

Tommy

Tommy arrived one Friday in February after school, to stay for a couple of weeks' respite. His usual foster carer was taking a holiday, so a temporary home had to be found for him. He was six-and-a-half years old. Foster carers were allowed only two weeks' holiday each year, with no bank holidays or weekends off. This was in stark contrast to the social workers who were entitled to five weeks' holiday, bank holidays and weekends. Although I was new to fostering, I could already see that there were many injustices, particularly concerning the children.

When Tommy arrived in a taxi, I was nervous. I didn't have much experience with boys – we had two daughters, and most of our friends had daughters too. When the taxi appeared at the top of the driveway, I went outside to welcome Tommy. It was a cold and blustery day and I didn't want to linger outside for too long. I was keen to bundle him inside where he would be warm. Suddenly, he exploded out of the back door of the taxi, a noisy, scruffy, 'Dennis the Menace' type of child. His unruly brown hair stuck up vertically from his head, his face was dirty, and he had very few front teeth. One trouser leg was hitched up somewhere above his knee and his shoelaces trailed behind his scuffed shoes. He also had the remnants of at least one meal splattered on the front of his shabby polo shirt. Even though his scruffy appearance was a shock, I liked Tommy immediately. Tommy was only the second child we had fostered. The first had been an eleven-year-old girl, who came to stay for two nights, so I had next to no experience. He greeted me with a wide toothless grin, and I bent down to his level to say how lovely it was to meet him and that the whole family was looking forward to having him to stay with us. He took a deep breath and shook my hand, whilst surveying his surroundings, then he said, 'F***k me, this is a big house.'

He did have a point. The house is very long, with its length across the front, making it look enormous, although in reality it was only one room deep. Built

around 350 years ago, its owners simply kept adding rooms on either end, when they needed more space.

I ignored the swearing and welcomed him inside, trying my best to stifle a laugh. It was mid-February, but the house was warm and inviting, the wood burner crackling with alighted logs. I wanted Tommy to feel cosy, safe and welcomed. It must be very strange to be thrust into a stranger's home, especially when you are only six years old. I tried to imagine how my children would have felt in a similar situation, and I couldn't really comprehend how awful it must be. The wintery sky had darkened and black clouds scudded across the horizon, bringing the threat of rain. I was glad to have Tommy tucked up indoors, and we had a couple of hours to get to know one another before the others arrived home.

Once inside I offered him a drink, then I took him upstairs with his bags to show him to his room. He touched everything. He repeatedly flicked the light switch on and off, then he moved to the door, which he began opening and closing again and again, then the bedside lamp. I took no notice, but motioned him over to see the en-suite bathroom. He began pulling the light cord on and off so much that I thought it would snap. He then looked thoughtful and a bit confused and asked why the bathroom was in his room. He was concerned that he would be woken up when everyone else came to use it. I explained that this was his bathroom and no one else could use it. To which he replied, 'F**k me,' whilst shaking his head from side to side in amazement.

It soon became apparent that Tommy's language was extremely colourful and neither his surroundings, nor the company he was in, was any reason to modify it in any way. I gathered that this was the way he'd been spoken to at home before coming into the care system, and naturally he thought it to be a normal, acceptable way to express himself – much to the frustration of his teachers at school. We decided to ignore it most of the time, although occasionally I gently commented that it wasn't very polite. I think that although he knew the words were 'bad', they were out of his mouth before he could stop them. I often had to stifle a giggle when the bad language exploded out of him, almost like a cheeky monster was inside him trying to push the words out.

