

Jimmy Black's Garage.

There isn't a whole lot to do in Branxton on a Friday night at the best of times, and the night of the incident at Black's Garage was hardly one of those. Barry was bored; after almost a month of enforced moderation, his insatiable need for adrenalin had reached crisis point. The nearest action was at Greta, the next town down the line, where there was a dance on at one of the local hall, and Barry resolved that one way or another he was going to get there.

The first problem was transport. There were no buses, and Barry had only just turned sixteen at the time, too young to drive himself. The obvious option was Fuzzy Bennett, a mate who, although a couple of years older than Barry, had managed to fail a couple of years of school and ended up in Barry's year. Fuzzy wasn't the most popular of people. Ungainly and obese, he sweated amply and washed seldom, and the carrot-like shock of hair which had earned him his nickname was considered bizarre, but something about him appealed to some kind of deep, subconscious sympathy in Barry that so often led him to support the underdog.

The other thing that appealed to Barry about Fuzzy was that he wasn't too bright. It hadn't taken long to convince him to donate his prize possession - an old EJ Panel Van that he'd bought cheap and spent all his spare time doing up - to the venture, especially when Barry hinted that Anne, Barry's sister who he knew Fuzzy was keen

on, would be at the dance. The arrangement was simple enough: they'd meet at the café at about seven-thirty and go from there.

It wasn't until Fuzzy turned up that the second problem presented itself. The car was practically out of fuel, and neither Barry nor Fuzzy had any extra money to buy it. Barry was used to thinking laterally in such situations, and it didn't take him long to come up with a solution.

'What about old Jimmy Black's? He'd have to have a few spare vehicles around the back of the Garage, wouldn't he? Why don't we just go up and siphon a bit of gas out of one of those? Nobody's going to miss it.'

Even Fuzzy was a bit hesitant about this proposal. Jimmy Black was a huge, barrel-chested individual, whose physical strength and short temper were legendary among the young people of the town. He didn't like kids, especially teenagers – and especially Barry, who had a reputation for getting into trouble. Barry in his usual manner had exacerbated this animosity with a plethora of pranks, ensuring that the tension between them persisted despite Jimmy's long-standing friendship with Barry's father. If Jimmy Black caught them, Fuzzy knew it would be curtains. It took a gentle reminder from Barry that Anne would probably already be at the dance, and would most likely be getting lined up by some bloke, to bring him around.

They parked the car at the end of the narrow, overgrown lane behind Black's Garage, then walked up to the weed-infested lot behind the ancient corrugated iron shed that served as the workshop for Jimmy Black's mechanical repair business yard and checked it out. Sure enough, there were a couple of cars there, a sedan and an old utility. The prospects of success for the siphoning operation looked promising; the

gate, as usual, was unlocked, and the fences around the yard, although battered and decrepit, concealed the darkened interior from the view of any neighbours.

Fuzzy had a tin and a piece of hose in the back of the EJ, and together they sneaked into the enclosure, picking their way carefully through the darkness. The first vehicle they tried had a lock on the petrol cap, but the second – the utility – unscrewed freely. They quickly set up the equipment and began the operation, Barry sucking the siphon into life with practised efficiency.

It was only later, when the tin was half full, that Barry thought of a possible snag. He'd thrust the tube into the fuel tank without checking the outlet. He quickly pulled the other end of the hose from the tin and shut off the supply. 'How do we know what we're getting?' he hissed urgently to Fuzzy. 'How do we know it's not diesel?'

Fuzzy pondered for a moment, then suddenly brightened and stood up. 'It should say on the inlet somewhere. I'll check it.'

By the time Barry saw the flash of Fuzzy's cigarette lighter, it was too late. There was a brilliant gush of bright orange fire, then a shattering concussion that lifted him a couple of metres and laid him on his back. When he got to his feet, he seemed to be standing in a patchwork of fires. One of these flaming pillars moved, and Barry realised it was Fuzzy, the top of his hair blazing furiously. Barry ripped off his shirt and quickly smothered the blaze, and for a few seconds the two of them stood gasping and gagging in the hideous stench.

'You okay, Fuzz?'

Fuzzy ran a hand over the top of his hair, now several centimetres shorter than it had been. 'Yeah. Couple of burns, that's all. What now?'

Barry made a couple of quick stamps of his shoes into the sparking grass, but his efforts seemed only to spread the flames, and the sound of urgent voices from the other side of the fence put a stop to his futile effort. 'Run!' he shouted.

They ran, fortunate not to encounter anyone on the seemingly interminable race to the car. They drove away slowly, only accelerating once they got away from the scene. Barry could see the glow of the fire in the rear-view mirror. His mood seesawed from fear to self-outraged defiance. Silly old prick, he thought; that'll teach him.

A few blocks further on, however, when Barry spotted a phone booth, his conscience got the better of him, and he told Fuzzy to pull over. Jumping from the vehicle, he ran to the booth and rang the number listed under 'Fire Brigade.' The phone rang several times before someone answered it.

'Yeah?'

The voice seemed vaguely familiar, and Barry hesitated for a second before shouting: 'There's a fire at Black's Garage!'

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line. Barry slammed the receiver down and ran back to the van.

They took the back road out of town, but soon realised they still had a petrol problem and turned around and headed back, staring in glum silence at the pillar of orange fire lighting the night sky ahead. As they drove into town they saw groups of townsfolk standing on street corners or outside their homes, staring in the direction of the blaze. The fire engine, its siren wailing, passed them as they turned into the main street.

All that remained was to cover their tracks, firm up their alibi. As they passed the café, Barry saw that there were a few people he recognised standing outside. He told Fuzzy to wait in the car, then sauntered across the road, turning to stare in apparent bewilderment at the spectacle behind.

‘What’s happened?’ he said to the onlookers as he reached them. ‘What’s going on?’

Everybody makes mistakes, and that night Barry made a couple of big ones. The first was forgetting to check his appearance before he got out of the car. When he did so he understood the strange looks he got from the bystanders. His face was black, his eyebrows and forelocks singed to a crisp. The back of his shirt was likewise filthy with dark soot.

The second mistake was forgetting who the town’s Fire Chief was. Jimmy Black was unimpressed by the anonymous phone call telling him his business was in flames, and was even less impressed when he arrived there a short later to find that the message had been something of an understatement. The entire place was reduced to ashes, and although insurance covered the financial side – and in fact left him considerably better off than he had been before – he never completely got over the shock of the call. He called around several times after the fire for a yarn with Barry’s dad, and when the subject of the phone call came up - which it invariably seemed to do when Barry was around – Jimmy’s claim that he had heard the caller’s voice before always had a vaguely accusative tone about it.

Barry never knew for sure whether the garage owner knew who the culprits were. If not, he must have been one of the few in town who didn't; people even took to calling Barry 'Al', after Al Jolson, for a while. Whatever the case, the police took no action, and eventually other calamities pushed the incident from forefront of local gossip.

Jimmy Black died a few years later, and his secret went with him. Barry still isn't the most forgiving individual when it comes to those he doesn't like; but he reckoned he learned something from what happened, and he always seemed to go a little easier in his judgements of people after that.

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