

POVERTY

By Bobby Keniston

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POVERTY

A Ten Minute Dramatic Monologue

By Bobby Keniston

SYNOPSIS: April, an average teenage girl, doesn't understand why her Mother "strongly encourages" her to volunteer at the local food cupboard every week. She likes to help out, but the environment makes her sad. When her mother explains why it's important to confront a problem head on, April begins to relive an old memory, long-forgotten, of a terrible encounter in a grocery store when she was just a little girl. This ten minute dramatic monologue confronts the issue of poverty, and the need to be an active participant in fighting hunger. Perfect for forensics competitions or a night of monologues.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 either; gender flexible)

APRIL/ADAM (m/f)..... Teenager, dresses like an average teen. As she tells her story, she begins to relive certain elements, especially the incident in the grocery store when she was only five years old.

CAST NOTE

This monologue can also be performed by a male actor. If this is the case, you may change the name to ADAM, and change any reference to the character's gender accordingly (for example, the man in the grocery store would call him "Little boy".)

SETTING

APRIL is onstage alone. It can be an empty space, or, if you like, there can be representations of a church food cupboard onstage as well.

This Monologue is dedicated to everyone who knows what it is like to stand in line at a food cupboard, and to all of those who give of their time and resources to help fight hunger.

APRIL: *(To the audience.)* Since I've been in high school, my Mom has forced me to volunteer at the local food cupboard with her. Okay, maybe "forced" isn't the right word. I'll go with "strongly encouraged" instead. She says it's important to give back to the community. I get it. She's right, and I agree with her. It's a nice thing to do. Still, I never understood why she was so passionate about volunteering EVERY week. I mean, wouldn't we reach our good deed quota if we volunteered every other week, or even once a month? Most people don't even do that much.

The food cupboard is set up at a church we don't attend, but everyone is still nice to us and happy to have us there. My Mom and I check the expiration dates on the canned goods, the generic brand boxes of cereal, the blocks of cheese that are more oil than dairy. It's weird— when I first saw those blocks of "cheese," it stirred a something in me, something familiar, a sense of de ja vu, I guess. Anyway, there are cartons of special milk that doesn't spoil as fast as real milk, and, of course, the powdered stuff that you mix with water that's probably okay for cereal and baking, but doesn't taste that great just to drink. There are bags of rice, boxes of pasta, and, on rare occasions, fresh veggies donated by a local farm. Sometimes, people give bars of soap and bottles of shampoo and conditioner, maybe some toothbrushes and dental floss... We sort through it all, and fill up brown paper grocery bags to make it easier to distribute and carry out.

To be honest, the whole thing is depressing. People are called up alphabetically by their last name to go through the line. There are a lot of old people who will smile at me and call me "dear," but they never seem to meet my eyes. I notice a good number of the older men are wearing caps that tell how they are proud veterans. I don't know if it is a "guy" thing, but they seem to have the most trouble with being there, as though they're asking for a handout, as if serving our country doesn't entitle them to some help. I want to tell them that it's okay, that they shouldn't be embarrassed. I want to thank them for their service, but I get the idea that they just want to get through the line as quickly as possible, so I wind up not saying anything, but just trying to smile warmly.

There are people my Mom's age who seem to have either medical or mental conditions, who just grab and go. Worst of all, some people have to bring their little kids with them, and I can't help but get this huge lump in my throat whenever I see them clutching on to a raggedy stuffed animal, not understanding where they are. These parents usually have their hands full, so I carry their groceries for them. Some of them don't have cars. I remember one lady who had to reposition her baby in a carriage so that the food bag could fit in with it, and then she started her walk home. It made me want to cry. It also made me wonder just how much a little bag of food could really help someone.

A boy named Carl who goes to my school was there one week with a couple of little kids. He came up through my line, and when he saw me, he got this strange look on his face, like he was well-practiced at hiding his mortification, like he couldn't afford to turn away from awkward situations. I smiled at him, and he smiled, looking down, and then off to the side. I said hey, and he said hey back in a soft voice. I asked if the kids were his younger brother and sister, and he nodded. When I asked if he needed any help out with his bags, he said no really fast, and then, "Thank you, though," in a small whisper. Now when I see him at school, he pretends he doesn't see me, casting his eyes in another direction. I wish there were a way my eyes could just send him the message that I don't think less of him, that he shouldn't feel weird around me, but my eyes feel as inarticulate as my tongue when it comes to this stuff.

