

## Broken Green Bottles

*“Life’s dim window of the soul  
distorts the heavens from pole to pole,  
and leads you to believe a lie,  
when you see with, not through, the eye.”*  
- William Blake

### 1

**I**t got dark too early. By the time I went to bed the fog pressed against my windows and the bell-buoy toned softly from miles away in the Mersey. A salty wind blew from the Irish Sea, making tree branches scratch at the window, and everything beyond, wildly moving shadows. I pulled the pillow over my head and lay there shivering. Gug, the barnacle man, might be on his way, piloting his rotten hulk from Formby Light to the Pier Head, looking for virgins to catch. And I was very much a virgin. Gug, floating gently, the fleeting moonlight through the trees, new passengers. Oh God!

Before sunrise, Gug’s boat, slimy, green, and shivery, shrinking to a toy, would spiral down a filthy intake, into the main sewer under the Pier Head, taking its tiny screaming cargo with it. So they said. But I’d have to ask Old Beardy, and nobody spoke to Beardy. We didn’t know if he still could speak.

I thought about the first time I’d met him. I walked down Chester Close, left along Saint Bernard’s Road, across the war memorial, straight on up Thornbeck, and then off to the right, through the sand dunes.

I climbed up one and stopped dead. Old Beardy stood on another sandhill about twenty feet away. I

knew straight away who he was, everyone in the village had heard of him. The evening sun reflected off the lenses of his spectacles. They were incredibly thick, like the bottoms of lemonade bottles, and his eyes looked huge.

He stared straight at me as if he'd known I was coming.

I ran.

Thinking about Beardy, I drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

It was nearly half-past eight when I woke up. That was because it was still so dark outside. I sat up in bed, reached over and pulled the curtain back. The fog had returned, and it was thick, I could hardly see the outlines of the trees in the back garden. No sign of the sun.

Den and Merv were supposed to be at my house by ten. Den, short for Dennis, lived in Waterloo, about ten minute's walk from the station at Blundellsands. Merv, short for Mervyn, lived in Thornton, and got a bus to his nearest station, Crosby. Would the trains be running?

I got up, had a wash, and dressed. Mum put slices of white bread as thick as doorsteps under the gas grill. She forgot them, as usual, and scraped them with a knife to get the black parts off. Then she spread them thickly with New Zealand butter and passed them to me.

I sat at the table and stared glumly at my cup of tea. It must have been brewed a while ago, from the scum on it. What I really wanted was beans. I got up and headed for the pantry.

"Just look at that fog outside," my mum remarked in her best Lizzie accent. My mum was a fanatical follower of the Royals. She thought she belonged in Buckingham Palace.

“Yeah. Den and Merv are s’posed to be here at ten.” I hacked the Heinz tin open with the crude wooden-handled opener my mum used for Dougal’s dog food. I couldn’t find the decent one.

“Please, James. We say Dennis and Mervyn. Did you wash that before you used it?”

I hate her calling me James, she knows very well I like to be called Jim. “No. Sorry.”

Dougal, my mum’s Pembroke corgi, came panting in from the back garden, disappeared under the table, and began sniffing my leg. I moved away but he continued. My mum had to have the same kind of dog as the Queen. Of course, the Queen has more of them. But mum has a tri-colour one she brought back from Wales.

“They’re breeding them too small now,” she says about the Queen’s corgis.

Dougal lay under the table watching my every move. I had trained him to wait for the gruesome fatty lamb and lumpy Bisto that my mum serves without fail every Sunday.

The radio played the intro to a programme my mum and dad doted on. It was called ‘Sing Something Simple’. A chorus, singing the songs they sang in the war, I guessed. Songs they sang before the war, for all I know.

I felt cheated by missing the war. Evidence lay all around me: chopped-off houses in Liverpool. And large empty lots paved in rubble. Not to mention, everyone seemed old. Like my gran. She had so many wrinkles it looked like a map of Seaforth.

Dad, who my mum calls Eddie, came in. I noticed he had last night’s evening paper under his arm.

“I wrote to the Echo again but they never printed it,” Dad said.

“Oh. Mr. P called earlier. Are you doing the flowers again this year? He wanted to know.” Mum looked over at me. “Are you burning those beans, Jim?”

I gave them a stir then turned the gas off. The toast was already fossilised.

“Sorry.” I poured the beans on to the toast. They slid out of the pan like molten lava. I scraped the wonderful dried crusty bits out of the pan and sprinkled them on top.

