

THE FEAST OF STEPHEN

Stephen looked out on the 26th of December. It was not crisp, and even the air outside had felt warm. It usually did around Christmas. On Christmas afternoon everybody had been too stuffed with food to countenance lighting the log fire. One soul, desperately keen to keep family traditions, got as far as lighting a match but the cries were so instant, unanimous and loud that tradition was snuffed out.

Today had been drizzly all day and rather gloomy and daylight had just about arrived by nine o'clock when they had set off for the sales. Stephen hated shopping and honestly couldn't think of anything he really needed. The multi-storey car park had been dark but the good thing about the rain was that the whole of the High Street gleamed with reflected white light from thousands of tiny round bulbs strung among the trees. The effect was just as magical as at night. Pavements, cars, even shoppers' wet shoes twinkled.

Stephen decided that he could not face fighting for shirts and DVD players, nor could his son, Mark. They left the ladies and sat companionably on a shabby sofa in a coffee shop. There were only two other refugees from retail therapy: a couple who silently read magazines. Stephen and Mark spent most of their time speculating on who they were and what they had done on Christmas Day.

“I bet he did impersonations of old comedians”, whispered Stephen.

“I think they look like the sort of people who would ...”, said Mark.

“Shh, Mark, they'll hear you. I wish I hadn't had that gateau”.

Ten minutes before the agreed rendezvous, Stephen decided he just had time to nip into the supermarket next door and get some *Rennies*. Mark ran with him. They both liked observing people and they both noticed a lady picking over the 'reduced' items, mainly bread. Two small girls hung on to her sleeves. A boy ran up with a small bag of *Maltesers*.

“Not those, John. Put them back, please.”

She was quiet and gentle and the boy obeyed so quickly that he didn't see her face crumple. By the time he was back she had controlled her own sadness and frustration.

“I'm so sorry, children, but no treats just now.”

She picked up a Thin Sliced Loaf, 18p, and 20 Granary Mini Rolls, 25p.

Standing by the pharmacy, Stephen realised they had both been absorbed by the conversation. “Don't stare, Mark,” he said but they both continued to watch in silence. The lady and her children were all neatly turned out although none of the clothes were fashionable. The children never complained but they watched trolleys going past. When the group moved off, the lady carried just the bread and a tin of beans. Even so she commanded respect not pity. They moved slowly down the aisles, checking prices.

“Can't we do something, Dad?” said Mark.

“Get a trolley, Mark—we're going to have to be quick or she'll have gone. I'll ring your mum to say we'll be late.”

Much later, when Stephen was silently looking out of his window, Helen and her three children were being incredibly noisy. They were shouting and laughing at bad jokes from the crackers. Everything seemed funny. They had just finished a huge turkey dinner—very late. The man had said to them “hop in the car or you won't have time to cook the turkey”. Even now they weren't sure why they had got in. It had just seemed natural. There were four carrier bags, one each, and they had taken turns at pulling out the shopping, like opening stockings.

Turkey,

Mint Crisps

Coke

Sausages

Potatoes

Christmas pudding

Clementines

Chocolate

Sprouts

Bacon

Cream

Parsnips

Wine

Crackers

—and a box of *Maltesers*. All jumbled up.

What made them laugh the most was the box of *Rennies*.

“Now I know there is a God” said Helen.

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