

Fruit basket

Every surface of the small, cramped office was covered in paper, folders and brightly coloured post it notes. Sabrina hunched at one of the desks rifling through her briefcase “I hate these visits – they’re worse than the CQC”, she grumbled, her mouth full of toast.

“How come?”, Shannon asked clearing a space on the desk to put a mug of tea in front of her boss.

“You’ll learn. It’s very different from the birth adoption squad visits. They have a much easier ‘sell’”.

“Yeah, they’re *E-harmony* for families”, Paul the social worker chimed in, accepting his cup of tea with a wink.

Sabrina ignored him, “Some of the prospectives come in like they’re doing their weekly shop. Sizing up the kids like my mum used to prod the peaches and pears in Asda. Looking for one that’s not too bruised, or too ripe or too wonky...”

“Ignore me” she sighed, “I’m just having one of those days. Come on.”

Shannon and Paul followed and as they entered the day room, the decibel level fell sharply. The children assembled, ranging in age from five to eighteen and were dressed in a variety of outfits. Some had adhered to the ‘*make yourself presentable*’ edict and others clearly had not.

“She’ll be an easy one”, Sabrina muttered under her breath looking at one of the children nearest to them, “cute, a girl and under ten. The sad dead parent story doesn’t hurt either”.

Shannon gasped.

“I’m just telling it like it is,” Sabrina shrugged “See him”, she indicated the boy next to the cute girl. “Mum is bipolar, dad’s an alcoholic. A good kid but he’s been in and out of foster care since two, ran away from his last one and ended up back here again.”

“Yep, I’m worried about him”, Paul agreed. “I’m sure the last disappearing act was County Lines related. Did you know his brother Pat just got another ten months in juvie?”

“Yeah, another one in the pipeline...”

“Exclusion, foster care, juvenile detention, then prison” Paul clarified, answering Shannon’s questioning look. “A grim production line and we’re the factory workers trying to get as many off the conveyor belt as possible”

“Maybe the belt needs unplugging then?” Shannon ventured, “to stop some getting on in the first place?”

“Well, that’s why you’re here – to shake things up a bit” Sabrina smiled for the first time that morning, “because I don’t know how many of these open days I can keep doing. It’s like a sad farmers’ market where only the shiniest, Instagram ready produce will be taken home. But often it’s the battered, tatty looking ones that need it the most.”

They stopped talking as the group of potential fosters filed into the room. Sabrina sighed again and surveyed her charges, some of whom looked pensive, some hopeful, some resigned but all waiting to see who would be picked.

484 words

Song title “*Strange Fruit*” by Billie Holliday