

Of Bins and Bouquets

by Sue Townsend

The flowers arrived at 11.30 in the morning. Sandra ran downstairs to answer the door. She had been cleaning the bath and still had a cleaning rag in her hand. It was a massive bouquet, the delivery woman looked at Sandra curiously, noting the lank hair, the unmade face, the apron and the cleaning rag.

"Mrs Lovejoy?" she asked.

"Yes," said Sandra.

"These are for you," said the woman, and turned as though disappointed towards her little delivery van parked at the kerb.

The flowers were extraordinarily beautiful, Sandra was overwhelmed by their pastel extravagance and their heady smell.

"They can't be for me," she shouted after the woman. It wasn't her birthday, and she hadn't done anything to deserve congratulations. The delivery woman assured her that she hadn't mistaken the address and so Sandra closed the door and took the flowers into the dark kitchen at the back of the house. Pink roses. Spray carnations. Gypsophila. Freesias. Daisies. All bound together with a pink satin ribbon. There was an envelope stapled to the ribbon and inside, a card: "I love you Sandra," it said. It was typewritten and unsigned. Sandra blushed with pleasure. It wasn't her wedding anniversary, and anyway her husband had never bought her flowers, even when the children were born. He thought flowers were a waste because they died. House plants he tolerated, could see the point of, they were, after all, a type of furniture. But flowers, by their very ephemeral nature, were not cost-effective and he was against them. Sandra was baffled. She stared at the card. "I love you Sandra." But she wasn't the type of woman that people loved. She wasn't beautiful or fascinating or clever or witty. She looked at herself in Alan's shaving mirror which hung over the kitchen sink. Her face was pale and ordinary. She filled the sink and put the huge posy in to soak. Then she went upstairs to finish cleaning the bath. But she didn't clean it, she rinsed it and then tipped her precious bath oil into the tub, turned the taps on and watched the bubbles froth.

"I love you Sandra." Who loved her?

She stayed an hour in the bath. She washed and conditioned her hair. Removed rough skin, dealt with unwanted body hair and ignored the ringing of the telephone. When she eventually went downstairs perfumed and dressed in her second-best frock, she felt less intimidated by the flowers, and more able to accept the astonishing fact that they had been sent to *her*.

When she arrived at the baker's shop where she worked part-time, her fellow workers remarked on her enhanced appearance. Behind her back they speculated

about the possibility of Sandra's having taken a lover. Male customers came under closer scrutiny than usual and the shop that afternoon was full of laughter. By five o'clock the women were almost hysterical, laughing at any trivial thing, like schoolgirls, though there wasn't one of them under 45. Sandra didn't dare to mention the flowers, though she never stopped thinking about them. When she got home she found Alan at the sink shaving. The flowers were heaped high and dry on the draining board. He was in a bad mood.

"What's all this?" he asked, jabbing towards the flowers with his razor.

"You didn't send them then?" she checked.

"Me?" he said. "There's fifty quid's worth there!"

Alan knew the price of everything, he was a cost analyst. He was very careful with money: Sandra was not even allowed to buy a pedal bin. "A cardboard box lined with newspaper serves the same purpose," Alan had pointed out, and Sandra couldn't deny that it did. But even so, she lusted after a pedal bin, a scarlet one she had seen in a hardware shop. She had gone into the shop several times and had surreptitiously pressed her foot on the pedal.

All their money was pooled. Allan paid the bills and gave Sandra housekeeping, but it was never enough. Her daughter Catherine was away at college but she couldn't manage on her grant and so Sandra secretly sent her five pounds a week tucked inside the notelets she had been given for Christmas. She asked her not to acknowledge the receipt of this money. Alan wouldn't like it. Catherine was taking "Women's Studies" at Bristol University and on her rare visits home she quarrelled with her father and called him "the worst kind of chauvinist". She urged her mother to assert herself. Sandra was always ashamed of the relief she felt when this tall, confident, pretty girl packed her rucksack and strode out of the house in her big, laced-up boots.

Alan finished his early evening shave and then asked about the flowers. Sandra showed him the card. He laughed when he read, "I love you Sandra". He said, "It's obviously a mistake, who would send *you* flowers?"

Sandra was hurt by this. As she prepared their evening meal tears rolled down her face, smudging the mascara she had applied so clumsily earlier in the day.

Alan was disturbed by her tears. Sandra never cried. He tried to cheer her up by talking about his work, but even this didn't snap her out of her gloomy introspection. They ate in silence until Alan said, "You're not leaving that chop, are you?" He said it accusingly, as though Sandra had committed a crime.

"Yes, you have it if you want it," she said.

"I don't *want* it," he said irritably, "but it can't be wasted, can it?"

Sandra had a vision of dropping the chop inside the scarlet pedal bin, but instead placed the congealing lamb onto her husband's plate. As she moved about the kitchen he watched her carefully. She looked different, almost pretty. Why was she wearing a decent frock in the house. "Are you going out?" he asked. "Yes," she replied. She hadn't intended to go out, she hardly ever went out in the evening, with or without Alan.

"Where are you going?" he was astonished.

"To meet a friend," she lied. "After I've arranged the flowers."

There weren't enough vases so Sandra filled jugs and pickle jars and milk bottles with the sweet-smelling blooms. The small house was instantly beautified, its general shabbiness temporarily disguised. Alan sat in the lounge flanked by roses and carnations, pretending to watch television. Sandra put her best coat on and collected her handbag.

