

## A Free Lunch

Several beggars tell me there are richer pickings in the suburbs than in London.

“There’s less competition,” they say, “and people aren’t in such a rush.”

I decide to give it a go using the Freedom Pass I’ve recently found in the subway. It’s a good idea. I make £200 in less than an hour in Wimbledon and similar in Edgware though the atmosphere in Epping is negative and I leave with just £15.

Today I’m trying Rickmansworth, just half an hour on the Chiltern Line. I put my cushion up my skirt before I catch the train. I want to arrive in character. My begging accessories are in my big bag.

I like sitting outside cafes, easy to get free coffees. It’s a short walk from the station to the shops. There are several coffee shops but the best place looks to be outside Greggs. I sit on my thick blanket, stand my notice **Pregnant and Hungry** and put a beaker in front

Several older ladies, with sticks, grimace treating me as an obstruction they have to avoid. Younger women with pushchairs also look at me with contempt. I smile at their babies and touch my stomach but no warmth is returned. Maybe this won’t be a good day.

However, the first man to pass stares at me with interest. I sense he’s making a judgement when he pauses. I’m right, he returns putting £5 note in my beaker. I mumble a thank you he smiles uncomfortably but says nothing. As soon as he’s gone, I move the money to an envelope hidden in my bra.

Over the next hour, few women give me anything but many men make a contribution mainly in notes. Finally, one stops to talk. He’s middle aged and I’ve watched him pass me several times.

“Are you hungry?”

I nod, my placard speaks for me

“Come into Greggs, I’ll get you a meal”

How can I refuse? I haven’t eaten today. He buys me a steak wrap, a Belgium bun and a coffee. He suggests we sit at a table and talk but I tell him I must stay outside,

“Where are you from?” he asks

“ Manchester.” I hope he’s doesn’t know that accent.

“Do you have anywhere to stay?”

I'm wary sensing there's an offer coming. Maybe, it's benevolent but probably it's a grooming initiative. I want money not help.

"Yes, I am in a hostel till I get myself sorted. Your contribution will help."

He gives me another £20 and his contact card

"Give me a call if you need help," he says.

I read the card when he's gone – *Free Lunch Consultant!*

Shortly after my boss strolls by. I had to tell him where I was. He bends as if to give me something but it's so I can pass him the envelope with the money I've collected. But it's not all. I'm hiding some for my escape fund. I'll buy my own lunches soon.