

Shelf Life

Some people stand at the shelf and arrange, folding vests for babies and lining up books, stacking tins of chopped tomatoes and sorting them from baked beans and boiled potatoes. The shelf is divided with areas for food, household items, toys, and different sizes and types of clothing.

Miscellaneous offerings are on the top. Perhaps the most unusual items end up here when people move house, or switch hobbies, or are given gifts they will never use themselves: a pair of scuba flippers, a dog harness, three rolls of wallpaper, Christmas decorations, a decorative mask.

Last month my son shared a pair of wellington boots. They were size 3s that we got for a school trip, and they were not worn for long. My son has always preferred curling up under a blanket to watch ten episodes of Peanuts back to back, or drawing, or making pom pom pets. He probably only wore the wellingtons a few times. Somehow while he was watching Peanuts and building cardboard hideouts, he skipped the next size altogether, jumping right into a size 5. But on the shelf the wellies found new feet. It was good to think of another child's toes growing stronger, imagining the squelch of mud under their soles, and another mum making a lucky find, her not having to fork out for rain boots. I told my son that he might find something too, because you never know.

Everyone likes to find something. We play a game sometimes, painting stones and leaving them in places, hidden for other people to find. When I find a painted stone that someone else has hidden I walk home with my hand in my pocket, the stone in my palm, and a good feeling because someone has given me a memory. The memory will be there long after I've re-hidden the stone and I'll remember the day I found the pebble with a serpent painted on it, or the rock with the rainbow design. The sharing shelf is the same. Things arrive and leave again, and there's a story for every item, even the cans of sweetcorn and the boxes of cereal.

We met Paul the day we shared the wellies. A metal trolley loaded with groceries pushed through the door of the café, followed by Paul who was steering the whole thing towards the shelf. There had been a big delivery from the supermarket, he explained. What was the story here? I thought all the food came from the café and the garden, but I was wrong. This story started in London, where strong gusts of wind had been blowing, a storm so violent that the huge wooden doors of the Westminster parliament slammed shut and gusted open again. The Prime Minister's much trumpeted Halloween deadline came and went, and the supermarket bosses were left staring at the tins and packets they had piled high for a second time: food set aside for a national crisis, postponed. So now the warehouses were being emptied again. The sharing shelf smiled and caught the windfalls.

The shelf isn't just about a boy's wellies, or the pair of gloves that the lady with a scarf tied over her ears found and pulled on straight away, a smile on her lips and happier, warmer fingers. I'd like to tell you her story too, but she doesn't speak the same language as me. It didn't matter. We smiled at each other in front of the shelf. There is always an understanding here. There is a feeling of sticking together, especially when times are hard. Paul looks out for people and he anticipates what they might like. Others do the same when they donate, and when they stand here and chat.

I helped Paul put the food from the trolley onto the shelf, thinking to myself that if these beans went home to feed my kids, I'd watch them eating with sauce dribbly on their chins and I'd feel an extra glint of pleasure. And whoever ate the cornflakes would find them even crunchier. The soup would warm a belly even better because it came from the sharing shelf. The shelf would be here, and it would be something to feel reassured by in spite of the election, and the winning or the losing of seats, and the meanness imposed. The shelf would be stacked, and stacked again. When more people know about the shelf there will just be more of us to hold each other together, stacked like tins. *They*, the ones that cut and sanction, will become a narrow tower of cans. Kick one and the whole lot will tumble, and one day we'll get to

that moment again, the 'will it, won't it' anticipation of the whole thing clattering down.

I have a daughter too. She is younger than my son. She just started Primary One and the General Election was confusing for her. It felt all at odds with the good cheering and winter festivities that were still going on in spite of the anxiety.

The day after the election both the kids were eating their breakfast. They were late for school but I had no energy to spur them on. I watched them slurping milk and puffed rice, and dabbed the dribbles from my daughter's Christmas outfit. It was Christmas Jumper Day at school, but the whole idea seemed tragic in the wake of what had just happened.

"I don't like Boris," my girl said.

The news is on in the background.

"But I like Hanukkah," she nodded.

"I think you mean Nicola," I said, stroking her hair behind her ear. "But we like Hanukkah too."

Today I help Paul put new tins and packets of food on the shelf. A box of fresh produce comes in from the garden, vegetables we seeded last winter. I remember how we turned the cold, empty soil to prepare it for the seeds, and how the harvest had seemed so distant.

While we are restocking the shelf a lady arrives. No questions are asked here and she can quietly take whatever she needs, but she explains anyway.

"I am the working poor," she says, her hand to her chest. "I'm a mother."

Is there anything else she could do with? Paul asks. A suggestion box would be great. He's got that in mind for the future. And bags to carry things.

A couple arrives some time later and they leave items from their home. The Christmas decorations are popular and raise a smile. They are gone twenty minutes later. An older man visits like every day since he was sanctioned. He puts a few groceries into his rucksack and thoughtfully wraps the final piece of tinsel around his hat.

“Don’t know what I’d do without the shelf,” he says to me.

“Take for every meal”, Paul tells him. “Make sure you have enough.”

The man nods.

“See you tomorrow,” Paul says.

The flippers are still here. They’d make a great Christmas present for someone who loves the sea, or for someone who needs to swim faster against the current. Sometimes we could all use a pair of flippers.

I have something else to share today. My daughter’s turquoise shoes. An infant size 6. She wore these for a long time, over a year, but they look perfect. You have to move to grow, and my daughter was never supposed to be able to walk or move her feet at all. But suddenly this year, she moved her feet for the first time. She wiggles now, she stretches, and she is making the beginnings of steps. As of last week she has made it into size 7 pink lace-ups. Sharing my daughter’s shoes is a triumph.

I like to think of another child learning to toddle, walking in the arts centre garden in the turquoise shoes, playing in the big sand pit. I like to imagine the neural networks forming in that baby’s brain and through some magical pairing, those networks replicating themselves in my daughter’s nerves and muscles and neurons, the bones strengthening, the ankles flexing. There is hope and joy in sharing.

Last week this was a polling station and everyone came and shared their opinion here with a simple cross, and we held our breath. I feel like we're still holding our breath. But whatever way the wind blows, I know the shelf will stay. Over Christmas closure Paul will send parcels of food to a local church to distribute. The supermarkets will start to stockpile again, or maybe they won't. Christmas presents will be gifted and shared. My son will watch Peanuts cartoons and my daughter will take steps across the kitchen with her walking frame.

In January there will be more stories to tell.