

Skint

Ah'm only here cause Ah'm desperate. There's a raa o raindraps hingin fae ma hood, ma beets are luttin in, an Ah feel like shite on the sole o the world.

The banner ootside the Hoose o God says, 'All Welcome Here', an Ah've tried te ging in fower times bit ma feet's pluntit te the pavement.

So fit ye gaun te dee noo, Linda? Ma mither's wirds draps in fae farivver she is.

Truth is, Ah dinna ken. Ah'm mebbe nae on the streets, bit Ah'm still beggin an Ah'm black affrontit. Ah've donated te food banks masel, haivin a fyow tins inte a basket on ma wye oota Tesco. An noo ess voucher in ma han's tellin ma aat Ah'm the needy een.

Aat kirk brae wis a fair clim an ma glaisses are aa stemmed up - ye dinna hiv te weer masks fir the Covid noo, bit Ah'm jist keepin on wi mine till things feel a bittie safer.

Foo the hell did Ah get in a sotter like ess? Aa Ah've got in the fridge is an egg, a bit o green cheese, an a bottle o reed saace wi a crusty lid. The shame spulls ower an rins doon ma chiks. Ah've nivver bin weel aff, an Ah've ayewis tried te bi independent, bit aat wis the aul me ... the me aat hid a job (an sometimes twa) ... the me aat hisna hid a stroke ...t he me wi'oot a funny han an a gammie leg. The voucher's gettin weet, so Ah push it inte ma pooch an crunch, crunch, crunch ma wye back doon the chuckies.

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Ah hing up ma weet jaicket an lean against the lobby waa. Ma hairt's gaun ten-te-the dizzen, ma heid's spinnin, an ma airms an legs are aa preens an needles. Ess pandemic's made ma anxiety waar. Ah jist need te breathe...

There's a hole in ma airmcheer an it sighs as Ah sit doon. The laddie fae Community Service says he can get ma a new suite - weel, new te me. He's jist young an stairtin oot in life, bit he's bin richt kind an aat means a lot. He even hid time fir a cuppie an a news file the 'unpaid wirkers' cairtit in the furniter an aa ma stuff.

The cairdboord boxes are still sittin on the bare fleer. Ah canna bi ersed unpackin them. The Cooncil maks ye lift aa yer cairpets afore ye pit yer keys back. Far the hell's the sense in aat? Mind you, it's mebbe jist as weel - the wifie it wis in here last wis a smoker an the place is stinkin. The windas are muckit, the blinds are twistit, the curtains dinna meet, the skirtin boords are scuffed an there's a fool fitprint haufwye up the waa.

Fin me an Davie wis thegither, we'd a hoose at the Brig o Don – nae fancy bit presentable. Ah mairret the first lad aat smiled at ma. Ah thocht he'd look aifter ma. He didna. Aifter wi pairtit company, Ah flittit te een o the skyscrapers aside the beach wi its dodgy lifts an pishy staircases. Ye get eesed te onythin, though, an Ah'd a rare view oot te the sea. Sometimes fin the haar come in ye could imagine ye wis sittin on a plane lookin oot ower the clouds. Bit free flights or no, a stroke an a high-rise jist dinna mix.

So here's me at the heid o Holburn – hine awa fae ma pal Pat fae ower the lobby fa wis ayewis poppin in fir a blether an a fly cup. Ah even miss the boy aat played his music at ma, throwe the waa. Dunt. Dunt. Dunt. An Ah've thocht a lot aboot the young couple on the same fleer. Their wee loon spens his aifterneens stottin his baa aff the lift door. The mam's on nights an the dad's on days. Ah've heard them rowin, an Ah ken they're strugglin. S'affa aat ye can baith bi wirkin full time an still bi skint.

Bit ess is hame noo, so Ah'd better get eesed till't. Ah'm a kick in the erse fae retirement, bit nae close eneuch - sixty disna cut it ony mair.

Wirk's nae an option, an Ah get so scunnert an ill-naattered. The peer quine at the hoosin office got it in the neck last wik, an aat's nae richt - neen o ess is her wyte.

