



Steven Gerrard started coming to our house the day we were expecting a bloke to fix the lamps in the attic. He must have done a good job cos Mam's face lit up a treat.

Liverpool captain!

She told me on the Saturday.

'I'm off to town. You coming or staying with Dad?'

Town with Mam usually means chocolate. Or crisps. She leaves me gazing at snazzy boots and the new away kit and seems to be gone for ages.

'Had to meet someone,' she shrugs when I ask her.

'Who?'

'Steven Gerrard', she breathes with a hunching of shoulders and her gifted way of sparking cigarettes.

'Wow! Just wait till Dad hears.'

But Mam says it's a special secret and I can't tell him. Shame, cos it would have really cheered him up. Usually he's the one who tells me which red shirt is

which on telly and when to get excited. He probably knows things about Steven Gerrard that Mam'll never find out.

He was a bit of a player, too, my Dad, when he was little. He would've been England centre-forward if he'd been spotted earlier and not taken up smoking. It's his leg though now, he says. And the long shifts, I reckon.

I'm getting better myself - *one-two off the kitchen wall, chip the pothole* - I can score like Steven Gerrard when I'm on my own against the garage door.

And the garage door was fine for a while. Mam was just happy that that Dad's old banger wasn't there during the day. Embarrassed us all that car did and showed everyone just what my Dad had brought us to. I liked it though. It smelt of oil and Saturdays and it was a shame that Mam frowned when she heard it coming back.

Maybe that explains the grin on her face once Steven Gerrard started sticking his car there. Escort. Cracking motor. White and wonderful and waxy, with fins at the back and spider-web wheels. There was even a rude message on the back window. People from down the street would point at it, oohing and whispering and elbowing each other.

This put our drive out-of-bounds for football, but that's okay. I know scoring's not really the same if there's no defence.

I thought Steven Gerrard would maybe take me for a kick around since Dad was out of action but he never brought his boots. I did sometimes see his shoes at the bottom of our stairs, though, and I couldn't complain really cos I was getting loads of chocolate now.

'Stevie G's great, isn't he, Mam.'

She stares blankly. Steven Gerrard's wasted on her really.

'What did you tell your Dad?'

'Nothing,' I say and she gives me more chocolate.

'Don't say a word, otherwise he'll stop coming.'

'He looks different in real life.'

'Yeah well, they're so tiny on the telly.'

'The telly makes his hair look shorter.'

'Yeah,' she said, sucking a ciggie, 'it does that, telly.'

'We should tell Dad one day though. He reckons Steven Gerrard's the top man.'

'Your Dad's right for once.' There's a bit of cheek chewing and she sizes me up with squinty eyes. Then she smiles and touches a finger tip to her mouth. 'It's fun having secrets, isn't it.'

Her nail is all glossy and oval-ended and beautiful. Mam is beautiful, but it's only now she's realising it. It must be why she's smiling more. I didn't want to tell her that this particular secret was hurting a bit. I know that sometimes secrets can keep you warm at night, too, when everything seems cold and clouded.

Close up, Steven Gerrard looks nothing like he does in the newspaper either. He's got a gold tooth and lots of rings. He's a kind of orange colour, too, which Mam describes as 'golden' when I ask her. She says it's scorching on his boats in Sam Tropy and Bare-Ritz and if I play my cards right I could go next summer.

He encourages my football talent if nothing else, does Steven Gerrard. It was him who first suggested I went to the big park. It seems a long walk just to play by yourself, but there's a whack of extra chocolate if I get myself to score for all 22 of us – double if I take it to extra time and penalties.

So, although I tell Mam I don't really want to go any more, Steven Gerrard's keen I keep trying. 'Here's a transfer fee', he grins. 'See if you can get a couple more games in before your Dad gets back,' and I get twenty quid and it feels like fantasy in my fingers.

'You all right, son?' Dad asks when he pokes a head round my bedroom door on a Tuesday evening.

'Dad, you know how some things exist, but then they don't really, like Father Christmas and the Pie-Minster's promises.'

'If you like.' I've not really noticed how my dad smiles before, but it's as though he's dredged it from dark places with untold efforts especially for me.

'Well... nothing.' I wanted to keep talking cos Dad always tries to give the right answers, but I didn't know what to say. Instead Dad tells me why he has to

go the hospital again next weekend and I make him promise he's not going to die. He laughs and says he's not going anywhere so I'd not get my hands on his fortune yet. His fortune's a trophy he won in the darts league - only B team and some of the silver plastic's chipped off, but it's still cool to have something fortune-shaped for the mantelpiece.

'Do you have to work so late, Dad?'

He gives a nod served with another smile. 'Sorry, son.'

'Just, well, if money's tight again, I've got some you can have.'

'Really.'

'Twenty quid,' I confess after a pause.

'Right.' He ruffles my hair with the end of his newspaper and gives me a look as though he knows more than he wants to tell. 'We're doing well in the league' he then says, cheerfully. 'Steven Gerrard's been playing his socks off.'