Tommy soon settled into life with us. He seemed relatively content and I had no real concerns about him. He seemed to sleep well, eat well and engage with the rest of us just fine. One busy evening we decided to have a rare treat – a 'chippy tea'. When I told Tommy the plan, his little face fell and he almost looked upset, which I was at a loss to understand at this point. So far, Tommy

had attacked every meal with gusto, eating anything and everything I put in front of him. He always commented how good it was and he always managed seconds and even thirds. He also planned his eating for the day, asking what he could have next. Upon his return from school, he would have a yogurt and fruit before he had even changed out of his uniform. When he returned downstairs, he would have crisps. Then, he would polish off a huge plateful of food, with seconds and thirds, followed by a pudding and more fruit snacks throughout the evening, then cake or toast before bed. He even filled his pockets – just in case. I soon realised that this poor child had been starved, so I didn't even try to curb his huge appetite. As with our own children, we always let the children we cared for have as much fruit as they wanted, helping themselves without needing to ask. One day, Tommy was helping himself to fruit and I saw a startled look cross his face, as he bit into it. I soon realised why – he had taken a huge bite out of an unpeeled kiwi fruit. I quickly ran over to him, took the kiwi, and started to peel it, explaining that many fruits needed to be peeled, especially one as furry as a kiwi. As I was peeling, I looked down to see that Tommy had an avocado in his other hand. Another crisis averted. I've never tried to eat avocado skin, but I doubt it tastes very good. Tommy was always very appreciative at every meal, his favourite phrase was, 'This is right f*****g good Jan,' followed by, 'what can I have next?'

One evening I gave him a chicken salad – a first for Tommy, because I guessed that a salad might not satisfy his remarkable appetite, but I was keen to introduce him to as many foods as possible. He tucked in as usual but was eating a bit more slowly than normal. A bit concerned, I asked him if it was ok. He nodded then sheepishly said, 'Yes Jan, but I have to tell you, it's gone f*****g cold!' I hid my giggles and poured on some salad dressing, for him to try. After two mouthfuls, he looked up and said, 'Oh no Jan, your f*****g gravy's cold as well.'

When Tommy was in bed, I told Peter and the kids, and we laughed for a good 10 minutes. I still chuckle when I think of his lovely toothless little face looking up at me and trying his best to be tactful about my oversight.

Anyway, back to the 'chippy tea'. I got a pen and paper and took everyone's order, but when I came to Tommy he just said, 'chips.' I asked him if that was all and he looked puzzled. I told him he could have pie, fish, sausages, peas, gravy and whatever else they sold. It took him a while to understand, because he'd only ever been allowed to have just chips. Of course, once it had sunk in,

he then ordered one of everything – until my pen ran out of ink! When we were ready to set off, he asked if he could come along – I suspected he wanted to make sure his order would be fulfilled. We pulled up outside our second favourite chippy (our favourite, Waters Green, was closed for a refurb following a fire) and Tommy said, ‘Oh, this is the f*****g chippy,’ with a knowing look.

I later learned that his grandmother had given him a pound coin every evening and told him to get to the ‘f*****g chippy’ for his dinner. It was no wonder that Tommy craved new foods, and lots of them. Sadly, this poor little lad has lost his mother who had died when he was two years old. He’d gone to live with his grandparents, who had treated him like a dog. He’d been locked in his room, barely fed and spoken to like he was worthless. He hadn’t known love, attention or respect. He’d been given nothing except the very basic essentials to survive. I’m still amazed, shocked and upset that some children are treated with so little care in today’s society. I sometimes feel ashamed to be a member of the human race.

On the Monday morning, following a lovely weekend with Tommy, he came downstairs ready for school. I thought it was a bit odd that he was carrying the liquid hand soap from his bathroom under his arm. I tried to coax him in to leaving it in the bathroom, but he insisted that he needed to show his teacher that he had his own ‘f*****g soap’. He repeated this strange ritual each morning, bringing different objects with him in the car. It was usually a towel, toothpaste, loo rolls, ornaments and of course food. More often than not, he’d be persuaded to leave the items in the car if promised to look after them and make sure that, ‘No f*****r stole them!’ This gorgeous little boy had never had anything to call his own, and it broke our hearts that a few toiletries could bring a child so much pleasure. I can only imagine what his teachers thought, but I hoped that they understood where Tommy had come from.

