THE HYGIENE BANK

The Empty Shelf, by Mark - Project Co-ordinator at THB North Wales

There is an empty shelf in a bathroom.

Nothing unusual.

A space where shampoo should be.

A toothpaste tube rolled, squeezed, flattened, trying to get one more brush out of it.

Shower gel turned upside down.

And a bar of soap. For your hands. Your body. Your hair.

Everything.

Because that's what you've got. So that's what you use.

An empty shelf.

Except— an empty bathroom shelf doesn't stay in the bathroom.

It follows you.

Down the stairs. Out of the door. Onto the bus.

You sit down and wonder if the person next to you has noticed.

It follows you into school. Into the classroom.

You choose the empty chair with nobody sitting too close.

It follows you to work. Someone leans in. You lean away.

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It follows you to the invitation you turn down.

The photograph you step out of.

The conversation you keep your distance from.

The job interview you nearly don't go to.

Nobody else can see the shelf.

They just see you. Quiet. Distant. Maybe rude.

They don't see what followed you out of the bathroom.

Then you're standing in a supermarket.

Bread in one hand. Toothpaste in the other.

You need both. You can take one.

Bread. Toothpaste. Eat. Brush.

You shouldn't have to choose. But you do.

The toothpaste goes back.

Somewhere else, someone picks up a tube of toothpaste.

They don't know you.

They don't know about the bus. Or the empty chair.

Or the invitation. Or the interview.

They just know somebody needs it. So they give it.

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It goes into a box. Then another. It passes through hands.

Until one day, it reaches yours.

Tonight, there is toothpaste on the shelf. That's it.

One tube of toothpaste. It won't change your life.

That's not the point.

It means tonight you can brush your teeth.

And tomorrow— the shelf stays home.

You get on the bus. Without it. You sit in the classroom. Without it.

You go to work. Without it. You walk into that interview. Without it.

Someone leans in. This time, you don't lean away.

Ten years ago we were telling stories about people having to choose between essentials.

We're still telling them. There are still empty bathroom shelves.

This story should have ended by now. It hasn't.

One tube of toothpaste won't end hygiene poverty.

Neither will one bottle of shampoo. Or one bar of soap.

But somebody gives one. Somebody else gives another.

And tonight, somewhere, there is one less empty shelf.