

## Any Old Iron by Steph Minns

Grandad's specialities were stories from his youth, which he delighted in telling us every other Sunday when we visited. Grandad would sit, enshrined by cushions and wrapped up in his favourite brown cardigan with the wooden toggle buttons, for all the world like an enthroned king overseeing his court. He had to look his best for us, he always joked, shrewd blue eyes twinkling as he warmed up to his tale, playing us, his audience.

"Geezer must 'ave been an old bloke back then," he began. My small sisters fought over the 'front row' cushions and quickly settled. Being the oldest at fourteen I had the sofa privilege.

"He looked ancient to us kids anyway, an odd fella with long silver hair, always wearing an old funeral director's coat and a battered top hat with a pheasant's tail stuck in the band. Tall 'n' skinny, looked a bit like a scarecrow. He was a rag 'n' bone man, that's what they called them that went collecting junk. Don't know why 'cause they didn't collect bones, just scrap metal, old pans, old clothes – that was the rags. 'Any old iron,' he used t' shout, 'cept you couldn't make out the words as it all came out like one nonsense word 'cos 'e said it so quick. He had an 'orse called Boo who used t' pull the old flat bed cart, up an' down Walthamstow High Street, past the market, up 'n' down the streets, past the station. Diesel trains had come in then but there were still steam engines in the railway sidings, used to shunt freight.

"Proper East Ender was Geezer, liked his beer and a sing-along around the piano in the George on a Friday night. No one used his real name, jus' called 'im Geezer, 'n' us kids of the neighbourhood doted on his every word. He was a bit of a mystery. No one seemed to know where he'd come from, if 'e had brothers 'n' sisters, if he'd ever been married. He had a scrap yard just behind the railway sidings, lived there with his 'orse.

"I got a look in there once. Geezer invited me 'n' Tommy Ashford in. Like a treasure trove it was, stacked with books, old lamps, chairs, all sorts of antiques. Once 'e kidded us 'e had a genies' lamp. He got out an old bashed up oil lamp and rubbed it, muttering some mumbo jumbo, telling us the genie would pop out. 'Course we believed 'im. Bet our faces were a picture when smoke started drifting from the spout! It was just a lit fag he'd hidden in there to kid us. He was good at tricks an' illusions and always had a new one t' show us."

"What colour was Boo, Grandad? Did you ride him?" my pony-mad littlest sister piped up. Grandad paused to reach for a digestive from the plate mum offered.

"Black 'n' white, patches all over. Proper gypsy cob Boo was. No we didn't ride 'im. Boo was a workin' 'orse. That was his life, up an' down the streets pullin' the cart."

“Oh dad, don’t tell them any more about that weird old man,” mum tutted. “You’ll give them nightmares.”

“Nah, they love it,” Grandad chuckled. “All kids love scary tales an’ this is a special one ‘cos it’s true.”

“True!” Mum snorted. “I remember you telling me he put a live spider in his mouth once to scare you all. Made me shudder.”

Grandad threw back his head and laughed, his scrawny turkey neck jiggling up and down as he crowed at the ceiling. Wiping tears from his eyes, he carried on.

“Yeah, old Geezer. He swallowed it too, crunched it all up in his gappy teeth, shnacketty snack, and jiggled his tongue at us to show it was gone.”

Grandad mimicked the action and a chorus of ‘urr, Grandad’ went up from us.

Mum left the room to start tea and that gave Grandad the opportunity to relaunch into this Sunday’s tale. He leaned forward to get our attention, not that he needed to as we were all ears as usual.

“Now, I was twelve years old that summer, 1947, just after the war. I used to hang out with some kids the same age on the streets after school and on a Saturday, when we’d often see Geezer on his round, shouting ‘any old iron’ ‘n’ ringing his hand bell. Boo plodded along, knew his route by heart. Our mums sometimes gave us apples for Boo and old stuff for Geezer, which he accepted graciously as though they’d offered him gold necklaces and not worn pots and broken knives. ‘It’s all treasure, lads,’ ‘e said once, showing us a bashed enamelled cup he’d picked up earlier as though it were a king’s chalice or some such. He made it all special, telling us stories about the things he’d come across. ‘You can find magic in ordinary things with a bit of imagination,’ ‘e always said, and I reckon we were all convinced about that.

“So when kids started vanishing we trusted Geezer, believed his tales. First was my mate, Tommy. Never came back from the corner shop. I knew ‘im well and all the parents went out combin’ the streets, police ‘n’ all. But there was no trace of Tommy. It was as though he’d vanished into thin air. A fortnight after he’d gone missin’, Geezer pulled up on ‘is cart and took a book out of ‘is coat, beckoned us over all secretive like. Tommy’s been taken by goblins, ‘e said, see here ‘e is trapped in the picture in this book.