In the evenings when Tommy was in bed, I’d read the paperwork about him. Each child usually comes with a report concerning his or her family, contact and school details, and information about their social worker and anyone else involved in their care. It also includes their personal history and an insight into why they had been brought into the care system. Tommy’s report made me cry each time I picked it up. He was such a lovely, kind, bubbly little boy who had suffered the most horrendous neglect in his first few years, at the hands of people who were supposed to care for him – his own grandparents. After reading his report for the first time, we had to take stock. This was only the second child

we'd looked after, and we really didn't know if we'd be able to find enough patience and understanding to help children who were this badly damaged. We would need a lot of emotional resilience to read these documents without becoming upset and very, very angry. We obviously decided that we had to carry on as long as there was a need for foster homes in the area. We had all the resources necessary and we couldn't turn our backs on children like Tommy. I couldn't imagine what might happen to kids like Tommy if foster carers didn't come forward in sufficient numbers. Since making that decision, we've hardly ever turned away a child, and we later put ourselves on the emergency list, which meant that we could be called by the Emergency Duty Team in the middle of the night, or at weekends, to take a child. These kids were usually tired, hungry, upset and scared, with only the clothes they were standing in. Peter became a regular at the all-night Tesco, being sent for essentials such as pyjamas, toothbrushes, underwear, socks and school shirts, and even nappies. We have now developed a store cupboard of most of these items – some donated by friends when their kids grew out of them. It still amazes me that some children are so delighted by just a few items of their own, which they can take with them when they leave. This is in stark contrast to the people we know, who like us, can afford to send their kids to private schools. They have ponies, iPads and exotic holidays.

Although our own birth children have never been deprived of material possessions, we haven't allowed them unlimited luxuries – they have had to earn them. To earn spending money, both our birth children took part-time jobs while they were at university – we only paid for their essentials, no money for beer or designer clothes. They were also asked to help in the house with jobs, such as loading the dishwasher, setting the table and tidying their bedrooms. For this, they received pocket money, at the going rate – no more. Our older child used to mow the lawns using our sit-on lawn tractor. I still maintain that it helped her to learn some of the skills she would need much later, when she started learning to drive. I believe that our own children are grounded and appreciative of all they had, and I also believe that fostering has enriched their lives, as well as mine. Unlike many of their friends, they understand about children, who may be from just a mile or two away, who have had to live in poverty, misery and danger. I think they now have a better understanding of how our society deals with some of its human problems and how we are all responsible for the welfare and care of our fellow human beings. A social conscience came to us a bit later in life, but

our girls learned valuable lessons much earlier. Tommy was the beginning for us, but we knew that we would continue on our journey.

During that first week with Tommy, I needed to take him to a ‘contact visit’. These visits are to keep the child in regular contact with their parents. Some of these visits are at the parents’ home, unsupervised, while others take place at a neutral address and are supervised by social workers. The ‘Family Centre’ was the venue for Tommy’s contact, twice a week. To say he didn’t look forward to these visits is an understatement. On Tuesday mornings, he knew what would usually happen that evening after school, and he became agitated and fearful. Through tears, he would ask me if he really had to go to see his Gran, visibly trembling at the prospect. I explained that he had to go because Gran wanted to see him. I felt like a real monster for making him go – why on earth should we send a child back, repeatedly, to the person who has treated them so badly? I will never understand why the rights and wishes of parents/grandparents are held above those of a child. It made me angry that a system which is designed to put a stop to fear and suffering, actually perpetuates it – and that it is presided over by adults who are supposed to be acting in the best interests of the child!

After each contact visit, I had to fill out a ‘contact sheet’ to record how it had gone. I had to give the time, date and any problems encountered, along with a list of those in attendance. Each time I recorded that Tommy had not wanted to go, and that the visit had made him very upset and frightened. The reports obviously meant nothing and I had no say in the matter, so I reluctantly took Tommy twice a week, to visit his Gran. The Family Centre was located near his grandparents, in the middle of a very rundown council estate. To soften the blow, we called the corner shop for an ice cream to eat on the way, and I reassured Tommy that I would definitely be back in an hour. He wanted me to stay outside in the car, so I moved up the road a little and parked up to read my book. He would be able to see me if he looked out of the front window and I hoped that he would feel reassured. After fifty-five minutes, I knocked on the door of the Family Centre and was greeted by a witch with orange hair and very few teeth. She was gaunt, wrinkled, very ugly and would have scared anyone; she didn’t even need the help of a dark alley. I was taken aback by her appearance but tried not to react. The witch immediately launched a tirade of abuse, the gist of which was about me buying Tommy an ice cream, which he was apparently ‘allergic to’. I knew that I hadn’t read anything about him being allergic to anything, but maybe she just wasn’t comfortable letting Tommy have a nice life. A life that

