

Martin was not happy.

He'd wanted to work during the half-term break and earn a bit of much-needed money, but wherever he'd asked he'd got more or less the same reply.

"Sorry young man, we don't need any help," said the man in the supermarket.

"I'm afraid not," said the lady at the newsagents.

Then, on the Tuesday before half term, he spotted a small ad in the local paper.

*HELP WANTED. Two people needed for one week.
Packing. No experience needed. Phone 25573.*

Without wasting a moment, Martin was on the phone. To his surprise and disappointment, all he got was an answerphone, with a message: "You've reached 25573. I'm sorry but there is no-one here at the moment. Please leave your name and number, and we'll get back to you as soon as possible."

"Oh well, too bad," thought Martin. "They'll have a whole pile of people leaving messages. I might as well forget that one."

At nine fifteen that evening, however, the phone rang. "Martin," called his Mum, "It's for you. Someone about a job."

Martin's spirits bounced up as he picked up the phone. "Hello!... Yes, it's me! Next week?... Yes perfect!... Sixteen.... No, but I can easily find a friend..... Tomorrow after school? Yes, that's fine..... O.K., we'll come round tomorrow."

"What was all that about?" asked his Mum.

"A job; I've got a job for half term — with a bit of luck. I've got to go and see a bloke tomorrow after school."

"What bloke?"

"The guy that just phoned. He wants to see me first."

"And what's the job then? Babysitting?"

"No, clearing out some old house or something."

"Well you just be careful Martin, I don't want you getting into any trouble or anything. There's so much of it around these days."

"Oh Mum, for goodness sake, I'm sixteen!"

It was an address in Hollydown, a leafy district of big Victorian houses that had seen better days. No.6 Royston Road was a two-story house. The garden was very overgrown, and giant weeds were competing for space against untamed climbing roses and white-flowered convolvulus.

A man with a thick grey beard answered the door, and invited Martin in.

The house smelt damp, as if no-one had lived in it for several years. Most of the floor was covered in cracked brown lino, and the walls decorated with cream-coloured wallpaper. All the woodwork was dark brown.

"Rather unusual, isn't it?" said the man.

"Yes," answered Martin, slightly surprised by the ancient air that seemed to hang over the house.

"I want you to get the whole place cleared out by the end of next week. Drawers, cupboards, attic... the lot. Everything's got to be sorted out and packed carefully in boxes. I want a complete inventory of everything that's packed, down to the smallest teaspoon."

"What for?" asked Martin.

"It doesn't matter what for. I want it done. D'you think you can do it? You'll need someone to help you. You'll get £400, if that's O.K."

Martin, who had not expected to get more than £100, was astonished —

though he made sure he didn't show it, in case the man changed his mind.

"Yeah, that'll be O.K.. I'll be back on Monday morning then, with a friend."

"I'll get you started," said the man, "Then I'll leave you to get on with the job. And by the way, my name's McAlister. Doug McAlister. If you need to call me, you can always leave a message on my answerphone."