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Afternoon Tea at the Sunflower Café

Written by Milly Johnson

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Afternoon Tea at the Sunflower Café

milly johnson



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For my nanna Hubbard.
A woman who loved her cakes and
was the best cleaner in Christendom.
I miss you.

A smart girl leaves before she is left.

MARILYN MONROE

Prologue

The awning that hangs over the window is a tired yellow and white stripe and much of the paint has flaked off the sign above the door announcing that this is The Sunflower Café. On a quiet lane in the village of Pogley Top, it barely registers as a place of interest. But should your eye venture past the unspectacular façade and you push open the door and walk in, you would find yellow walls as cheerful as sunshine, pretty sky-blue curtains dotted with sunflowers and a long window affording the village's prettiest view of the adjacent stream. You would find a warmth as if the café has a spirit that welcomes you and is happiest when filled with laughter and chatter. Of the women who visit here to partake of the owner's delicious and generous afternoon teas, many of them are like the café – you would never guess what beauty and strength sit beneath the ordinary outside.

Hung up are many pictures of sunflowers but one, near the door, in particular catches the eye. Underneath the smiling giant petalled head is written a poem:

Be Like the Sunflower
Brave, bright
bold, cheery
Be golden and shine
Keep your roots strong
Your head held high
Your face to the sun
And the shadows will fall behind you

This is the story of three women who never realised they had the capacity to be the tallest, boldest, brightest flowers in the field.

Chapter 1

When Jimmy Diamond told Della on Thursday morning that she would have to cancel her day off on Friday, he could not have known what wheels he had started in motion.

When Della protested and said that she'd had it booked for weeks; it was her old boss's retirement party, Jimmy still insisted that she couldn't take it.

He said no.

In the fifteen years she had worked for him, he had never said no before. He might have man-grumbled a bit under his breath when she asked for a favour, but he knew what side his bread was buttered where Della was concerned. He would never have found anyone else who worked over and above the call of duty as she did, watching his back, doing his dirty work, covering his tracks more than Della did and if she had to take a rare afternoon off for a dental appointment or if there was a panic on with her elderly mother, it had never been a problem before.

Had he said yes, this story would never have been told and life would have trundled on in much the same way as it had for years. One woman would have continued to exist unhappily on the begging end of a non-relationship and one

woman would have eaten the equivalent weight of a small emergent country in truffles. But Jimmy Diamond had said no.

The office junior Ivanka had turned up to work that Thursday morning acting limp and tearful with a sickness and diarrhoea bug, obviously unfit to work, so Della had sent her back home again. Ivanka had protested a little before relenting and saying that she would be in after the weekend. Then Jimmy breezed in and announced that he was off that afternoon to schmooze on a golf course and wouldn't be back until Tuesday. When Della reminded him that she had booked Friday off, Jimmy had thrown up his hands and said that someone was needed in the office and as he couldn't be there and she had sent Ivanka home, who did that leave? Nope, there was nothing for it: as office manageress, it was Della's duty to be there, especially in such a busy period. Once upon a time, cleaners had been ten a penny, now demand outstripped supply and they were like gold dust. Della's attendance was needed more in manning the phones than it was in Whitby, eating vol au vents and drinking warm white wine out of a plastic tumbler at the party of a bloke who probably wouldn't even remember who she was, said Jimmy firmly.

'Of course he'll remember who I am,' said Della, her mouth a defiant thin line. 'I worked for him longer than I've worked for you.'

Della saw the features of his face soften and she guessed he was about to change tactic.

'Oh, Dells,' he sighed and held out his hands in a gesture of apologetic surrender. 'Of *course* he'd remember you. But he won't *need* you like I do. I *have* to go on this golfing weekend with Pookie Barnes. I owe him after he's shifted all his business to us from Cleancheap and he's making noises about recommending our girls to clean the offices of his

contacts. I have to keep him on side. I hear that Roy Frog is hopping about it.'

Jimmy laughed at his own joke. He and Roy Frog's firm Cleancheap had a long-standing rivalry. Della knew that it was thanks to Jimmy's schmoozing that Pookie Barnes, Cleancheap's biggest customer, had jumped ship faster than a rat on the *Titanic* wearing a lifejacket.

