

## ME AND MR MANDEL

*[An office of a local Citizen's Advice Bureau. A desk and chair. In the chair, an elderly man – late 70s, early 80s. His stick is on the floor beside him. He is talking to a woman (unseen) the other side of the desk.]*

Let's get one thing clear. I don't take no shit from nobody. Nobody puts one over on me, I can tell you. So, when they told me. I nearly hit the roof. I went right up the bloody wall, and that's a fact. I mean – fifteen pound! For the love of God, where can you get a coffin for fifteen pound these days? And that's not counting the rabbi's fees, never mind a stone or some flowers. How can you have a decent funeral without flowers?

I went straight down the dole office, and I told them. I gave it to them straight. Fifty years he'd worked. Twelve hours a day six days a week, not including Saturdays. Worked his fingers to the bone, he did. But did it make any difference? Did it, be bugged – excuse my French, miss. It's always the same old story. Those people got hearts of stone. Look what happened with the pension. Seventy he was before he got that. And all because he wanted to keep doing a bit of work! Is it a sin to want to work? Is it a crime? I ask you.

Do you know what they told me, down the dole office? 'He hadn't paid his Contributions.' He'd come into the Scheme too late, they said. Half the Death Grant and that was that. Contributions! He'd paid his taxes. He'd earned it. Why, his whole life was a contribution.

It was a young fellow down the dole. Couldn't have been more than – oh, twenty at most. He had long hair down on his shoulders, and an earring through his ear – Jesus! like a bloody woman, he was. And there he was, this

little Nancy boy, standing there calm as you like telling me Mr. Mandel's only going to get fifteen pound! Well, I lost me temper. I admit it. I shouldn't have, I know, but I got a terrible temper sometimes, my wife'd tell you, God rest her soul. Sometimes I just blow me top. And the little ponce is standing there giving me all this rubbish, and me thinking of Mr. Mandel at his sewing machine these fifty years, and – well, I'd had a few pints at lunchtime, if I'm honest – but I d1dn't mean to break the window, miss. It was an accident. I was just waving me stick about cos I was upset and in a state. It was only a little window, couldn't have been worth more than a few bob. It was the drink talking, miss, and that kind of helpless feeling you get when people aren't listening to you. What did the boy want to call the police like that for? I'm old enough to be his grandfather. I didn't mean any harm, miss. Anybody knows me'll tell you, I wouldn't hurt a fly. I mean, look at me, miss. These days, with my legs, a fly's more like to beat me up than the other way around. But – I just wanted to see him done right by.

You see, he lived for his work, did Mr. Mandel. Even after he'd retired he wouldn't give it up. We'd be sitting in our little parlour of an evening. I'd be doing me pools – I won fifty-two pounds seven and four pence in 1958, and that's a fact. Or maybe I'd be reading the *Evening News* if the man from Vernon's had already been round. But whatever I was doing, he'd always be patching up some trousers or running up a blouse from some odds and ends he'd picked up at a jumble sale. He used to haunt those jumble sales. Little scraps he used to pick up.

I'd say, "What d'you want to be bothering yourself with those for, nothing but rags?"

“Oh, they'll come in handy some time.”

And he was right. Many a baby was glad of his mending when the mother couldn't afford a new matinee jacket. Or a widow woman with an old twinset going at the elbows. I told him, you should charge for all you do. But he was worried if he did, they'd find out and take it off his pension. And if they'd all been like that cupcake down the dole, they would have!

Yes, he liked to keep himself busy. And if it was for children there was nothing he wouldn't do, not having been married or having kids himself. The little ones was always in and out the house for a bit of bread and jam.

He was a gentleman, you see. A real gentleman. Educated too – went to a proper Jewish school. Not like me. I left school at twelve – well you had to in those days, but truthfully I was glad to be shot of it. Been thrashed by the Fathers once too often.

They asked me down the dole office what Mr. Mandel was to me. They said it was "all in the hands of the social services". But I don't want him shovelled into the ground by the council in some pauper's grave without so much as a by-your-leave.

It's not as if I can do anything myself. I had a few bob put by but – well, he put it by for me really, took a little bit out me pension every Tuesday - but since he got took ill and went up the hospital the house got sort of quiet. The kids stopped coming round. I took to going up the pub again a bit. And the drink's always been the temptation with me. So now it's all gone. The money's gone. The kids gone, he's gone. There's nothing left...

I'm sorry, miss. I didn't mean to do that. Look at me grizzling like a girl. You must think I'm soft, or something.

Oh, thank you miss. I'd love one. Don't see many places with a tea lady these days. She's not...? Well, it's good you've got the volunteers...