she was no longer controlling. She then thrust a nappy bag at me, saying, ‘That’s his shit-filled underpants – and it’s your fault.’ I was so shocked that I couldn’t reply. I took the bag in one hand and Tommy in the other, and we left as quickly as possible. I learned that Tommy often got so upset at having to see his grandmother that this kind of accident wasn’t unusual for him. What kind of planet do we live on, where social services think it’s ok to subject a child to that amount of horror twice a week?

There were to be several more visits to see Gran during Tommy’s stay with us, and they didn’t get any easier – for either of us. We both dreaded Tuesdays and Thursdays, and by comparison, the rest of the week seemed like a breeze. Tommy was, however, quite difficult to entertain. His appetite for outdoors was matched only by his appetite for food. After school we played football outside or went to the park. When I asked Tommy which park, he usually visited, I was shocked when he replied that he’d never been to the park. We made sure that we went regularly after that, often taking a large picnic.

It was such a shame that Tommy had visited us outside of the caravan season, because he would have loved it at our caravan. We were fortunate enough to own a lovely new static caravan on a fabulous sandy beach in Anglesey. The caravan had been bought by Olive, Peter’s mum, but she didn’t use it as often as she would have liked to. Her health was beginning to fail and I’m not sure that she had the energy to travel very far anymore.

Our pitch was perfect, right on the shoreline overlooking the wide, curving beach and the Irish Sea. The sand here was perfect too – soft and fine, with plenty of shells to collect and rock pools to play in. Tommy would have loved running along the sweeping beach, catching fish and shrimps with a net, and messing about in a boat. However, it was the wrong time of year for caravan holidays by the sea and I hoped that Tommy would visit us again and we could take him to the seaside. I find it astonishing that so many of the kids who come into the care system have never been on holiday. I believe it is a fundamental right of all kids to visit the seaside. Tommy came to stay with us twice more, in the September and October of that same year, but we were still unable to go to the caravan, although we did have many fun days out.

At the weekends Tommy really enjoyed helping Peter. They mixed cement and filled in some holes in the drive, fixed a bit of guttering (broken during one of our footie games), and generally tidied up the garden. Tommy was really happy to be helping and pottering about outdoors. Each evening before bed, I ran

a bath for him with lots of bubbles and bath toy. He really wasn't keen on the idea at first, but soon tolerated, and later enjoyed it. Like many of the children who came to stay, he couldn't understand why he was required to have a bath or shower every day – he wasn't dirty after all! Except that Tommy was always dirty. I'd had to buy six more white school polo shirts because he often had to have a second clean one in the morning after spilling his breakfast down the front.

One Saturday evening, during Tommy's second stay with us, we went to watch a production, put on by our local musical theatre group. Both Peter and Nessie, our younger daughter, were members and were taking part in this particular production of *Oliver*. Nessie was playing the part of the strawberry seller, with a few solo singling lines. Peter had the part of Mr Bumble. I asked Tommy if he'd ever been to a theatre and, unsurprisingly, he looked confused. He hadn't even visited a cinema. I reckoned that we were both in for a real treat – though I guessed that my attention would probably be focussed on watching Tommy's face rather than the stage.