“We all crowded round to look and, sure enough on page 96, there’s a picture of a little blond haired boy, cryin’, tryin’ to escape from the clutches of five ‘orrible goblins. I can see that picture now, the boy wearing brown trousers and a blue shirt, just like Tommy often wore. The old cover of the book had a tea stain the shape of a rabbit on it. ‘Mr Farley’s Bumper Book of Fairytales’ it was called. I can still see it to this day. There was a picture of a witch on a broomstick on the front, the tea stain covering her left foot.

“But here’s the creepy bit, Tommy appeared again a week after Geezer showed us the book. Police found ‘im wandering in a daze in Whitechapel market, miles away, and all he would say was Geezer saved ‘im, rescued him from the goblins by bursting into the cavern where they’d imprisoned ‘im. His parents took ‘im away to live somewhere else shortly after that ‘n’ we never did get a chance to ask Tommy what had happened. We heard the adults just supposed whatever had gone on had disturbed ‘im so much ‘e made up the goblin bit and Geezer part to explain things for himself, try an’ block out what really happened.

“Except Geezer showed us the book again, and this time there was no little blond boy wearing Tommy’s clothes, no little boy in any picture with goblins at all in fact. Me ‘n’ Jimmy Cook asked if we could look through it ‘n’ we spent an hour goin’ through every page, twice, tryin’ t’ catch Geezer out. There were no pictures on page 96, and none of the stories had anything t’ do with goblins kidnapping boys. But it was the same book, with the witch ‘n’ the rabbit tea stain on the cover.”

Grandad sat back, nodding with satisfaction and we all gawped at each other. My smallest sister had saucer eyes. This was a good story indeed. He carried on.

“Geezer told us there was a bogeyman hunting kids t’ eat in the East End. We didn’t want t’ believe him, but how could we not after that? Then a second kid went missing, Jack Hargreave, and again the police knocking door to door, frantic parents all helpin’ look for ‘im in the park, by the river, on the common and along the railway. Not a sign of ‘im. Geezer turns up with a seashell and gets us all to listen to it, hold it to our ear. We all fancied we could hear Jack calling for help in it, as well as the sea. Geezer said this one would be harder as ‘e was far, far away, down on the coast in Essex. He reckoned ‘e could see Jack in his mind, trapped in a deserted boatyard, fed on by the bogeyman but still alive. He showed us Jack’s yo-yo, said he’d dropped it as he’d been snatched and holdin’ this let Geezer see where our mate was. I knew it was Jack’s as it had ‘is name on it in green pen – I’d watched ‘im write it, proud and careful, when he’d bought the yo-yo.

“Well, word got to one of the parents that Geezer ‘ad Jack’s yo-yo. It’d been in ‘is pocket apparently when he’d gone missin’. My dad heard talk down the pub that some parents at the school were gettin’ suspicious of Geezer, what with ‘im always hanging around the kids an’ giving us things, just small things like tin cars or puzzles he’d picked up in a house clearance or summat. Tommy goin’ on about him being there an’ saving ‘im didn’t help none and after the third boy went missing just two streets away, that same month, the police hauled the old rag ‘n’ bone man into custody.”

Mum came in to check the time just then, interrupting Grandad’s flow. She’d obviously overheard the last bit and, curiosity stirred, she sat down on the arm of the sofa next to me, prompting.

“So what did happen to him, dad? Was he charged with kidnapping the children?”

“Well, no. They ‘ad nothing on ‘im. Police went through ‘is lock up, turned it right over and made a fine mess. All they found was junk. Police roughed up poor old Geezer too, we heard whispered on the street. Seems they treated ‘im as though he was guilty of being a pervert anyway, even without a trial.”

Mum looked uncomfortable and shooed the girls off to the bathroom to wash their hands for tea. I, being older, was allowed to hear the rest of the story. Grandad continued in a more subdued, thoughtful manner, no longer playing for a young audience.

“Y’ know, Rosie,” he looked at my mother. “Geezer was alright. I’m sure ‘e didn’t do nothin’ bad to kids. He just liked amusing us, seein’ us laugh, and especially the poorer kids who ‘ad nothing. He’d fix up broken dolls and tin fire engines that had been dumped, fix ‘em in his workshop and just give ‘em to kids who had no toys. Boy, you should have seen the faces of them poor kids. Geezer was magic to them, Father Christmas all year round.”

Mum nodded sympathetically.