The rain's batterin against the winda an the claes-horse is strung wi socks an punts. There's a bag o peels on the table aat wid fear ye an a page o exercises fae the stroke clinic wi pictirs aat show ye fit te dee. Ah've hid wurd ma benefits are chyngin an the paperwirk tellin ma the gas an leccie's gaun throwe the reef is stappit doon the side o the settee. The chancellor's spikkin the morn an there's wurd o help wi the bills, bit fit about the rest? Ma shoppin's gaun up an up...ma mobile's oota credit...Ah canna get ma hair deen or ging te the picters ...Ah canna buy new claes... an Ah'm jist wytin fir the 'Fit for work' letter te land on the mat.

Ah wisna brocht up te feel sorry fir masel, bit Ah sometimes think it'd bi easier if Ah wisna here. Bit if Ah canna afford te live, Ah definitely canna afford te dee. A shiver rins up ma back - the knees o ma jeans are weet an the hoose is caal. The meter's as hungry as me an Ah canna afford the top-ups. Ah pull on anither jersey.

An Aiberdeen City Coouncil minibus slows doon ootside an there's the rattle o a door bein pullt open. Michael fae Community Service an his wirkers get oot ower. Ah clean firgot they war comin. Ah mak it te the front door jist as the bell rings.

"Foo's you, Linda?" Michael hauds up a tin o pint an a roller. "Wi're here te pit up yer bed, an wi'll get goin wi the decoratin the morn. Aabody's back fae bein aff wi the Covid noo, so it's all systems go."

Ah smile an stan oota the road. Michael's charges fir the day come in humphin a mattrass an the base. The first lad throwe the door's jist a rickle o beens. A hoodie's hidin his face, his trackies are tucked into his socks, an he looks like he's left his erse at hame. The mannie at the ither eyn o the mattrass is dressed decent an ye can see yer face in his beets.

His sark buttons are strainin wi the liftin an he looks like he's awa te explode. The quine's like Amy Winehouse afore it aa gid wrang. She's aa black hair an eyeliner, jangly bracelets an tattoos. Ah canna help winnerin fit ess lot's pyin back te society fir, bit fa Ah'm I te judge? Ah'm jist glaid o the help.

"Waatch ma fuckin taes!" Trackie Boy shouts at his wirkmates. Shiny Sheen looks offendit. The lassie lachs, maks the wanker sign an luts the base bang against the waa.

"Ess'll keep ye gaun till ye get yer supplies." Michael ignores fit's happenin, follaes ma into the kitchen and hauds oot a broon bag wi a wee plastic winda - there's a cheese an ingin sannie, salt an vinegar crisps an a chocolate biscuit. Ma belly gies oot a great rummle.

"Foo did ye get on at the foodbank?"

"Ah hivna bin yet." Ma face is on fire, bit Michael disna say ony mair an disappears into the bedroom te check on his squaad.

"Ah've jist left them te get on wi't." Michael looks tired an leans up against the sink.

"They're wirkin ye ower hard."

"Aye, wi've bin flat oot, Linda. Wi're gettin hooses riddy fir the Ukrainian families aat are comin ower. The kirk's bin takkin donations an the volunteers are makkin up packs te get them stairtit. Ye shid look in by – they're aye needin helpers."

Ah decide te be deaf. "Ye'll hae time fir a coffee, though?"

"Definitely." Michael hauds up a paper bag wi a greasy stain. "Ah'll need somethin te waash doon ess buttery."

"Ah've nae milk." The coffee's nearly deen an the speen clatters roon the jar. "Accordin te aat money mannie on the telly, the kettle's een o the biggest power surges in the hoose." Ah find twa mugs an poor het water fae the flask Ah fullt in the mornin.

"Hiv ye ony faimly, Linda? Or onybody aat can help?"

“Nae really.” There wis ayewis jist me an Mam.” Ah look awa - Ah canna cope wi sympathy. “Ah’ve a fyow pals, bit they’ve aa got their ain crap gaun on.”

“Stick in.” Michael nods at the free lunch on the coonter.