I spent a lot of the day on Saturday preparing Tommy for that evening. We talked about what would happen later, and I had to explain that it would be just the two of us, as Peter and Nessie would be leaving much earlier to get ready. I told him about the special costumes they would be wearing, and that they would both be wearing make-up, and Peter would wear a wig. Tommy fell about laughing at this information and kept asking me if I was sure that Peter would be dressing up and 'looking f*****g stupid.' I went on to make sure he had understood that they would both be 'just pretending' and that when Peter banged the big stick and shouted 'More?' he wasn't really angry at all. I was quite worried that Tommy may not be able to sit still and remain quiet for the duration of the performance, and that he may lose interest if he didn't follow the plot. I bribed him with a promise of ice cream in the interval – or as he called it, 'half-time.'

After Peter and Nessie had left for the theatre, Tommy and I played 'eye spy' sitting in the kitchen. He seemed a bit on edge, but I reckoned he was just trying to remember everything that I had told him about the evening. It was a bit too early to leave for the theatre, so I suggested that we call at the local corner shop for some sweets. He took a long time in deciding what treats he wanted – I think he really wanted all of them. We went back into the rain, jumped in the car and drove to Lord Street in Macclesfield to try and find a place to park – a near

impossible task. The Little Theatre was sandwiched between terraced houses in an ordinary residential street. Its capacity was only about 180, but it was a cosy little place, with traditional velvet curtains, and a tiny bar. It was used by two different amateur groups and one of them was the musical theatre group we had come along to see.

When we finally arrived at the Little Theatre, we bought a programme and took our seats. Tommy began to wriggle a lot and I was worried that I had expected too much of him. After asking lots of questions about the seats, the curtains and the lights, he had a good look around, gave his large toothless grin to anyone who looked in his direction, and polished off his sweets. With nothing left to do – or eat – he was getting bored and there was still another fifteen minutes to wait until the show began.

He eventually said, after a lengthily pause, ‘This is a big place.’ But I knew that he’d stopped himself from saying, ‘*F**k me*, this is a big place,’ and I was relieved. When the lights finally went down, I held onto his hand, before he exclaimed, in a loud whisper, that it was ‘*f*****g dark!*’

The opening song saw children dressed in rags, dancing and singing on the stage. Tommy was spellbound and hardly moved a muscle. I tried to remember what it felt like to visit a theatre for the very first time. When the song finally drew to a close, Tommy asked in a quiet whisper why the kids looked dirty, and I had to explain about them pretending to be orphans. I then had to explain what an orphan was. I could sense that the questions wanted to come frothing out of Tommy, so I hushed him and told him that the next song was starting. Soon after, Peter appeared on stage, dressed in his finery, and I felt Tommy twitch. Before I could stop him, Tommy was on his feet. To my horror, he stood up and pointed, ‘Hey look, that’s Peter!’ People began to look round, and some of them tutted. If only they knew the circumstances behind this little child’s excitement. I hurriedly pulled him down into his seat. I reminded him, in a whisper, of everything that we’d talked about earlier. I also reminded him of the half-time ice cream that was promised, if he stayed quiet. Although he wriggled a lot, he was fairly calm, but a couple of times I felt him twitching, and I just managed to grab his sweater before he leapt out of his seat again. After a while he seemed to get used to the darkness and the singing and dancing, so I began to relax a bit, which I soon realised was a mistake. A little later Nessie arrived on stage singing a little song about strawberries. Quick as a flash, Tommy was on his feet again, keen to tell everyone that it was ‘our Nessie.’ Thankfully he didn’t say, ‘That’s

our *f***ing* Nessie.’ He seemed buoyed on by the collective stares of the audience, who were now looking at Tommy rather than at the stage. He was grinning and pointing and giggling with excitement. I finally dragged him into his seat and spent the rest of the performance a nervous, embarrassed wreck, fidgeting in my seat each time he took in a deep breath. When the show was finally over, we retraced our steps back to the car. It had turned bitterly cold and Tommy held on to me for warmth. He didn’t have a winter coat, so I planned to get him one the next day. Looking back, the theatre trip had been worth the fuss, and embarrassment. Tommy had witnessed something completely new and learned how to behave well around unfamiliar people. It was experience that he talked about for the rest of his stay with us. When we all arrived home later that evening, Tommy was still giggling about Peter being dressed up ‘daft’ and wearing make-up. He asked why the people had made him do it and couldn’t understand why anyone would act that silly for nothing.

