

## Star is in the East

Go. He will find her. (It's Go, pronounced as, actually written as Geo, because our family name was Cash - look up Geocache, for yourself. Must have seemed a good idea. Distinctive though innit? Know anyone else called 'Go'? Thought not).

It had been chaotic. It was the morning, the day before Christmas Eve, when things went downhill with mum. It had been coming for a while. The Christmas play at school had been a trial. Given everything that was going on with her, she did well to hold it together. Life was all too much, and too little. Too much she loved, and too little she had to show it, of herself, of money, for us.

"I don't care about myself; I care about you."

The warning signs of many times before during the very highs and deep lows. Little food. No presents. Cold house.

I closed the door on her wailing, there'd be no stopping. I called adult services, spoke to duty desk, left a message for her social worker to contact CPN (that's Community Psychiatric Nurse, see what I'll say in a minute about carer kid talk).

"Tell them it's the usual. Low".

Carer kid talk, we got all the professional chat, after all we do most of the care so we need to talk the talk so they know when we say we can't walk the walk they know we know what we're talking about.

Nothing more to do. We know we can't do anything when she's like it. Mum wouldn't notice us gone till she was better. Then we can come back and everything will be normal. If only she'd take her meds. It would help.

I walked Star down to the social work office. Inside, it was warm. It was why we liked going to school. Warm and food and friends. Teachers know what's going on with our situation and they do what they can. They know when we are the last to leave after-school club all isn't good at home. I can tell they know by their faces, that look, 'what can I do' and sympathy, which has to end at the school gate.

"Hello Geo. Want a hot chocolate Star?" The receptionist.

We like her. Welcoming.

"How can we help today?" She goes on to explain, long story short, no people available, might be a wait.

Not too long and a social worker comes to see us sitting around the Christmas tree, the lights flicking on us both. She listens like she already knew, probably read up before seeing us. She's a pro. We hadn't met her before, but we could see that she knew what we knew.

“We need to find somewhere for you two, don’t we? Star nodded. “Let’s get on the phones.”

Several hot chocolates passed with us looking at the blinking Christmas tree.

“OK, we have somewhere for you Geo. Foster care is full. It’s a children’s home all set for Christmas.” She sat on the edge of Star’s chair. “Star we are still looking.” She turned to me. “I know Geo you won’t go anywhere till Star is settled. You hungry? I’ve got a Christmas sandwich, it’s mine but I haven’t had time to eat it, chicken, stuffing, cranberry sauce. You like it? You’re welcome.”

“What’s cranberry?” asked Star.

“Like jam, fruit, sweet,” said the social worker.

“Chicken and jam? ...Really?” said Star.

I could tell that she wasn’t sure whether the social worker was fooling her and it was OK to laugh.

“Uh huh, it goes well. Believe me,” social worker said.

“I’ll give it a go,” Star said. She sat, eating, evaluating savoury and sweet, unsure of something new, she was uncertain.

I watched her who knows how long for. She looked at me eat it no question.

It wasn’t long and social worker was back.

“Star we’ve found somewhere for you too. It’s a children’s home too. It’s not with Geo as all the lads in that home are seventeen and you’re only seven. The one we’ve found for you is a special one for younger children.”

Star sat upright. “I’m glad it’s not foster care. I’ve said it so many times. I’ve got a mum. I don’t need another one.” Star looked at me. “It’s like someone listened this time. They knew what I needed.”

“Ok. You both need to be ready in five minutes. Geo, Charlie is driving you. Carly is driving you Star.”

In the rush there was only time for a hug and a reluctant, “See you soon...again,” from Star as I kissed her head.

It was only when we were driving I realised I didn’t know where Star was going. Charlie didn’t know, so he called the social worker, who gave him the number for commissioning (placements finders). He called, but no one had replied before I arrived at the home. Surfing the tidal wave of care I guess, overwhelmed, understaffed. Head on beds, result. Matching need with the right place would be nice, but choice needs time and availability. Whoever heard of anyone providing care

waiting for the next kid? It's open the door and here we are! Reality is, more than half times it's ok, and less than half its not.