“After the third kid vanished Geezer was beaten up badly. I ‘eard dad tell mum he was lucky there hadn’t been enough blokes in the neighbourhood with the gumption t’ form a lynch mob. They all thought he’d had a hand in it somewhere, y’ see. Dad reckoned ‘e took kids to order for some mob in Whitechapel. That’s where they’d found Tommy, gibbering.

“Geezer ‘ad some weird stuff in ‘is lock up. He showed me that time I went there an old handwritten book covered in yellow waxy parchment. He said it was a witch’s spell book. Covered in human skin ‘e said it was and ‘e used it to help him trace the kids.”

“Oh dad! You believed him?”

Mum stood up, having heard enough it seemed.

Grandad stiffened and looked away.

“Well we were just kids,” he muttered defensively.

I waited until she’d gone back into the kitchen to shell the boiled eggs before I pressed Grandad further.

“So what became of Geezer then? Did you ever find out?”

Grandad stretched in his cardigan, flicking biscuit crumbs from his lap as he recovered his composure.

“I saw ‘im one last time, coupla years later. He was livin’ rough down on Leyton High Road in an empty shop. Beggin’ on the street ‘e was, beggin’! That proud old man that ‘ad once ‘ad ‘is own business. The way he’d been treated ‘ad broken ‘im. I sat with ‘im for a bit, bought ‘im some food an’ talked while I waited for me bus. After he’d been threatened his landlord ‘ad chucked ‘im out and sold Boo, but Geezer never saw any of the money from ‘is ‘orse. All ‘is stuff was just burned or dumped. He wasn’t allowed or daren’t go back for fear of

'is life 'cos everyone thought 'e was guilty. It was a sad thing t' see 'im like that. I felt bad about it and went back that winter t' find 'im, maybe 'elp 'im. I asked around but local shopkeepers said he'd died, alone in that freezing, derelict shop at the end of the street."

Grandad fell silent then, pressing his lips together in a tight line at the memory. I noticed his hands were shaking and he seemed suddenly very old, like an orange that had had all the juice sucked out of it until just a tired old shrivelled skin remained.

"'Ere lad, come out the back with me. Don't tell y' mum about this or she'll 'ave me certified."

I dutifully followed him out to the lean-to, not much more than a timber frame covered in mildewing corrugated plastic sheet. Grandad's shuffling slippers left a snail-trail through the dust on the concrete floor. A Central Line tube train rushed past at the end of the garden, headed for Leytonstone station, sending the rails singing and splitting the tranquillity of the evening. Once it had passed we could hear each other speak again.

"Here."

Grandad lifted a carefully bubble-wrapped object out of a wooden banana box on the peeling shelves. Curiously, I unwrapped it to find a palm sized, slightly battered conch shell. I was studying biology at school so recognised it immediately.

"Put it to your ear," he instructed, his face serious. "What d' you hear?"

"Our science teacher told us it's just ambient background noise resonating in the shell. Everyone likes to think it's the sea they hear though." I replied.

"Is that all you can hear?"

Grandad had become suddenly intense, watching my face like he watched the horse racing on TV when he had a bet on.

I shrugged but then I heard a small far-away cry. It sounded like a young boy sobbing 'help, please help me.' I held the shell away from my ear, listening intently, assuming it was a kid shouting nearby on the street. But I heard no kids playing nearby, just the drone of cars.

Rain started to plot onto the corrugated plastic above my head and I tried the shell again. This time I was sure I heard that boy cry 'Geezer! I know you're here – help me!'

Unnerved, I shoved the shell quickly back to Grandad. My face must have given the game away. Grandad nodded solemnly, frowning.

"So you can hear 'im too. It's Jack, still trapped there. That day I saw Geezer sleepin' rough 'e gave me the shell, begged me t' take it in return for the food I'd bought him. I've 'eard that voice ever since. Not every time I listen, but most times. All through the years Jack's voice 'as haunted me through that shell."

He looked drained, desperate, grey. I was lost for an answer, lost for anything to say.

Mum called 'tea's ready' at that moment and I was glad of an excuse to go back into the house, unsure what to make of this. An old man, losing his marbles? Grandad sighed, muttering.

"I keep hoping one day I'll hear Geezer in there too and know everything for Jack will be alright, that he's free. I keep listenin' an' hopin' that Geezer can sort it out, wherever 'e is now. If anyone could do it 'e would."

During the car journey home, mum tried a little probing.

"You're quiet, Josh. What were you and Grandad talking about in the lean-to?"

"Just stuff," I mumbled.

My pony-mad sister interrupted. "Do you think Geezer really knew magic, proper magic like Grandad said?"

"Yeah, I think he did," I replied quietly.