Dad put the Liverpool Echo on top of the radio, reminding me of the horrible music. “Bloody fools. The sea’ll be through there one day, then there’s nothing to stop it before Ormskirk.”

“The excavator?” Mum shovelled poached egg into her mouth.

“Half the dune’s gone already. Mr. B said they’re going to stop it, one way or another.”

“What does he mean by that?”

“Don’t know. And I don’t want to.”

“What excavator, Dad?” I crammed buttered toast and beans into my mouth.

“The excavator? Damn fool machine Rainbrothers built. It’s out near the golf course, past the old fort. Taking the dunes away. For building more houses.”

“Oh.” So that was where they got the sand from. The sand they were using to build houses where I played almost every day. One of my dens got bulldozed just last week. Immediately I formed an intense hatred for the excavator.

“You mind your own business, James. And get upstairs to do your homework. You’ve got mid-term. You’ll never pass.”

“Yeah, Mum.” I ate the last of the beans as fast as I could, then washed my plate in the sink. I’d have to talk to Den and Merv about the excavator. It must be a long way, though. Past the golf course. Miles. Couldn’t ride our bikes through the dunes. I saw the golfers from the train. Groups of men, tiny in the distance, pulling around small carts. Crazy.

I put my plate in the drainer and dried my hands on a towel.

“Mrs. J buys ten pounds of sugar a week, according to the sub-postmaster.” Mum shook her head.

“Eh? Is that a lot?” Dad frowned.

“It’s five times as much as we use.”

“Maybe they’ve got worms.” Dad raised the paper to indicate that his end of the chat was over.

On the back of the paper the headlines read:

### **DOCK STRIKE CONTINUES**

I closed the kitchen door carefully, leaving my parents to enjoy ‘Sing Something Simple’, went into the lounge and picked up the phone. An eternity passed, then I heard the operator’s voice.

“Number please.”

“Crosby five-oh-seven-one.”

“Connecting.”

Some clicks and whirring sounds came down the line, then I heard the ringing tone.

“Hello?” Merv’s mother. I recognised her Welsh accent straight away.

“Can I talk to Mervyn, please?”

“He’s doing his homework. Just a minute ...”

She put the phone down and went away. In the background I could hear sounds of a door being closed, footsteps.

“Yeah?” Merv’s voice.

“Hey. It’s Jim.”

“Yeah. Mum said.”

“You heard anything about an excavator? Somewhere out past the fort, near the golf course?”

“Nah. Didja ask Den?”

“Not yet.”

“Well. Hey, I finished the guitar.”

“The bass?” Merv was building a bass guitar all by himself, since his parents refused to give him any money to buy one. ‘Devil music’ his dad said.

“Yeah. ‘Course. I haven’t got an amp, but I can hear it if I put the head against the kitchen door.”

“Gear. Can you play it yet?”

“No, but I’m practicing. My fingers hurt.”

“Gorreny ideas for Sarraday?” I lowered my voice in case my mum caught me trying out my scouse accent.

“No. You?”

“Ah wuz thinkin’ of goin’ to the fort. See if we could find the excavator.”

“There’ll be a lot of people working on it, won’t there?”

“Maybe not. Do they work on Saturday?” My mum and dad both worked, but not on Saturday.

“Dunno. Have to talk to Den. Gotta go now.” I heard a click, then the burring sound of the empty line. The operator broke in, startling me. “Have you finished, caller?”

“Er, yes. Thanks.”

“Then please replace your receiver.”

I did as instructed.

I made a mess of my homework because I couldn’t get the excavator out of my mind. Our whole village was built on sand. When you dig, it just keeps flowing into the hole. I imagined the sand draining from under the foundations, the houses tipping, walls cracking, falling, the sea rushing in. Ormskirk must be at least ten miles inland. Ten miles of soil and black-and-white cows under salt water. All of them in Gug’s boat, heading towards the Pier Head.

The phone rang. I heard my mum answer it. After a moment she came into the dining-room where I sat with my dog-eared exercise books and log tables. “It’s Dennis.”

I went into the lounge and picked up the phone. As usual, the plaited cable had turned into a bunch of knots that reduced its length to about ten inches. “Yeah?”

“That you Jim?”

“Yeah.” I looked out the lounge window. I could barely make out the garden wall in the fog.

