

Trying to Help

By Michael Pearcy

“That’s your mum over there.”

“Where?”

“By that shop.”

“Which shop, we’re in a shopping centre?”

“Foodbank, the foodbank shop. Turn round, look.”

I did and it was. She was standing outside the foodbank shop with two carrier bags of shopping. Another woman followed her out and they were talking. Shit.

First thought - my mother seeing me in town with Tim. I was supposed to be in our park kicking a football around. Second thought – foodbank? What’s she doing in a foodbank?

I turned my back to her. “Don’t let her see you Tim.”

“Okay, she can’t, you’re in the way.”

“What’s she doing?”

Tim peered round me. “Talking.”

“Good,” I said. “Follow me.” I wanted to get as far away as possible.

“This is stupid,” said Tim. “You’re walking sideways like a crab.”

When I got home Mum was in the kitchen, like always.

“What’s for tea?”

“You’re a very tidy footballer,” she said.

“Do you mean I’m good? Can we have burgers?”

“No, I’ve made cottage pie. I mean you’re a very clean footballer.”

“We didn’t play much. Can I have a burger and heat the pie tomorrow?”

Tim’s hurt his ankle.”

“Oh that’s a shame. Eat it fresh love, best. Is it swollen?”

“Dunno. He just limps a bit.”

Mum spooned the dinner out; the potato wasn't on top like at school but just sloshed onto the plate next to a pile of mince.

"Can I grate cheese on?" I wandered over to the larder and looked at the food. Nothing said Foodbank. All the labels were normal. Normal stuff.

"Cheese is in the fridge. Just have a small piece – loads of calories."

"Hmm. Okay." I went to the fridge. Everything there was normal too.

"Steve, you've left the larder open."

After tea Mum loaded the dishwasher and went out to finish her job. She delivered parcels – from Amazon and all the others. She didn't like it, said the money was pathetic and the hours too long. She sees me off to school then collects her deliveries for the day from a depot. I saw the car once, stacked out it was, in the boot, everywhere. Loads of parcels.

I had another look in the larder but it was all normal, not sure what to expect foodbank stuff to look like. So I went on-line.

Wiki said: *A foodbank is a charitable organization that distributes food to those who have difficulty purchasing enough food to avoid hunger.* Is that us? Me and Mum? Do we have difficulty getting enough food to avoid hunger? Hunger!

So I searched Foodbank Maidenhead. There it was. Helping people in crisis. How can that be us? Mum has a job, we pay all the bills – I suppose we pay the bills. Crisis is like an emergency so maybe we just had one, an emergency. So Mum went to the foodbank. I didn't notice an emergency.

I know it's been hard since Dad was killed in his car but mum said the house was okay – he had insurance that meant we had a roof over our heads. Are we not paying our bills? Mum has a desk she uses for doing all the bills, insurances and stuff. She mumbles and talks to herself – I don't normally pay any attention when she's at the desk.

I stood in front of the desk feeling bad about spying on my mum. But it does affect me, especially if there's not enough money. She never talked to me about money – I never asked. But now I had to know so I slid one of the drawers open. I stared at the papers; card statements, gas bills, electric, rates, car repairs. A school exercise book with 'accounts' written on it. That's the one I opened and looked at the columns labelled 'item' 'expenses.' 'income.' and 'balance'. Sometimes 'OD' is written at the end of a row. The

book is nearly full of pages like this. It takes a few minutes for me to understand what it means.

Under the ‘item’ column I recognised a lot of the entries. ‘SR’ is obviously me. *SR trainers - £60; SR school farm trip - £28; SR Sat morning football training - £80*. There is one entry that makes my gut drop: ‘SR tablet £200’ which was written with ‘£370 OD’ at the end of the line.

I remembered. I went on at Mum about getting a new tablet. She said she would when she could but I nagged. Then we had a bust up and she said she just couldn’t afford it – I’d have to manage with the old one. I deliberately dropped it and cracked the screen. It was the biggest row I can remember; Mum said I had to be more careful, more considerate and she wasn’t made of money and money didn’t grow on trees. I said a lot of stuff too.

I look at all the bills in the drawer and at the notebook. I feel guilty.

Mum came home about eight o’clock.

