

Miss Flanagan was stuck on a crossword puzzle. “*Without family or friend*” ... six letters. She sat back in her chair and chewed on the end of her pen, the answer just wouldn’t come. As she rattled her sizeable brain, her telephone rang on the small table next to her. She picked up the receiver and greeted her caller. It was Sergeant Reilly.

“Good afternoon, Brigid, how are you today?”

“Oh good afternoon Sergeant,” she replied, “I’m stumped on a crossword puzzle, truth be told. How is all down at the garda station?” Miss Flanagan was hoping things were not all tickety-boo, and that there might be a crime needing solving, just to take her mind off the frustrating crossword.

“Actually Brigid, I have something to run by you, perhaps if you had a few minutes you could drop by the station and I can explain better by showing you the evidence.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes!” said a delighted Miss Flanagan. She said goodbye to the sergeant, donned her autumn coat, and set off on a brisk walk to the nearby garda station. “Let’s hope it’s a good one!” she thought to herself.

Sergeant Reilly greeted her at the front desk and led her to one of the small interview rooms. On the table in front of him were five pairs of what looked like brand new football boots, except there were large rips on all of them.

“Someone has been going around destroying people’s football boots,” explained the Sergeant. “Three different mothers arrived in here together this morning and presented the boots before me. They all live on the same street, Hogan’s Row, and their sons all play for the same team. In each of these situations their sons had left the football boots out on the front doorstep overnight, as with the recent wet weather the boots have been too mucky to bring inside the house. Each of the lads had the intention of cleaning their boots after their post-match showers, but boys being boys, well it slipped their minds and they ended up leaving the boots on the front doorsteps overnight.

“It might sound like a trivial enough matter, Brigid, but these boots are top of the range and their parents had to spend up to €250 on them. It’s not like they can go straight back out and buy new pairs. Luckily old Martin Canning, the cobbler, is still in business and they plan to bring them down to him to get them stitched back up. And in an even stranger twist, it’s not the first time this has happened, it happened to two other boys last week who live on a different road, and their mothers got Martin to stitch them back up too.”

Miss Flanagan gave the matter some thought.

“My immediate reaction is to think of someone who might not be getting his place on the team, Sergeant. I tell you what, can you get me the name of the coach of the team, and I’ll pop around to see him.”

Sergeant Reilly smiled, “I knew you’d think of something, Brigid, hang on and I’ll ring one of the mothers and get that name for you.”

Less than an hour later, Miss Flanagan knocked on the front door of the house belonging to Coach Peter Mercer. He was a fine big man who obviously kept himself in good physical shape.

“Well Miss Flanagan,” he said rubbing his fingers through his sandy hair, “I have to say that I would agree with your line of thinking, the most obvious solution to this strange carry-on would be that it’s a jealous substitute. The only thing is that the football team is has been really struggling with numbers this season, blame it on addiction to devices, or boys just losing interest now that hormones have kicked in ... but usually we only have one substitute sitting on the bench, and we alternate it each week. So there isn’t actually anyone who can complain about not getting enough game time.”

“And there haven’t been any rows between the boys, no bullying?”

“Not that I know of,” replied Peter, “in fact, the boys are at an age where they hardly say two words when they show up. They just get on with the game, and any bullying nonsense was kicked into touch

years ago.” Miss Flanagan thanked Peter for his time and took a slow walk home.

That evening, while sitting in her favourite armchair with a cosy fire burning in the corner, Miss Flanagan once again turned to her crossword puzzle. She found herself reverting back to the clue that had baffled her earlier that morning ... “*Without family or friend*” ... six letters. And then something sparked in her mind. It couldn’t be! But then again, what if she was right. Miss Flanagan jumped to her feet, grabbed her handbag and for the second time that day was seeing walking briskly down the pavement towards the centre of Benford. This time, however, she was not calling into the garda station. She was calling to see an old friend.

Martin Canning had been in the cobbling business in Benford for over seventy years. Now in his late eighties, he was showing his age, but his skill and talent remained second to none. He lived in a small cottage at the end of Blossom Lane, and his little workshop was out the back of his house. He was pleasantly surprised to see Miss Flanagan standing at his door.

“Come in Brigid, and I will make us both a cup of tea,” he said.

Miss Flanagan sat down, and for the first few minutes they made small talk. Then the cunning sleuth got around to what she really wanted to say.

“How have you been since Mary passed away, Martin? It can’t be easy living here on your own?”

“Ah, I’m alright, Brigid. I do miss the company, if I’m honest. And work has slowed down. People don’t need the services of a cobbler as much as they used to. Nowadays, they are all so well off if anything goes wrong with a pair of shoes they just go out and buy new ones, and throw the old ones in the bin.”

“Unless ...,” said Miss Flanagan.

Martin looked startled, “Unless what, Brigid?”

“Unless they are very expensive football boots, then parents wouldn’t be so quick to throw them away. In fact, if something started going wrong with expensive football boots then the services of an expert cobbler is exactly what parents would need.”

Martin’s cheeks went red, and he diverted his gaze to the floor, unable to look Miss Flanagan in the eye.

“Oh Brigid, I should have known you would figure it out. Yes, it was me. I get so tired of being here on my own, from morning to night, and no one ever calls to see me. Then the other night I was out for a walk and I saw that kids were leaving their fancy football boots on the doorsteps. I took my penknife out and slashed them, in the hope that people would come and visit me to get me to fix the boots. And it worked out just as I imagined. I had two customers last week, and then I did it again, hoping that three more people would need me. Now I feel completely stupid, I’m so sorry.”

Tears trickled down the cheeks of the old man. Miss Flanagan leaned over and gave him a hug.

“Don’t be silly, Martin, and don’t be feeling bad. We all go into dark places from time to time and that’s when we need friends to help us find our way out. I’m afraid I haven’t been a good friend to you, and I should have called around sooner to see how you are. Here’s what we’ll do. I’m going to call back to Sergeant Reilly, and collect the other three pairs of boots. I’ll drop them down to you and you can repair the damage, making them as good as new. Then we’ll return them to their owners, free of charge. No one needs to know what really happened, once the boots are returned as good as new. Then you and I will begin a new routine, starting with an evening walk together every evening. And maybe once a week we can meet for a coffee in The Cosy Café. How does that sound?”

“Oh Brigid, how can I ever repay you for your kindness?” Martin said with a smile.

“I have a pair of wellingtons that are leaking water, you might have a look at those for me,” she replied.

That evening, Miss Flanagan picked up her crossword puzzle for the last time. “*Without family or friend*” ... six letters. She lifted her pen and wrote in block capital letters: LONELY.

Crossword completed, and another mystery Solved.