‘Quite,’ said Dad, casting a sheepish look at Mum. ‘Wonderful old gentleman, Albert,’ he said. ‘Er, sorry, Barry.’

‘Harry,’ corrected Helen.

‘Sorry, Harry. What must you think of us? May we offer you a cup of tea?’

Mum and Dad were moving into Formal Hospitality Mode, which was odd: they didn’t usually do this for Helen’s boyfriends, but then Helen’s boyfriends weren’t usually middle-aged men.

When Helen objected to Harry being given a mug and went in search of the best china, Ian and I escaped upstairs.

‘Who’s he to tell us how we should feel about Albert?’ Ian asked resentfully. We’d both liked Great Uncle Albert. He’d never spoken to us in a special voice for children. He barked at us just as he barked at everyone else. He would whack me over the head with a rolled-up newspaper. I always recognised this as a sign of friendship. On one visit he gave me a Davy pit helmet – a real one that miners wore to go down into the coal pit. I wondered whether he’d been a coal miner but when I asked Mum she said he’d worked for the Co-op all his life.

I was sorry Great Uncle Albert was dead.

Alive he would never have moved to Elm Close, to Dublin, or anywhere else. In fact, he'd refused Mum's invitation to come and live with us, much to Dad's relief. Albert wouldn't have left those mysterious piles of belongings, but now he was separated from them forever.

'Miserable git,' I said, and I didn't mean Albert.