“Forty-six parcels today. And I had a text saying I have to go in at six tomorrow – that means a busy day. Better than no work at all. Sorry love, can you sort yourself out in the morning? I’ll leave everything ready. But I daren’t turn it down, they might give my work to somebody else.”

Before school the next day I opened the garage and looked through my dad’s stuff. I wanted the things he used to clean the car, bucket, sponges, brushes for the wheels and a special cloth for wiping down. It was all there.

The night before I’d thought a lot about what I’d seen in Mum’s desk. What I could do about it. First I thought I would not ask for expensive stuff at Christmas and birthdays and cut right down at other times. I was still going to play it like that but I’m a growing lad, as Mum kept reminding me, and I can’t stop growing and needing new clothes and trainers. So I decided the best thing was to make some regular money – contribute. I made a list of ways to make money. It was a short list: You Tube channel or washing cars. I remembered my Dad once paying a neighbour’s boy to clean his car. The top You Tube channels have like fifteen million subscribers. That’s why I was checking out Dad’s buckets.

Saturday morning I skipped football training and snuck out with the car cleaning stuff. I must have knocked on twenty doors before someone said yes. Five pounds. Then even more houses until I reached Mr Cutting who said he had known my Dad.

“Aren’t you Rob’s son? Sorry about what happened, the accident. I used to see you at Maidenhead United – with your dad. Do you remember me?”

I did, sort of. He let me clean his car and gave me ten pounds.

“It’s what I pay at the local car wash.”

He said I could come back every week. Total fifteen pounds.

The next Saturday I cleaned Mr Cutting’s car and he gave me four addresses of people who also wanted their car cleaned. Two of them also gave me £10 so I had a grand total of fifty-five pounds.

Problem, if I simply handed the money over to Mum she would start asking where it came from. She’d probably put a stop to it. So I decided to slip the money into her purse when she wasn’t around. That was going to be hard because her purse was in her handbag and she was never far away from that bag.

The bag was on the counter in the kitchen so I waited until Mum went to use the toilet and I took my chance. She only had fifteen pounds and maybe ten in change. She’d be bound to notice an extra fifty-five. So I’d have to slip a tenner in now and more over a few days.

“Steven! What the hell do you think you’re doing in my handbag?”

“Nothing Mum. I...”

“How could you?” She snatched the bag from me. “I never thought... God Steven, how could you – you know how hard it is for me to make ends meet. And now I catch you stealing from me!”

“Mum...”

“Shut up Steven. You can’t lie your way out of this.” She snatched the ten pound note from me and stuffed it in her purse. “I work hard for every penny. You know that, you see me... every day I work. And you treat me like this. Stealing Steven. From your own family.” Her face crumpled and her eyes filled with tears. She shouted. “From your mother Steven. From me!” She threw the handbag at me and ran out of the kitchen.

I let the bag hit me and fall to the floor. I knew I was innocent but it all made me feel so guilty. Why did she assume I was stealing? Why didn't she ask me what I was doing? Give me a chance to speak. Tell her. Explain.

I couldn't wait to get away. Leave the house for good. I threw all the money on the floor with her bag. I had to get out. I ran as far as I could. Just ran. Nowhere in particular. Just ran. So angry. Running like mad to get rid of that feeling. When I stopped – out of breath, sweating, crying – the feeling was still there. I hated myself. Hated her. I tried to help and...

Shit. Shit. Shit. I was shouting it out loud.

A woman with her dog was near. "Everything all right love?"

"FUCK OFF" I screamed and ran.

I was sitting opposite the foodbank shop. How did I get there? It was late on Saturday but they were open – people coming and going. I just stared at them. Poor people. People who needed help to get enough to eat. My sort of people. I only tried to help. Instead of asking, finding out, she accused... I'm not a thief!

Then I saw her car, driving slowly, going even slower as it passed the end of a road. Coming closer. I stood up and walked away.

"Steven!"

I started to run.

"Steven," she was shouting and running. "I didn't mean it."

I stopped but didn't turn to look at her. Why? Angry still.

"I'm so sorry... Mr. Cutting rang to ask you to a football match. He told me you were cleaning cars."

I turned. She had left the car open and the engine running. More foodbank people were watching, some crossed the road to see better. "I was trying to give you the money, and you..."

"...I know Steven. I am so, so sorry. Please come home."