Arrived and in. Room ok. Clean, tidy, nice colours. Some clean clothes, nice ones too, been thought about. Done this before. Obv. Wash bag. Towel. This lot are good, used to children like me, got things in store. Warm. I got an en-suite! Me, an en-suite!!!

The rest of the evening was autopilot. Food. Xmas TV, not really watching. New people. New people so often I'm good at sussing them out quickly. Who's ok. Who not. Who to be nice to and avoid. Long day. Sleep came easy.

Woke feeling guilty I didn't know where Star was last night.

Wash. No. Shower! Warm house. Towel smells clean.

At breakfast I say, "I need to know where Star is. She needs to know I know. Please can you find out quickly." 10.30, no news. I go to manager and ask. She calls social worker and commissioning. Phone rings. And rings.

"I'll keep trying. Meanwhile we need to sort you out. All our children get Christmas clothes and presents. As your here you are one of ours, of us! So, Jem is going to go shopping with you. You're in charge of your budget but Jem has to agree what you spend it on. OK?"

I go shopping. The noise, crowds, lunch, more chicken. I'm thinking Christmas is a bad time for chickens.

I get back. No news. How is it possible not to have news. To be able to talk to someone? The manager sits me down. She's sweaty. She explains what she's going to do. She's been calling and calling. I believe her.

So now she calls EDT, yes I know what it means I tell her. She listens to the person talking then, loudly, insists the Director calls her. Urgent. She ends with a nice Thank You that also meant no arguing I'm expecting.

In minutes the Director calls. The manager explains. I know what push back is, and it sounds like it's coming down the phone, but the manager holds firm. He says something about Regulation 5 and quotes. I can see she's reading from a page above her desk.

"Regulation 5. Engaging with the wider system to ensure children's needs are met. 'It is crucial that the home works in close partnership with all those who play a role in protecting and caring for the child, but particularly the child's local authority and statutory social worker'." She looks across at me and nods smiling, then she says, "So I am working with the system, and Directors are in the system. You're at work aren't you? It's not a day off? I am advocating for our (I noticed she dialled up the volume and changed her tone just for that word) who is here in the office right next to me."

Voice on the phone I can't make out but I know what was said when the manager says, "I know I know all of that, but we", she emphasises, "we have taken two children who are close and split them up. My young man is the girl's de facto parent. I know he's too young for PR (parental responsibility) but it's what you do that makes you a parent. No, I'm not being facetious. I'm being concerned. He needs to know. She needs to know. And all three of us need to know how mum is doing. A Christmas without her kids must be stressful and, in her situation, I imagine it must make things worse. We've a big social work problem. Yes, I know how many there are over Xmas. Yes, please call me soonest."

She turns. Tears in her eyes. "Done my best."

I know. I was here. I heard. I understand. "You did good, It's not ok but you're good."

"It's not ok," she says.

A lonely rest of the day. Mum would say I was moping. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I am joining in and not joining in. Everyone seems to know.

I can't sleep. I can't be awake either.

Couldn't take it anymore. "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." A quote from a wall poster in mum's bedroom of a woman she admired, Angela Davis. Nice afro Angela!

I spend the night making a plan. I get up early. I ask all the other children and grown-ups to meet in TV room. I explain my plan. What I think will work.

Grown-ups don't say "No." They do say "Can't stop anyone contacting anyone especially their friends on their phones."

The children know what they're saying. It's not a secret. It's not approved either. "We'll have to tell others what you're doing. By which time you'll have done it and if works it'll be rolling."

My plan. I figured, use the phone network. I'll What's App a message and so would lads to all our in-care friends. With a photo of Star. And explanation and a message.

My message goes like this:

"A message from a child in care to other children in care - I need your help to find my sister. We've been split up. At Xmas. I need to find her to tell her I am OK. She needs to find me to know I am OK. We're all each other have got. Here's her photo. Have you seen her? Contact Geo. Send this to all your in-care friends. This is going viral. This is going to be massive. Be a star for Christmas PLEASE."

I set up an email for the purpose, so I can't be traced. And so I don't mind my 'tag' being sent onwards. So it went from phone to phone in my head.

Till 'ping'. Only Two hours.