Seeing Carl there, and the anguish in his expression, hit me really hard. I told my Mom I didn't want to go and volunteer anymore. I explained that it wasn't because I was lazy, or thought I was too cool to help out or anything like that. I just couldn't take it. All those poor people, people who are hungry and embarrassed to be hungry, lining up with their hands out, but ashamed of those very same hands that need help.

It's just so sad, I told her. Why do we have to live in a world where people in need are programmed to be ashamed to ask for and receive help?

And the saddest thing of all? There are more and more of these people every single week. Like being poor is a disease that people are catching, and there's no easy shot to prevent it, or medicine to make it go away.

She listened to me like she always does. That's one thing about my Mom--- she will always hear me out. My Dad died when I was little, so it's always just been the two of us, and she's treated me like an equal member of the family since I can remember. I don't always get my own way, but she does consider my point of view.

So when I finished explaining, she sighed and looked at me. "You're right," she said. "It is sad. It's heartbreaking. But April, honey, not looking at a problem doesn't make it go away. And pretending there's no such thing as hunger in the world doesn't quiet a child's empty belly when they're trying to sleep."

I admitted she was right, but then asked her why he had to go EVERY week. Couldn't we just cut down a bit?

She said, "I like to go every week because it reminds me of a time when we weren't always so lucky. You may not remember, you were really little, but after your father died, and before I got my job at Dr. Lyons office, we were the ones in need. That's something I never want to forget."

As soon as she said this, a memory came flooding into my brain, like a tsunami. I can't help but think I must have built a wall against it at some point, my Mother's words broke through the dam and let it find me again.

I was five years old, in the grocery store with my Mom. I always loved going to the store with her. She let me ride in the cart, and would hum songs with me as she shopped. I was particularly excited on this day, because it was close to my birthday, when I would be turning six. She let me pick out the cake mix for my birthday cake, and then picked up a quart of chocolate ice cream to go with it. When we got to the checkout line, she lifted me up out of the cart, and stood me next to her. I told the cashier, who seemed like a friendly old lady, that it was my birthday, and my Mommy and I were going to make cake. She smiled and gave me a sticker with a bunny on it... When the groceries were all scanned, and the total came up, there was a look on my Mom's face like she had just shrunk three inches, as she told the nice lady, nearly in a whisper, that she would be paying with her food stamp card.

As I relived this memory, I realized that I recognized that face on my Mother, and the tone of voice. It was exactly like Carl's, when he came through my line at the food cupboard.

As my Mom swiped her card, a loud voice came from behind us. It was a plump man in a nice coat. He said, "Oh, come on! You've got to be kidding me!" Neither the cashier or my mother responded, but the man wasn't finished. "It's bad enough that my tax dollars go toward your 'essentials,' but now I have to buy your cake and ice cream too?"

Mom's face went pink, with tears popping out of the corners of her eyes. "It's for my daughter's birthday. She deserves to have cake and ice cream on her birthday."

"Maybe she deserves a mother who doesn't leech off the state!" the man shouted. He looked down at me, and I may be remembering this wrong because I was afraid, but his eyes were almost black. "I'm the one buying your cake and ice cream, little girl! Not your mother!" Dark veins bulged in his neck and forehead. A stranger had never been in my face like that before.

I started to cry, and a man who worked at the store, maybe even the manager, approached the man behind us and asked him to leave. The man made a fuss, but finally left, shouting about how messed up this country is when a man who actually pays for his groceries is asked to leave the store. Both the cashier and this other man apologized to my mother and I, and I got another sticker. My Mother cried on our car ride home, the kind of crying you try to stop, but it only gets worse. I cried with her, not understanding what had happened, or why that man was so angry at us.

Later, my Mother tried to cheer me up as we worked at making the cake together, and we began to giggle again.

I must have locked that memory away because it was too painful, or too grown up for me to comprehend at that fragile age.

Times had never been that tight for my Mom and I again, not after she got the job at Dr. Lyon's office. She had insurance, we could pay the bills, and, even though we weren't rich, we never had to worry about where our next paycheck would come from. Maybe it was just as easy for me to forget there was a time when we were poor, I don't know.

But as soon as this memory came back to me, I knew exactly what my Mom was talking about. I couldn't turn away. I realized no matter how sad it might feel to me, that it was infinitely more difficult for the people there receiving help. And I am going to do my best to smile at every one of them, I am going to work my hardest to make my eyes and expression more articulate, and maybe, if I really try, I can help take their shame away. Or maybe just being there week after week, helping, will be enough.

Because no one should feel shame in being hungry.

THE END