

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

By Liz Harris

I was on me way through the precinct, keeping me head down, hopin' no one would notice I was out in the streets when I should've been in that dump of a school, when I saw somethin' fall out of the pocket of the tall bloke in front of me. He was wearing a long mac, the man was. He didn't see it fall, so he just kept on walkin'.

I opened me mouth to call out to him—really I did—but when I looked down at what was on the ground, and saw it was a wallet—well, you know. It was a black wallet. It looked like it was made of real leather, and it was bulging. I was that surprised, I was. Bet the wallet alone is worth at least a tenner, I thought, and I looked back up at the man. But he was miles away and he'd never've heard me call.

So I did what anyone would've done, didn't I?

I bent over and pretended to fiddle with me trainer, but really, I was shovin' the wallet up me sleeve. It wasn't easy, I can tell you—me anorak's old and me sleeves are much too short—but I did it. And when it was out of sight, I stood up and looked around. Me heart was beatin' up a storm. But nope, no one had seen me. So I pulled up me collar and got away from there double quick.

It had been an awful week, I thought as I scurried down the street, and I well deserved that bit of luck. First I'd got done in History, and it wasn't even me fault—that History teacher's a mean git and he hates me. And then some of the older lads at school

knocked me around a bit as I looked at them funny, or so they said. As for me mum, she never stops goin' on at us. She's bin worse than ever recently.

Yup, it was well and truly me turn for some luck. And it wasn't as if that bloke would miss whatever was in it. He had a proper mac, not a poxy old anorak like me.

Then the friggin' rain started, didn't it, so I belted into a nearby caff, tryin' ter look normal, though my heart was still thumpin' that fast.

It being my lucky day, I decided to go mad and push the boat out, and I asked for a chocolate milkshake with whipped cream, with extra bits of chocolate on top. Then I went and sat in the corner facin' the door, wantin' to see who came in, just in case.

While I was drinkin' the shake, I dug me hand in me pocket and wriggled me arm around, tryin' to slip the wallet down me sleeve and into me pocket. It worked. I took another quick look around the caff, but I was still all right—no one was lookin' at me.

I could feel the wallet was folded over, and a sort of catch was keepin' it closed. I tried like mad to undo the catch, but I couldn't with one hand only, could I? I then tried to get me finger inside the wallet, into the money bit, but I couldn't do that either, it being folded-up like and stuffed so full.

But I could tell there was notes in there, and lots of them. I felt that excited. I couldn't wait to get home and count the dosh.

When I'd spooned out the last bit of froth from the mug, I left the caff by the side door. As soon as I got outside, I looked around. But there was no sign of anyone waitin' for me, so I knew I must be okay. And as it was tippin' down by then, and me anorak let the rain in, I set off for home as fast as I could.

The trouble with me is, I got too much imagination. I saw this film once about a guy who found a stash of money. Turns out it was Mafia money and he got chased all round the world. I can't remember what happened in the end, but I think they done 'im in. I kept on thinking about the film, and looking over me shoulder, I was that scared I wouldn't get home safe.

To be honest, I felt really bad about keeping that bloke's money, didn't I, even if he didn't need it like I did. My feet were wet for a start 'cos of the holes in me trainers. And I needed a new jacket, too. Something real cool that'd keep me dry. And the others at school were always boastin' about an ace club in Camden Town. Now I might be able to go there, too. If I went at least once, I wouldn't seem such a loser to them.

It was certainly time I had a break.

Finally, I got to our block of flats. The lift was bust—but when isn't it? So I had to walk up the stairs which smelt of piss to get to our landing. When I'd let myself into the flat, I found that Mum hadn't got back yet, and nor had my brothers. It meant I could look inside the wallet without havin' to hide in the bog.

There wasn't any milk or anything in the fridge, so I poured a glass of water and went and sat on the corner of me bed. I wiped me hands on me jeans—they were that sweaty with me being nervous like—and I took the wallet out of me pocket. Yup, that's leather all right, I thought.

I undid the stud, and opened out the wallet. Well, you could've knocked me down with a feather at what was in those little credit card pockets—a big fat nothing! They were all empty.