Still Della tried to reason with him. 'Jimmy . . .'

'You shouldn't have let that Ivanka go home.' He wagged his finger at her, intimating that this situation was of her own doing. He always referred to the office junior as *that Ivanka* as if she still wasn't part of the Diamond Shine crew despite working there for six months.

'I couldn't exactly chain her to the desk, could I?' replied Della. 'Besides which, she wouldn't have been much use in her state.'

'I've worked through worse.'

'Well good for you, but the lass wasn't putting it on. Any idiot could have seen that. Bed was the best place for her.'

'Aye, I suppose you're right. She should spend the day in bed.' He grinned. 'Send your old inferior boss a present instead with apologies for your absence.'

'It might not arrive in time.'

'Send him a bottle of champagne. On me. Overnight delivery.'

If Della's eyes had opened any further they would have burst out of their orbits and dropped onto the desk. Jimmy Diamond was as tight as a duck's stitched-up arse. He would sooner have cut his own balls off than paid next day delivery on anything, never mind champagne for a bloke he didn't even know. He must be desperate for her to cover the office if he was offering to go to those lengths.

'I can tell what you're thinking,' said Jimmy, guessing correctly. 'I'm not exactly famous for charging champagne to

the company account for people I don't know, but I *really* need you here, we're too busy for you to be off at the moment. Come on, Dells, don't be mad with me.'

He gave her his best round puppy-dog eyes.

'Okay, Della, what do I have to do for us not to fall out about this? Do you want me to beg? Look, I'm begging,' and Jimmy got down on his knees and clenched his hands together as if praying to her.

'Oh get up, you fool,' said Della, trying her best to remain annoyed.

'I love you, Della. You know I do.'

Oh, if only, thought Della.

'And you love me, which is why you're going to send that bloke some champagne instead of going to his crap party.'

He was right.

'Please please please, Dells. Be my friend and tell me that you agree with me,' Jimmy insisted until her face broke into a resigned smile and she knew that he had won her over. Again. He always could because with the tiniest bit of flirting, a little bodily contact, the mere hint of appeal in his voice, she was putty in his hands and had been for fifteen years.

'Don't go mad though. No frigging Dom Perignon. Bubbles is bubbles.'

That sounded more like him. He hasn't gone totally mad after all, thought Della.

'Oh, and order some chocs for the missus will you, love. Top notch, big box.'

Della sighed. 'Okay. If I must.'

She had really wanted to go to Whitby, but Jimmy needed her. And Jimmy was the number one man in her life, as she was his number one woman. Despite what Connie, his Lady Muck of a wife, might have thought.

Chapter 2

In one single hour, Cheryl Parker's whole existence had tipped upside down and her insides had been scooped out. At least that's what it felt like as she stood in her tiny kitchen, hand shaking as she gripped the piece of paper which had ended her life as she knew it.

She wished life were like TV. She wished she could press the rewind button back to just before she had opened the envelope. She wished she had put it on one side until she returned from work so that Gary could have found it first and had time to think up an excuse which she might have swallowed and life would have carried on as normal. But she *had* opened it and what she had found could not be unread. An hour ago she had been making breakfast toast and tea for two whilst Gary was taking a shower and it was just a normal Thursday morning; two more days at work to get out of the way and then the familiar joy of the weekend to look forward to: fish and chips from Cod's Gift with Gary for Saturday lunch as usual, a bottle of wine and some beers in front of *Ant and Dec* on the TV. Now she was alone – single – and couldn't think past the moment. And her heart had been ripped out and stamped all over.

The postman hardly ever came first thing in the morning, but today he had. And he had delivered three envelopes: one containing a catalogue full of rubbishy gadgets, a dental reminder for Cheryl and *that* one from the building society. A quarterly statement. And Cheryl had opened it and found that the account which should have had four thousand seven hundred and twenty pounds in it, had a nil balance.