Three sugars, please. *[Pause]* Now don't you be trying to tell me what I can have in me tea. I didn't come down the Citizen's to be lectured by the likes of you. I hope I'm not speaking out of turn.

You see, it's not as if he had anybody else. The £family's all dead. Not that he ever had much time for them. And he never got married or anything like that. *[Confidential]* Actually, if the truth be told, I think he was a bit frightened of women. He wasn't the marrying kind, if you know what I mean.

So now there's only me. And I want to see him done right by.

Cos fifteen years is a long time. Of course, when you get to my age it goes a lot faster, but fifteen years... still... I got to pay him back for his kindness. Cos I was in a terrible state when I met him. Me wife had just died, and I took to the drink then too. Never washed. Rags on my back. Terrible. And he changed all that.

I remember. I was standing in the Post Office. I'd just collected me pension. It was about a month after my wife died, and I'd never been to collect on my own before. I couldn't put her out of my mind. And there between the queues, I just broke down. Howled like a baby. I kept remembering. One night we'd gone to bed, same as usual, and when I woke up in the morning, there she was lying beside me, cold. She'd just gone in the night, never even made a noise or

anything. Never even woke me up. Mind you, I've always been a heavy sleeper. Perhaps she tried... And there in the Post Office, I thought how cold she'd been and I couldn't stop myself.

Mr. Mandel came over and put his hand on my shoulder. I tried to shake him off, cos I can't stand strangers touching me, and him seeing me in that state. But he wouldn't take no for an answer. When I calmed down a bit, he took me to the caff round the corner in Tavistock Place.

You know what they say about Jewish mothers? Well he was just like that. Sat opposite me saying 'Eat! Eat!' and me sitting there staring at a plate of beans on toast. He was right, of course. I hadn't touched a thing for days – well, you don't bother when you're on your own, do you? But, he made me snap out of it. I don't know how. Sheer force of kindness, almost rammed the food down me throat. Followed by a Belgian bun – wouldn't take no for an answer.

Then he took me to his house, and made me have a wash and a bit of a lie-down till I felt a bit better. And I told him about my wife and things. And how the council wanted to move me to a single flat – sheltered flat – warden – surrounded by a load of old people! Jesus, think of that! Load of old biddies fussing around, looking for a bit of how's-your-father and maybe a second husband. I'd go up the wall!

Well, we talked things over, and there he was with his spare room he didn't need, and wondering how he was going to make ends meet now the rag trade had put him out to grass, as he called it. And the rag trade was never exactly generous, wasn't only the cloth where they cut corners! So, to cut a long story

short, he let me move in. Into his own home. 'Paying guest,' he said. Seemed an ideal solution.

So we settled into our little ways. I helped him with the dole office when he had troubles – you see, he'd worked all his life, he'd never had to bother with them before. It came as a bit of a shock for him to have to go down there. He didn't like making a fuss. Didn't want charity.

'Charity be blowed, Mr. Mandel,' I said, 'It's your bloody right. You've earned it.' And I made those buggers – pardon my French – sit up and take notice, I can tell you. To get him what was his by right. You have to fight for these things. Like now...

I could help round the house too, cos I was in the building trade, off and on. Not exactly steady, working The Lump, and the drink didn't help, but I'd never lost me touch. He'd let that place go something terrible. Smell of damp rot, mould all over the walls. Half the floorboards were rotten. I doubt if he'd even noticed it. Never had the time or the interest, what with all the tailoring. If he'd been married, his wife would have had something to say about it, I'll be bound.

So I set about putting it to right. I still had my tools, and what with all the skips around, there were materials everywhere – there was a lot of re-build going on. And he took care of all the money and the shopping. Like I said, he saved for me. I paid all my pension to him, he let me have a few bob for fags. Not for booze, not now! I've never had a head for figures, but he had it all worked out. I never even realised how much he'd saved for me till he showed me where the

Post Office book was, when he was took sick at last. And on a Friday or Saturday we'd go out down to the pictures together. We'd argue whether to go to the Empire, Mile End or the Regal, Hackney. The Regal was classier, but further. I'd choose the film one week – I liked John Wayne – and he'd go for something a bit deeper the next week. And always a pint after in the Ten Bells in Commercial Road – just the one, mind!

So we got along. It was – it was a real home. Sometimes I'd miss me wife to be sure, but he understood that, even though he hadn't been married himself. Marvellous sympathy that man had. It was a great comfort.

Do you understand what I'm saying, miss? I loved that man. Loved him. Don't get me wrong, there wasn't anything funny about it. I'm not like that, and we had our own rooms. Though in the winter, when the weather was very bad and the draught came through round the windows something chronic, I won't say we didn't share a bit of warmth from time to time. Never could afford central heating.