“My mum says I can’t go out in this. It’s too thick.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Merv rang. His mum said the same thing.”

“We’ll have to wait for next Saturday.” Tomorrow, Sunday, was no good because on Sundays I always went with my mum to see nana, my grandmother, and grandad, and it took us over an hour to get there by train and bus.

“Yeah. Oh well. Heard the new single by The Flamingos?”

“Shake Sherry?”

“Yeah. Gear, isn’t it?”

“It’s okay.” I hadn’t heard it yet. Dennis had an HMV record shop near his house. He spent hours in the listening booth with the headphones on.

“Only ‘okay?’”

“Well, gear, yeah it’s gear.” I wanted to get off this subject. “See you on Monday then.” Den and Merv were both in my class at Waterloo Grammar.

“Yeah.”

“Right.”

“Bye.”

I heard the click as he replaced his handset. I put mine down before the irritating operator could come on, demanding to know if I had finished. Why did my village have the only operator-controlled telephone system left in the country?

My mother’s budgie, called Dickie, whizzed past my ear. He perched on the standard lamp in the corner of the lounge. Budgie crap covered the side of the lampshade. After a few moments pulling at the fabric he flew down and strutted back and forth on the parquet floor, by the television in the corner.

Dougal the corgi wandered in and saw Dickie at floor-level. He charged toward Dickie. The bird waited until the last possible moment then flew up, out of harm’s way, and back to the lampshade for a triumphant shit, while the dog, unable to stop on the polished wooden floor, slammed into the wall. I waited for the day when the bird would be too slow.

What a boring day. Bloody fog. I wandered into the kitchen. "I'll be back in a minute," I said, opening the door to the back garden.

"Where are you going, Jim?" my mum said from the sink, where she was trying to remove my burnt-on beans.

"To see if the trains are running."

"Oh. Don't go too far, now."

That was what she always said. I closed the door behind me and sniffed the air. Our house was a good mile from the river but even so, if the wind was in the right direction we still got a whiff of it. This time the air smelt of dock leaves, Dad's compost heap at the bottom of the garden, some poo left on the lawn by Dougal, the leaves of the apple trees, the rotten bits of the garden fence where it touched the soil.

All I heard was 'cotton wool in the ears'. Muffled. A general whiteness filled the air but where this light was coming from, I couldn't say.

I walked ten yards straight ahead until I found the garden fence, turned right, and followed it to the end of the garden, thirty yards to the east. Beyond was still wild land, although new bungalows were going up a couple of miles away.

I stood at the end of the garden, tracing the local landmarks in my imagination: on my left, to the north, starting about twenty yards away, the remains of an old lime brick factory. Nothing more than foundations really. Ahead, rabbit warren, and a deep ditch, then more warren, and finally, a chain-link fence and the railway line.

I decided to see if the trains were running. That meant walking straight ahead. I nearly fell down the ditch, and twisted my ankle painfully in a rabbit-hole. Finally I found the fence. I turned right and followed it in the direction of the station, which I knew was only a couple of hundred yards.

A terrible clatter above my head made me jump, painning my ankle. I looked up to see the dim outline of

a signal. It was at 'go'. I stumbled on, along a cinder path. Then I heard the sound of one of the electric trains, moving very slowly, coming from the north. I'd thought it was the other track. And, immediately, three muffled bangs, like loud fireworks. Dad told me once they were 'detonators' to tell the driver to slow down.

The trains were barely moving. So much for the expedition.

I turned and followed a wider path used by the army, who had a range to the north. I knew it passed close by my house. I hobbled on and on, a long way. Surely I should have reached the house by now?

A signpost loomed out of the fog; two small wooden boards fixed to a piece of galvanised channel and jammed into the sandy ground. I knew there was no signpost near my house. I moved forward to read it.

One board said: **295<sup>th</sup> BRIG HQ PURPLE**

The other read: **SEPTIC**

This was no good. I must have walked too far. I turned round and began walking back the way I came.

I heard a dog barking. Dougal? The barks, wrapped in cotton wool, seemed to float towards me from a long way off. I started running that way, but found myself caught in a patch of reeds. The tall stems scratched my face. Wet oozed into my shoes.

The barking stopped. All around was quiet. I fancied I heard my heart thudding, the sound magnified by the fog. No, it was a gentle plashing sound. And suddenly I realised I was caught in the reeds of the river bank, where it was all smelly, sucking, mud.