She didn't know how long she stood there, unable to move, listening to Gary mooching about upstairs. She imagined him towel-drying his thick light-brown hair, spraying a cloud of Lynx over himself, getting dressed, blissfully unaware of what trauma his long-term girlfriend was going through. Cheryl heard his feet on the stairs, watched the door into the kitchen open. She saw his eyes lock on to the paper she was holding, then flick up to her face and from the expression she was wearing, he knew instantly what she had discovered.

The words came out in a croak. 'Where's it gone, Gary? Where's the money?' It was a rhetorical question because she knew. She would have bet her life savings – *oh, the irony* – that the money was in the till of William Hill.

Gary's eyes began to flicker, which they did when he was anxious. She knew that his brain would be scrabbling around for something viable to tell her.

'You won't believe me . . .' he began eventually. No, she wouldn't. Because she had wanted to believe him every single time and every single time he had let her down.

'Try me,' she said. Deep down she wished he would say those words which would make it all right. But also, deeper down, she knew he wouldn't.

'You weren't supposed to know. I was hoping to have it back in the account before you noticed,' he said. His hands were in his hair. 'Oh God, Chez, I am so sorry. I thought I could do it. One last time. For us. For the ba—'

'No!' The loudness in her own voice surprised her. 'Don't you dare say it. Don't you DARE.'

He had used those same words eighteen months ago. He had taken the money she had scrimped and squirrelled away for IVF treatment in the hope of doubling it, trebling it even, he said. He'd been given a tip – a sure thing from someone in the know. She would never forget the name of the horse as long as she lived – *Babyface*. He had put every penny on its nose and it had come in second. And he had cried and she had comforted him and told him that she forgave him but this was the last chance – no more gambling. And he had given her his word that he would never bet on another horse or dog ever. And she had started saving all over again and had been stupid enough to give him the benefit of the doubt and keep their joint account going as a sign of her trust in his ability to change.

But he would never change, she knew that now. They'd reached the end of the road. Actually they'd done that eighteen months ago and now they were well off the beaten track, stumbling over increasingly rough terrain until they had arrived at this point and could go no further. For ten years she had listened to his Del-boy Trotter promises that 'this time next year they would be millionaires' and yet they were still living in the same tiny two-up, two-down rented house with no garden and damp patches on the walls because Gary had been convinced he could win his fortune. For ten years she had been trapped in a vicious circle of her saving a bit of money in a teapot, him gambling his wage away, her having to borrow back from the teapot, him promising to alter his ways and doing it for a couple of months, him gambling his wage away . . . This time her heart would not be penetrated by the sight of the tears slipping down his face.

When she looked back later, she couldn't remember in

detail what words had been said that day. She told him it was over and he knew somehow that she meant it this time. He asked her if he should leave and she said yes. He packed a few things in a suitcase and wiped his eyes, telling her that he was sorry and he loved her and he'd put the money back whatever happened. He promised. She hadn't believed him. She hadn't attached any faith to his words, she'd seen them for the bullshit they were. Then he had walked out with his head bent low to the same battered car they'd had for the past eight years. And it hadn't been new when they'd bought it.

Cheryl listened to the car starting, heard the engine chugging: the hole in the exhaust was getting worse. Her ear followed the rattle until it was no longer discernible and she hiccupped a single sob, as she felt whatever it was that had held them together finally stretch to its limit and then snap.

Don't you dare, she said to herself. *Don't you dare cry one more tear over that man. Haven't you shed enough?*

Enough to fill five mop buckets over the years. And she had enough tears inside her now to fill another. She daren't let a single one drop out because it would be quickly joined by thousands more. Something inside her groaned, probably her stomach, but it sounded as if her heart had cracked. And she felt as if it had, too.

She threw the building society statement down on the work surface and picked up her bag full of cleaning stuff. She was doing her monthly blitz on Mr Ackworth's house this morning, which she hated because he barked orders at her as if she were a dog, then a four-hander at her favourite client's with lazy Ruth Fallis, then a one-off clean in an office. It was going to be a long, hard day.

She needed to get to work, keep busy and not think about anything but the jobs in hand. *If only life could be*

spruced up and made perfect with a J-cloth and a spray of Mr Sheen, she thought as she realised that if today wasn't bad enough already, she'd have to get the bus to work from now on.