When Tommy finally left our care, an empty void was left in his place. We were truly sad to see him go. I felt almost bereaved, but knew that he was with a good foster carer and would be well looked after. I really would need to toughen up and try to see fostering as a job, despite myself, I had unwittingly become involved in Tommy’s life and I deeply cared about him. Who wouldn’t? But now he had moved on, so I would have to deal with the heartbreak, put my chin up and prepare for the next child.

A few months later, Tommy came to stay with us again for a couple of weeks. This time he seemed like a different child. His swearing was at a minimum, he’d become less anxious, and was an altogether more balanced character. I don’t know what eventually happened to Tommy, I guess he’ll be about eighteen now, but I often think of him and hope he isn’t still worrying about seeing his grandparents.

The next time I had a foreign child, it was a girl from the Far East. I got a call from social services about the girl, giving me most of her information, and as usual they were desperate and had tried everyone else. Jasmin apparently spoke very little English and wasn't in school, although she was 16 years old. There was a court case pending and I may be asked to attend. I was beginning to understand why no one really wanted such a challenge. Then I learned the last bit of vital information just as the social worker was taking the phone away from her ear and about to put it down. She said 'by the way she's 37 weeks pregnant', click. 'Hello, hello?', I said, but it was too late, the trap was set and I'd fallen in. Then I began to give myself a talking to, how bad would it be? We lived only 10 minutes from the local hospital, which did have a maternity unit, and she would probably need lots of rest and wouldn't be a handful. She was coming to us from an hour away so wouldn't be out partying with her mates until all hours, she wouldn't be drinking and smoking, and I didn't need to take her to and from school each day. I'd actually talked myself into looking forward to it, unbelievable.

The next day a social worker brought Jasmin who, as expected, arrived with a huge belly, looking sheepish and shy. She was a tiny, frail looking child and I wanted to protect her immediately. It was her first time in care and away from her family and she looked worried and lost. The relief was that she had more than three words of English, though not many more. It soon became obvious that she wasn't at all prepared for the pregnancy, she didn't even own any maternity clothes, just a pair of joggers which were stretched to the limit. She fairly soon settled into life with us, we did a bit of cooking, went shopping for maternity clothes, toiletries and a few basic baby clothes. I took her to contact with her mum two or three times a week and she seemed contented. Jasmin's mum was lovely. She hugged me and thanked me when we met, and even made cakes for me to bring home.

The history was that Jasmin was at risk from violence from her father, who was devastated and furious about her pregnancy, so it was unsafe for her to live at home. The pregnancy had only been discovered recently and no one seemed to have a clue who the father was. I asked Jasmin about the father but she said there had been no one, and she hadn't had sex. Perhaps I ought to start calling her 'Mary'. I kind of believed Jasmin, she wasn't a worldly kid, and never went out, so there was a mystery surrounding the impending delivery. I was later to learn that Jasmin was very close to, and spent much time with her uncle, a man

of over forty who was a greasy looking, shifty Individual. Jasmin even asked me how the baby was going to get out. Bloody hell, how was I going to deal with this problem? I'm ashamed to say that I chickened out and bought a picture book for her, which we looked at together. The penny dropped, though I hoped the baby wouldn't, at least not yet. As luck would have it, we went to court, the next week. It was a daunting experience, even for me, so it must have been really scary for Jasmin. There were lots of people at court, myself, Jasmin, her social worker, solicitor, mum, dad and the evil uncle, and at least two interpreters. Luckily, I wasn't asked to say anything, I just had to sit in the waiting area with Jasmin, not knowing whether I would be taking her back home or not. I was also hoping and praying that she wouldn't go into labour today. I don't know what went on in the courtroom, but it was decided that Jasmin was to go home with her mum and dad. I said my teary goodbyes and considered myself off the hook, though I would miss Jasmin, and I worried that the delivery would all go well. I heard a few weeks later that Jasmin had delivered a baby girl and both were well.