"Well, bye," she said. *And she went.* She didn't know where to go, she felt conspicuous wearing her best clothes on a weekday. She passed by the hardware shop and looked at the pedal bin and then caught the bus into town. The town centre was full of young people. It was as though a decree had been passed forbidding the middle-aged and the old the freedom of the city. Sandra felt quite daring as she walked along - as if she were breaking a curfew. She noticed a huddle of young people waiting by the clock tower - in her day, 25 years ago, this had been the traditional meeting place, where you met your boyfriend before he got his courage up to be introduced to your parents. Sandra had always met Alan here. Had waited with a beating heart to see him alight from his bus. She remembered the careful preparations she had made to look nice for him, spending hours on her hair and makeup and sometimes changing her clothes as much as three or four times. The agonies she had gone through when he was a few minutes late!

The clock struck half-past seven and she saw several of the young people glance at their watches. They anxiously scanned the pavements for their loved ones. The night was cold and a cutting north east wind had blown up. The young people shivered in their fashionable but skimpy clothes. When did teenagers stop wearing coats? Sandra wondered. One pretty girl was wearing a thin dress which stopped halfway down her thighs. She shivered and hopped from leg to leg, her high heels clattering on the cobbled pedestrian precinct. Sandra wanted to mother her, to remove her own coat and give it to the girl but instead she walked into the main shopping street and began to covet the goods in the shop windows. It was ten minutes past eight when she passed the clock tower again and the girl was still there. Here bare legs were blue and she clutched her handbag to her breasts as though the bag were a source of warmth.

"She's been stood up," thought Sandra, and a huge rage filled her. She decided to wait with the girl. She stood a few yards away, close enough to hear the girl's teeth chattering. Occasionally the girl shot Sandra a curious glance which said, 46-year-old women didn't wait under the clock tower for a date. They had homes of their own, didn't they? Or they met in bingo halls or suburban pubs. Their glances met - and Sandra smiled. It was not 20-past eight - the girl had been waiting for 40 minutes. Her face was pinched with cold and anxiety. Sandra spoke, "Cold, isn't it?" The girl mumbled something, agreeing but making it clear that she didn't want conversation. It was half-past eight when Sandra spoke again.

"Looks like I've been stood up."

The girl turned to Sandra and said, "And so have I."

She started to weep and Sandra took a clean tissue out of her bag and handed it to her. Heads turned in the street as the pent-up tension the girl had been feeling turned to noisy sobbing. Sandra steered the girl to a nearby pizza restaurant where they sat in the warmth and discussed men. Her name was Kerry, she was 17 and was in love with a youth called Daniel Wainwright. He was unreliable and was on probation for criminal damage to a Belisha beacon. If Daniel had turned up they would have gone to a disco pub. She wasn't wearing a coat because Daniel didn't like her wearing coats. He wanted other men to admire her figure. Sandra knew better than to criticize young Mr Wainwright, but she made some unflattering observations about men in general. She surprised herself because she hadn't realized that she had these opinions, she didn't know where they had come from. As she saw Kerry to her bus-stop she heard herself saying, "You mustn't let a man rule your life Kerry, he mustn't be the be all and end all."

Kerry said, "I'll ring him up when I get home, perhaps he's poorly." She ought to hurry home, she had never been late. Alan had taken it for granted that she would always be there waiting under the clock, looking nice and being pleasant, agreeing with whatever he said, and never making demands of any kind. She hadn't liked any of the furniture they had chosen as newly-weds for their first home but she hadn't liked to say so. It was the same for the carpets and the wallpaper. None of it was to her taste. She began to refurbish her home, she window-shopped and chose the most expensive chintzy three-piece suite and curtains that draped and swagged and were edged in satin ruffles. She then revolutionised her wardrobe. In her mind she threw away the sensible clothes that Alan had chosen for her from various chain stores and she re-dressed herself in floaty extravagant things in soft impractical colours that would show the dirt. Alan was asleep when she returned at half-past eleven. He was on the wrong side of the bed, in her position. His back faced the door. There was a note on her pillow. "Who is he? I'll tear his head off his shoulders."

Alan, who had trouble snapping a wishbone on Christmas Day! The jar of freesias she had placed on the dressing table scented the bedroom delightfully. She

searched in her wardrobe for a negligee set she'd never worn. At the time she'd thought this frothy outfit silly. "Has her sister gone mad, buying her this ridiculous present?" she'd asked Alan.

But now, oh now! she looked at herself and fell in love. The bows, the ribbons, "I love you Sandra," she said to her reflection. She flounced and posed in the frivolous nightwear. She took her old brown bedroom slippers off. She painted her toenails... scarlet. She lay awake most of the night wondering if she really loved Alan. Alan also lay awake, pretending to sleep, which was hard work. He was consumed with jealousy - an emotion new to him. Where did she go? Who did she meet? Why couldn't he broach the subject? When did they stop talking and start writing notes on the sticky yellow things he'd brought home from the office?

"I've fed the cat." "We need light bulbs." "Your mother phoned."

The very monotony of these remembered communications eventually sent Alan to sleep. When he woke he turned and looked at his wife. What was she *wearing* for God's sake?

He dressed carefully, he splashed aftershave on his miserable face. He put on a perky tie. He went downstairs, there was a letter from Catherine... She'd got a job as a waitress. The tips were incredible! A drunk had given her a fifty-pound note! Did Sandra like the flowers? You don't mind if I call you Sandra do you mum? I'm not a child now, I do love you Sandra. Wrote their daughter.

Alan put the letter in his pocket. He would ring Catherine when he got to his office. Sandra must never know. The flowers breathed their tender scent through the house as Alan wrote his first romantic note to his wife, "Buy that pedal bin."