

CARS or CAKE?

Driving. Frank's mother dreaded the question, even though it came up every year. Would Frank see well enough to drive? She could hardly say it didn't matter, because she got in her car and drove almost every day. To work, the shops, school, everywhere.

It was Frank's birthday soon and, as usual, he would ask how long until he could learn to drive. So, this year she made sure Uncle Chris was around on the day she made Frank's birthday cake. Uncle Chris was her brother and she had always known he would never drive because of his wobbly eyes.

But life is full of surprises (or cakes if you're Northwick) - in many shapes and sizes. And the look on Frank's mother's face showed that quite a big surprise had just walked into the kitchen and said "hello!" Now, I know surprises don't have legs and can't talk, but use your imagination.

As I said the surprise was a big one. Big enough to stop Frank's mother talking for several seconds. And big enough that her chin dropped, her eyes stretched wide open and her arms completely stopped moving - even though she was in the middle of mixing Frank's birthday cake.

Eventually, the surprise felt sorry for her and tiptoed out of the kitchen door just as quietly as it had come in. Only then did Frank's mother, still staring wide-eyed at her brother, utter the words: "You - never - told -- me - you - took - driving - lessons."



Big decision

Uncle Chris sighed and said no, he hadn't because he knew everyone would be telling him different things. Whether he could – or indeed should -- drive or not was something he had wanted to decide for himself. He explained that it all began when an optician said he might possibly just see well enough to drive on a good day. By a good day, he meant when his eyes weren't wobbling very much, the light was right and everything else was perfect.

Uncle Chris himself had very big doubts. He had often been a passenger in cars. He marvelled at how drivers could look in so many different directions. How did they look in the rear-view mirrors and at the road ahead at the same time? How did drivers see people and bikes and animals and road-signs when the world was rushing by so fast?

Anyway, Uncle Chris went on, many years ago he had started learning to drive. He sat in the car with the instructor. He learned all about the controls and pedals that make a car start, stop and go faster. He learned how to steer a car. He even learnt how to change gear without making too many crunching and grinding noises.

CARS OR CAKE?

But one thing never changed. Uncle Chris still couldn't see what was happening around him quickly enough. He knew he would never be safe behind a steering wheel. So with a great sense of relief he stopped learning to drive and it had never bothered him since.

The \$64,000 question

Frank, who had been listening with great interest, asked: "So, does that mean that some people with wobbly eyes can drive?"

Uncle Chris looked at Frank and said: "Yes, but not many. And some who learn to drive decide not to carry on because, like me, they know they wouldn't be safe." He noticed that Frank looked very glum at hearing this news, so he smiled and added quickly: "Of course, you can always move to another country, like America for instance, where you don't have to see so well to be able to drive."

Frank thought very hard for several seconds before saying. "I don't think I want to drive that much. Going to America would mean leaving you and mum and dad and Northwick and all my friends behind. What do you think Northwick?"

"Oh, that's an easy question to answer," said the bear, whose eyes had been glued to the birthday cake taking shape on the kitchen table during the whole conversation. "We'll stay here. I've never been the least bit interested in driving. I'll have a chauffeur. Apart from anything else, it's hard to eat if you're driving. And if you don't drive you will probably walk more. And that means you will absolutely have to eat more cake!"

(A version of this story first appeared in the UK Nystagmus Network Focus newsletter in 2015)