I sort of open my mouth like I'm trying to swallow a snooker ball and wonder why I wanted to say something that I wasn't allowed. I guess that's what it must be like to grow up.

'You've not told anyone our secret?' Mam says, gazing out of the window and smoking quickly and high into the air.

I flick about in my pockets. I'd pinched a cigarette and stashed it there, but it had snapped and most of the stuffing was knocked out of it. Did that matter? I'd never smoked before. They seemed to make Mam happy though and maybe they'd work for me.

'How can it be a secret when his Escort's always there?'

'It's a different type of secret,' she says and giggles. She always giggles with Steven Gerrard but has a frown ready for Dad when he's due back from work.

I heard her giggling upstairs once when my midfielder got injured and cold and needed the toilet. I went in through the back door and heard raucousness upstairs. Maybe the attic lamps had gone again. When I called up, everything went quiet.

'You okay Mam?'

'Yes. I'm great sweetheart. Down in a minute.'

'I saw Steven Gerrard's car parked down the street. Is he visiting again?'

Silence and then a muffled, 'Hang on,' and I guess she was fine cos she gave the kind of giggle I remembered from holidays as a toddler in a tent.

'Dad's coming now, too' I shout back, 'I heard his car.' And there's a new kind of banging next and plenty of other noise as feet thump on stairs and the back door slams and whatever.

I was going to tell Dad to watch he didn't trip on Steven Gerrard's shoes, but the shoes had gone so I suppose Steven Gerrard had gone too.

Funny the way he breezes in and out, Steven Gerrard. When he's on telly, Dad tells me he's got pace and brings vision to the team. At our house, if nothing else, he's brought chocolates and cash and a smile to my Mam's face.

I don't know though, like presents and chocolate, some visitors seem to make people happier for a bit and then, maybe, sadder and different.

There had been giggles and even real laughter for a bit, but it blew away like smoke. Mam beat the bedroom drawers until they coughed stuff up into a suitcase.

'Sweetheart.'

'Yes.' I wondered if she knew about my mashed cigarette.

'Sweetheart, if I don't live here, you'll come with me, won't you?'

The words dissolved around me in a smoky breath. Of course I would. Boys always lived with mams, didn't they? 'So, are we going to live with Steven Gerrard?'

'Who?' she said irritably and then patted my head and smiled.

I didn't really want to move, partly cos the park was getting good now. I'd even found a couple of kids who'd kick the ball back to me.

Also, we'd already had this chat too many times now and I knew there was no answer to the 'where' question.

A week later and she's tapping her heels in the hallway, one hand on a suitcase. 'Look, sweetheart, there's some things that people decide and it, well, you see...'

'But they're teaching me to chip the ball and everything.'

I refused to move.

'Just, come on. Get your bag.'

I scraped my toes on the floor and by the time I'd bit my lip a bit she was boiling over. 'Look, pick the bloody bag up! Everything you need's in there.'

My football wasn't in the bag though, nor was my Dad.

'Mam, I'm not going.' I said.

'Oh for God's sake!' She pulled her suitcase onto the front step. 'What are you playing at?'

Playing? I wondered how to explain. 'It's not just about playing. Sometimes you need someone to play against and know there's something to play for...' I stopped because I didn't know what I was saying really and tears were dribbling on my face.

'You can't stay here. We'll have a great time, you me and...'

'And Steven Gerrard?'

Her voice went gentle again. 'We'll, love, you know...'

'Dad'll stop you,' I blurted because there was nothing else I could say, and Mam groaned into cupped palms.

'I need to go now,' she quavered and a tear pricked her eye. 'And I want you to come with me.' She stopped there. A car horn had sounded down the road.

'We have to go now. Before...'

'Dad'll stop you!' I repeated, my stomach swelling up into my rib cage and a burning sensation ridding me of tears.

She said nothing but 'sorry' as she clattered out of the gate and scraped her suitcase down the cement path.

I stood there sweating. Dad would know what to do. All I had to do was tell him they'd gone and he'd know. He'd stop it all. He'd stop whatever was hurting me. That's what dads do.

I listened to the clock clicking against the silence. I knew it wasn't the real Steven Gerrard she'd gone with, cos he was great, the real Steven Gerrard; he knew what it was like to play hard and fair and win... my Dad did too.

I heard the grate of a key and my Dad came in with a hug. I clung to one thought that was something like, 'get her Dad.' We could rescue everything.

There was still time if we jumped in the car right now because dads can do anything.

‘You okay son?’

His smile rose up through a concerned frown and I breathed deeply, pulling him towards the back door. ‘Come on, Dad,’ I said and gave him a grin that could have been almost adult. ‘We’re off to the park. You can be goalie.’

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2,000 words

Contact:

Michael Wilson

[michael.wilson@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:michael.wilson@brighton.ac.uk)

07941 344710 / 644175

Staff member at the University of Brighton