Message read 'Saw her today on the beach with a dog and a young woman'. Gave location.

I told the grown-ups. No secrets.

I was going. If they liked it or not. "Get a driver!"

"Whoa. Slow down. Needs planning. I know it's hard. Let's do some searching. Meanwhile, breathe!"

Manager looked up children's homes near location. Just three. Good news. Felt tickle of hope. Gonna do it. It's gonna work. Children in care looking after one of their own.

More news pinged in. Seen going into a house called 'The Stable' with other children. Looked happy. Gave location.

"Yep, that's one on our list."

Manager calls a friend in another home who calls another. Manager gets a call and an email and phone number. Meanwhile I found The Stable on the internet. Looks OK. Says younger children only. Social worker being true with us. Good. Trust. Did best.

Manager calls The Stables. Rings and rings. Voice says, "Sorry to keep you waiting, it's Christmas Eve, we were busy." Understood. Manager explains for me, what I've done. Explains I need to talk to Star.

I'm handed the phone.

It's The Stables grown-up speaking, "And she needs to speak with you. She doesn't know where you are. Hold on..." I hear a scream of joy and running little feet.

"It's you, it's you, it's you. It's me. You and me." All running together. "Are you there? Are you ok? Where are you?"

"I'm here. I'm OK. I'm near home actually."

The feeling grows; I need to see my Star. I look at manager. I mouth, "I need to see her. She needs to see me."

Manager reaches to signal 'Give me the phone.'

"Star it's Geo's grown-up here, I need to speak with your grown-up. I'll pass you back in a second. They talk about a Zoom meet. When? Now!"

She hands back the phone, "Ok keep talking and we'll sort the Zoom."

In no time we were seeing each other. Her big smile. My big smile. We talked about what had happened. She told me how great the place was and the people especially

Joe, older, and Maz, younger, father, daughter, set up the place 'cause younger children need residential care too. "Like me," says Star.

We talk, then the grown-ups say we need a plan. Can't talk all night. We all need to enjoy our Christmas Eve. We agree we'll zoom early tomorrow after breakfast and share presents.

"Love you lots Star."

"Love you more Geo."

Talking Christmas Day. Three times.

In the afternoon deputy manager says, "Got a surprise. Tomorrow, one of us is going to take you to see Star."

Long way.

"It'll be fine. Lots of singing. Lots of sweets."

Boxing Day. Bright and early off we go. Houses give way to fields. Town follows town. Road gets smaller. We're there. 'The Stables' says name on the gates.

Star runs out. I run to Star. We hold each other and scream delight. We jump. Grown ups watch beaming too.

There's tea. Food. Lunch. Sausage roll and chips. "Your favourite Geo," said a Stables grown-up. "Star told us. There's more if you want it."

We eat. We talk.

Then Star looks and says quietly to me only, "I want to show you something." She turns to grown-ups, "Can we go out down the path in the garden?"

As we walk, she says, "I got a present money can't buy."

We walk down the garden and we're on the beach.

"I had a Christmas present with everyone, here. Not wrapped up tho. It was seeing the sun rising over the sea. It's a present you can't buy. It was beautiful. We all got up early. It wasn't quite light, not still dark. We were all went. Coats. Hats. When we got there, there was a bonfire. We toasted marshmallows. Hot Vimto! Then we watched."

She smiled at me "I'll never forget this Christmas Geo. It's been so good."

"And I got a present money can't buy too Star "I say.

She looked puzzled. "You did too?"

"You want to know what it was?" Star nodded.

"It was... You!"

She shrieked with joy. And we held each other and jumped.

“And I believe in happy endings now,” I said to Star. And turned round to look at The Stables. “And so do other people.”

Star interrupted my thinking. “It’s a lovely place run by Joe and his daughter Maz. Joe and Maz said it might be OK to stay a few days every so often. Would that be all right Geo?”

“It would be very all right Star.”

**And I thought: Care is care when people care. When they show it. Show, don’t tell. When people go the extra mile. This lot went hundreds of extra miles showing they care. RESPECT!**

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### **Disclaimer**

***(This story is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, events or localities is entirely coincidental).***

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