So it was comfortable. It was always comfortable. Like, I'd get a bit of bronchitis on my chest in the damp months, and he'd always be there with a bit of whisky and hot lemon – just a small one, mind! – or a smear of Vicks to rub on my chest. Such cool gentle hands he had. Touch like velvet.

Being ill on your own's a terrible thing. I was took bad after he went up the hospital. Most miserable time of me life. Clock ticking on the landing, not a sound in the house. Couldn't hardly move. You lie there thinking, Is this it? Is this the time? Will they find me cold in me bed too? Terrible.

First day I was back on my feet. I went straight up to the hospital to see him, cos I used to go and see him every day. Oh yes. But then I didn't, for a fortnight, and there was no way to tell him why I hadn't been in. And, d'you know, when I got there he was so worried. Not for himself, but for me. For me.

'Are you all right. Michael? Should you be out so soon? Are you looking after yourself?'

He was worried about me. And him lying there dying.

I hated going up to see him in that place. Hated it. It was converted from an old workhouse. And I remember when it was a workhouse too, back in the Twenties. Little windows high up on the walls. Bars over them. All them smells. I think I took it worse than he did. He was very good about it.

Very patient. 'Won't be long now, Michael,' he used to say. And the marvellous thing was, he never lost his interest. Always wanted to know what was going on. The nurses loved him.

Towards the end I couldn't face going up there without a drink or two. I used to smuggle in a drop of brandy for the two of us. By that stage Mr Mandel didn't mind the drink, not under the circumstances. But then the Sister caught me.

After that I went down the pub first. One day I'd what with the worry. When I got to the ward, he was going. They said he was asleep and couldn't see me, but I could tell from their eyes he hadn't got long.

'Let me in,' I said. 'I know he'd want to see me.' 'He's not conscious,' they said. 'Then how d'you know he doesn't want to see me?'

'How d'you know he does want to see you? You're not family. You might upset him.'

'He's asleep,' I said.

'What if he wakes up?'

Round and we went, like it was some sort of game. I begged. I pleaded with them, the tears streaming down me face like a girl.

'You've got to let me in. He's in there bloody dying.'

Didn't make a blind bit of difference. Not next of kin, they said. Not a relative, they said. 'Sorry, but those are the rules, and that's final.' After fifteen years.

A couple of porters took me out. But I wasn't going to give up so easy. I waited till the porters had gone, and I nipped round the side of the building. Sure enough, there was a toilet window there – you know the sort, a big window underneath and a little window on the top. There was bars on the big window but the little window was open.

I went over to the kitchens, and there was a couple of milk crates outside, so I dragged one of them over – the bad leg was killing me – and got up on top of it. I reached in through the little window. but I couldn't get the catch on the big window. So I took my stick and smashed it. Took off the rubber tip and poked through the window, through the bars. I wasn't going to let him go, just like that.

They called the police then too. Said I was disturbing the other patients. Oh, but they knew all right what the real trouble was. Cos, as they was taking me down the nick I heard them talking in the front of the car.

'What's the trouble?' asks the driver.

'Nothing,' says the copper. 'Some old poof kicked the bucket, and this is his boyfriend. He's going bananas.'

'What, him?' says the driver. 'Ought to be past it at his age, dirty old sod.' I could have killed him. I would have killed him, but I hadn't got the strength left. I was too exhausted even to cry, let alone raise a finger to him.

Lucky the magistrate was kind. Otherwise I'd never have got out in time to find out what they were going to do with him. Cos they can't keep him in the - down there for ever, even with the strike on. And they wouldn't even tell me where he was going to be. Do you think you can do anything, miss? Mrs. Khan next door told me you help people at the Citizen's with the social security and eviction and things. I'm worried they'll just bung him in the crematorium cos that's the easiest, but they couldn't do that, could they? That's against his religion. It's not much to ask, is it? A decent burial with a few flowers and a bit of music. He'd have liked that - very fond of music he was. Brass bands was his favourites. And Bing Crosby.

If you could try. Thursday? I'll be in. Thank you. I'm sorry to take up your time. I wouldn't have bothered you over a little thing like this, I'm sure there are people out there much more deserving. But there's nowhere else to go, see?

Oh, no. Thank you very much. I don't want no social worker to come sniffing around my place. Asking questions, moving the furniture. I can stand on my own feet. Don't you worry about me, I can manage. But I do miss him. He was a wonderful man.

'Well, you been a great comfort, miss, just by listening. I won't say 'a great help' yet, we'll see what you manage to do. No, don't bother, I'll see myself out – if you could just pass me stick? Thank you. I'll see you on Thursday, then.

And thanks for the cup of tea.

**LIGHTS FADE AS HE EXITS**