The sandwich tastes as gweed as it smells. If the laddie wisna here Ah’d stap the hale thing inno ma mou an be hammin into the crisps bi noo.

"Did yer GP phone ye back aboot the eConsult, Linda?"

"Aye, thanks fir helpin ma full it oot. The doctor thinks Ah’m nae weel again, bit Ah telt her Ah’m nae depressed, Ah’m jist pissed off an there’s a difference.”

There’s a crash fae the bedroom an somebody’s roarin aboot an Allen Key, an, ower seen, they’re packin up an Michael an his crew are on their wye.

“See ye, Linda. Ye’ll get a fine sleep in aat new bed.”

Michael's helpers file oot gruntin their fareweels. Trackie Boy’s got his hood aff an he gies ma a smile aat tells ma he’s nae a bad loon.

“Wi’ll be back the morn.” Michael lifts a han as the wirkers clim in ower the minibus.

The front door rattles in its frame an Ah’m aa on ma ain again.

Ah turn on the TV fir company an it looks like the world’s gaun mad. Folk are roarin an greetin. Bombs fussle an bang. Ah press the remote. Anither channel’s nae ony better - Covid’s aul news noo, an there’s a panel o folk discussin the wik in politics. Some MP boy’s bin tellin folk te buy value brands...anither een’s said aat wi need te learn foo te cook and budget better...an some bam thinks ye can mak a meal fir 30 pence. An, appairently, aa folk need te dee is te ‘Get a better job. Work longer hours. Make more money’. Aabody’s argeein an spikkin ower een anither: ‘Cost of living crisis. Energy price caps. Fuel stress. The working poor. Heat or eat. Partygate. Celebrate the Jubilee on a budget’.

Wirlds. Wirlds. Wirlds. Aa the big questions ging unanswered. Ah turn doon the soun.

Ma mam's photie's lyin on tap o een o the packin boxes - she's smilin up at ma an lookin like she could jist spik. Twa o ess boxes belanged te her an noo they're mine - an inheritance o aul claes an crappy ornaments. Mam wirkit hard aa her life an fit did she hae te show fir it? Bugger all. Pyin oot rent fir a Coouncil hoose aat wid nivver bi hers an wirkin three jobs on low pye - she jist nivver got oota the bit.

Mam wisna the kirkie kine, bit she wis as gweed a bodie as ony prayin pew-sitter. She jist got on wi fitivver life dolled oot an she ayewis said, "There's helpers aawye, Linda - ye jist need te look. Help fa ye can an lut ither folk help you. It's nae complicated."

She wisna een fir bosies, my mam - it jist wisna her wye. Bit there wis nae shortage o affection. Ye saa it in her een an in aathin she did an said.

An suddenly Ah'm a bairn again. Ma wee han's in her big een. She's stickin a plaister on ma skinned knees, dichtin ma bibbly neb an wipin awa ma tears. She's haudin ma han on aat first day at the skweel, pushin ma throwe the gates an stannin wavin till Ah'm inside. The mynin's makkin ma braver.

The clock says If Ah nip on Ah can mak it te the foodbank afore it closes. Ah'm gaun te pit ma name doon fir sortin oot fitivver's needit te mak the Ukrainian faimlies feel welcome. Ah'm nae sure foo muckle eese Ah'll be, bit there's bound te bi somethin Ah can dee.

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The pavement's a disgust o dog shite, fag eyns, an blobs o flattened chuddie. Cars flee by an folk pass wi their heids doon. There's a crash o recyclin an the beep beep o a scaffie cairt.

The gate groans on its hinges an Ah leave the soun an steer ahin.
There's a fair heat in aat sun an the air's earthy aifter the rain. The kirk's
up aheid an the thocht o gettin somethin fine fir ma supper spurs ma on.

The step's shiny an weet aneth ma feet. Ah pull ma mask up ower ma
nose, fish oot ma voucher, an tak a deep breath.

On ye go, Linda. Mam's voice again. It's nae complicated.

Anxiety rises. Ah force it doon.

The doorknob squeaks. Turns. Ma mither's ahin ma. Twa hans on ma
back. A firm push. An Ah'm in.