

# HORSES FOR COURSES

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

“You don’t need a garden or allotment to put something in.” Carol was trying to organise an online version of the town’s flower and vegetable show. This year, with the town hall closed and public gatherings still banned, the idea was to take a photo of anything you’d managed to grow and upload it to the show’s website.

“Well we’ve plenty of daisies, love,” said Roy looking out the kitchen window at our weedy lawn. “Or is there a prize for best dandelion? We’d be in for a chance there.” To be fair I did have a miniature rose in a pot that my sister gave me for my last birthday. It was a bit spindly where I’d forgotten to water it, but it did have one nice yellow bloom. There was a class for a single rose and the prizes were vouchers you can spend at the garden centre. If I won, I might be able to buy a healthier-looking rose with that. One each side of the back door, that would look all right. I realised at that point that Roy was no longer listening, his attention drawn back to some old black and white film on Talking Pictures.

I took the rose photo on my phone. I was quite pleased with it. Even when you enlarged it, it was still all in focus, and thankfully there wasn’t an aphid in sight. I showed Roy the website for the show with all the categories you could enter. “There’s a class for just about every flower, plant, vegetable or fruit under the sun. Carol rang to say she’d had loads of entries already. Competition is going to be tight.” Roy wondered why we didn’t enter an apple, banana and orange from our Tesco’s delivery into the ‘Three Different Fruit’ class. Because that would not only be cheating, I patiently explained, but everybody would know there’s no way we could’ve actually grown a banana on our patio. Carol and the rest of the organising committee were taking the whole thing very seriously and doing it all by the book. You had to abide by the rules and play fair. The photos would be up on the website by that Thursday and then voting would open. It was judged anonymously, so you could for example vote for number three in the ‘outdoor cucumbers’ and number ten in the ‘cacti or other succulents’. The votes would then be counted and the winners declared.

“So you can’t cheat, or rig it?” Roy asked.

“Definitely not.”

“That’s brilliant, Steph, that’s really brilliant,” he said. For a minute I thought he was being sarcastic. I’ve never known Roy take any interest in our tiny garden unless he’s having a couple of mates round for a barbecue. Cutting the lawn and trimming the wild bit at the back is always left to me.

The next day, I overheard Roy on the phone to his mate Jim. I wasn’t surprised to hear him lamenting not being able to have ‘a little flutter’. I’m surprised Roy, Jim and our neighbour Davey don’t yet have their own personal stools down the local bookie. Betting on the football is their big thing. Well I say big, but Roy’s pretty sensible really. He doesn’t bet what he can’t spare and when he has a little win, he always treats me to a meal out, even if it is down the chippy. The next thing I heard, whilst shamelessly eavesdropping was slightly more surprising. Roy actually uttered the words “butternut squash”. Really. “Butternut squash.”

I mean of course I know what a butternut squash is, but Roy’s very much a burger and chips kind of man. I don’t recall him ever wanting to spend time in the vegetable aisle. He once told me the efforts he’d go to as a kid to avoid eating anything green. Pockets were filled with peas and lettuce leaves shoved down his underpants while his Mum wasn’t looking.

On the afternoon of the virtual horticultural show, Roy had invited Jim and Davey round. We’d a bit of a boozy, socially distanced lunch in the garden. Not wanting to stay out in the hot sun, I’d left the guys out there chatting and came in to check on how my entry to the flower show had done. My rose was somewhat disappointingly unplaced. This was despite it looking much more attractive than the one in third place which looked like it had come off worse in a fight with a caterpillar.

Suddenly I heard a roar go up from the garden. Roy was doing a silly little victory dance, Jim was groaning in mock agony. I opened the French windows, to eavesdrop.

“Come on hand it over, that’s ten quid you owe me with my onions coming in first past the post.”

“No, it’s only a fiver, Roy mate. You changed your bet to the favourite, remember? At five-to-one.”

“Yes!” hollered Jim at this point, “Oh yes! First in the hollyhocks, first in the Fuchsias! The boy done good!”

Now I happened to know for a fact that Jim lives in an eighth floor flat and come to that where had my Roy got the onions? Surely he hadn’t bought them in the supermarket and cheated by taking a photo entering it?

I rushed outside to get to the bottom of the matter. It was Jim who explained it to me. The guys hadn’t actually entered the flower show at all. None of them had grown a single flower or vegetable. What had happened was that with no live sport on the telly due to the Covid restrictions, Roy had suggested that instead they bet on the results in the show!

Jim had kept the book and set the odds, and all three of them had studied the entries on line in great detail. They’d enlarged the photos and deliberated over blemishes on apples, crumpled dahlia petals, and crooked carrots. It was a bit like checking the form of a racehorse or a football team’s line-up, Davey explained in all seriousness.

“Well you won’t be doing that again for a while” I told them, not entirely approvingly. The show’s an annual event. Roy grinned.

“We won’t need to – the horses and the footie are back on next weekend.”

It seemed this would be both the first and last time there had been twenty-to-one odds on a butternut squash and a vase of blue hollyhocks coming in first past the post. I put my rose in its vase in pride of place on my windowsill. It may not have won the cup, but it was still a winner in my eyes.

*Judy Upton is an award-winning playwright. Her first novella 'Maisie And Mrs Webster' is published in 'Hometown Tales: South Coast' by W&N and short stories have appeared in Suspense Magazine, Amsterdam Quarterly and Stone Crop Review among others.*