

John and Joan

ONCE upon a time? What, just once? As they say, tell that to the marines. And that is ironic because my uncle John served as a marine. What is also ironic is that Uncle John was an honest man and my favourite uncle. OK, I can't say for certain that he was always honest, because we can't say that about anyone and I only knew him for about six years. I was still young when he killed himself. But never then and not since did I ever hear anything about him which didn't suggest he was straight up guy. So I'll stick with it: Uncle John was honest and a good man.

He was serving in Malta when I was born, and I didn't meet him till he came to see us. I was about five and he was very big and tall, and though I don't remember a lot, I was excited. He was like something from the films, a real hero. It wasn't just that he'd been fighting in wars, but was 'a marine'. I didn't know much about them, but when everyone at school got to know my uncle was 'a marine', they all wanted to be my friend. So I knew 'a marine' was special.

He stayed with us for a few weeks and told me stories when I went to bed. He told me that when he and Mum were young, they lived in a big, dark forest and one day went for a walk and got lost. Then, he said, they found an old cottage that was made of marzipan and gingerbread and were eaten by a wolf. I didn't wonder then why he was sitting on my bed telling me a story if he had been eaten by a wolf, but it didn't matter. It made him all the more special. Once he told me that he and Mum were so poor that their mum sent him to the market to sell their cow. On the way he met an old man who offered to buy the cow and paid Uncle John with some magic beans. When he planted the beans, said Uncle John, a really tall beanstalk grew into the clouds and he climbed it to find out what was at the top. Then he was chased by a giant, climbed down again, chopped the beanstalk to the ground and killed the giant. Oh, and he got rich and he and Mum weren't poor any more. OK, but I was five and Uncle John was special.

A few years later, Uncle John was demobbed and came to work for Dad and Mum to help run their garage and gas station. He lived in a small house next to it. I used to go and see him after school some days. He always gave me a glass of squash and a few biscuits and told me funny stories about his time with the marines. I liked Uncle John better than my Dad's brothers and sisters.

To this day I think of Uncle John when someone lights up a cigarette, because that was his smell, fresh fag smoke, that and Old Spice. I don't know why, but Dad's brothers and sisters didn't seem to like me and my brother, and I didn't like the way they spoke to Mum and Dad. They seemed to think we weren't as good as them. But Uncle John didn't, I liked Uncle John and I was very sad when he hung himself. I cried and once couldn't stop crying but Dad said it wasn't my fault Uncle John had hung himself. It took me a long time to believe that and even now I feel guilty.

What happened was that one day I went to his house. I was about ten and wasn't going to see him as much. Uncle John was always at home in the afternoons because

he was in charge of the gas station from five till it shut at midnight. Usually the front door was unlocked and I could just walk in, but this time I couldn't open it. So I rang the bell. No one came. I went round the side of the house to the back door to see if that was open, and in the kitchen I saw a tall woman. I knocked on the window and asked if Uncle John was in, but she just turned and went out of the kitchen. I then knocked on the kitchen door but she didn't come to open it, and I went home. I was sure I had seen her, and asked Mum who the woman was who was staying at Uncle John's. She looked at me but didn't say anything.

'Just get on with your tea.'

The next day was a Saturday but we went to go shopping Reading. On the Sunday after church I went to Uncle John's after I'd changed from my good things. This time the front door was unlocked, and I went straight in. Uncle John was sitting in the lounge watching telly with a bottle of beer and smoking a cigarette. I told him I'd come round on the Friday afternoon but he wasn't in. I asked him who the woman in the kitchen was.

'Oh, that was Joan.' He didn't look at me.

'Who's Joan?'

But it was obvious Uncle John didn't want to talk about her. And I knew he was lying. I don't know how I knew, but I did know. You always do. It's something about people.

'She's a friend,' Uncle John told me. 'She came to see me.'

After that he said nothing, and the silence was odd and didn't stop and I began to feel uncomfortable.

'Look, you'd better get home for your Sunday dinner. Your Mum and Dad will be wondering where you are.'

'I told them I was coming to see you.'

'Yes, but get off now so you won't be late.'

He got up and went the front door and I followed.

'I'll see you next week, shall I?'

'Yeah, I suppose.'

Then he shut door behind me. That was the last time I saw him.

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'You're back early, John not in?'

'He didn't want me to be late for dinner.'

'Won't be for a while yet. What was John saying?'

I didn't know what to tell Mum. I didn't know how to tell her that Uncle John was a bit odd. I didn't know how to tell her I thought he was lying about something.

I didn't go round to his house on the Monday afternoon, or the Tuesday and when I got home from school on the Wednesday, I heard that he'd been arrested and being kept in the police station.

'What did he do?'

'He didn't do anything, he just had a bit too much to drink and the police thought it would be safer if they put him in a cell.'

'How is he safer there?'

'Oh, don't keep asking questions.'

That night Dad had to ask Doreen from the shop to look after the gas station till midnight because Uncle John still wasn't home. He had to ask her the next day, too, and the next, because they found Uncle John's body hanging from a tree in Lambridge Woods.