The bloke didn't have no cards. Not even one. And there was no name, no address, no nothin' anywhere. And no money-off coupons. Nothin'. But everyone has things like that, don't they? At least, lucky sods with jobs do, and he'd looked like one of those.

To be honest, I was kinda relieved as if I didn't know who he was, I couldn't give the money back, could I? And it didn't feel so much like I was robbin' 'im.

Then I opened the money bit, and you could've knocked me down all over again. I'd thought maybe I'd find some fivers and a few tenners, but there were twenties, too. Lots of them! I couldn't believe me luck. I counted them out, not once, but twice. It was just over five hundred quid! I'd hit the jackpot.

All of a sudden, I heard someone bangin' on the front door. Me stomach turned over, and I leapt up, shit scared. Then I heard me mum's voice. She was calling to me through the letterbox. Tommy, she was calling.

Man, did I feel relieved. It was only Mum! For a minute I'd thought I was gonna get done, like the man in the Mafia film. I shoved the money and wallet into me pocket and went and opened the door.

Mum had this big bag of washing with her, and I helped 'er pull it into the flat. No wonder she was knackered, I thought—she'd had to lug it all the way from the launderette and then up the stairs. Our caretaker's somethin' else.

As soon as we'd got the washing in, she started goin' on at me, didn't she? She's always moanin' at me, Mum is. But that's 'cos she's always tired. But this time she sounded scared, too. They'd sent someone round from school that morning, she said, and she'd end up in court if I didn't start goin' every day.

At least she cares for me, my mum. She wants me to go to school and get me exams so I'll have a better life. But they don't teach you nothin' in that joke of a place. They dunno how to shut the kids up and make them listen.

They're lying about the court, I told her as I helped her fold the washin' and put it away. But I promised I'd start goin' to the dump every day.

And then I had a thought. I could get her a washing machine with the money I'd got! Five hundred was a lot of smackers. And I'd still have enough for new trainers and a jacket. And new trainers for my brothers, too. And there'd be a bit left over for me to have some fun.

There was a tap on the door, and Mum stood still. A quiet tap, it was. And then again. Mum peeped around the net curtain and went dead white—she really did.

'Don' open the door,' she whispered, flapping her hands in a panicky way. 'It's Mrs Akkers.'

So what, I said.

She'd borrowed money from her, she told me, sort of whispering like. She knew she shouldn't have gone to her, but she did. She'd wanted to get my brothers and me somethin' nice for Christmas. It wasn't much she'd borrowed, but she couldn't pay it back when she'd said she would, and now she owed 'er even more, and Mrs Akkers had been pushin' 'er for it.

And she told me that Mrs Akkers' husband was a mean bastard, and she was afraid of what he might do. I really thought she was gonna pass out, she was that sick-looking. Then she started to cry.

Well, I opened the door, didn't I? What else could I do? And I gave that Akkers cow the money in my wallet. Every stinkin' penny of it. But she's my mum, isn't she? She didn't say a word when I gave the dosh to Mrs Akkers—like she didn't wanna know. She just stood there, shakin'. But I could tell she was that relieved to see the old witch go.

I know it wasn't really my money to give away, Father, but you should've seen my mum's face and how frightened she was. And she'd only borrowed the money 'cos she'd wanted to get us boys a present. But I feel bad about the bloke that lost the wallet, and it's been doin' me head in all week. So I came here today, sort of to say I was sorry.

On the other side of the grille, the priest leaned forward and began talking quietly to Tommy, going through with him what he'd done. And then he suggested practical ways in which Tommy could show his regret.

When the priest had finished, Tommy stood up and thanked him, saying he felt much better for telling him all about it. And he opened the door, walked out of the confessional and made his way up the aisle, his thin shoulders hunched beneath his lightweight anorak.

The priest opened the door on his side of the confessional, stepped out into the church, and stared for a moment after Tommy. Then he went across to the sacristy and picked up the phone.

'Is that the Camden police station?' he asked, when a voice came on the line at the other end. 'This is Father Grainger. You may recall that I reported the loss of my wallet earlier this week. It contained the Easter gifts given to me by my parishioners. Well, would you be kind enough to record the matter as closed? There's no need for you to look any further for the wallet—a good man found it.'