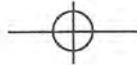


1

“**I** don’t offer you these for tuppence,” my granpa would shout, holding up a cabbage in both hands, “I don’t offer ‘em for a penny, not even a ha’penny. No, I’ll give ‘em away for a farthin’.”

Those were the first words I can remember. Even before I had learned to walk, my eldest sister used to dump me in an orange box on the pavement next to Granpa’s pitch just to be sure I could start my apprenticeship early.

“Only stakin’ ‘is claim,” Granpa used to tell the customers as he pointed at me in the wooden box. In truth, the first word I ever spoke was “Granpa,” the second “farthing,” and I could repeat his



JEFFREY ARCHER

whole sales patter word for word by my third birthday. Not that any of my family could be that certain of the exact day on which I was born, on account of the fact that my old man had spent the night in jail and my mother had died even before I drew breath. Granpa thought it could well have been a Saturday, felt it most likely the month had been January, was confident the year was 1900, and knew it was in the reign of Queen Victoria. So we settled on Saturday, 20 January 1900.

I never knew my mother because as I explained, she died on the day I was born. "Childbirth," our priest called it, but I didn't really understand what he was on about until several years later when I came up against the problem again. Father O'Malley never stopped telling me that she was a saint if ever he'd seen one. My father—who couldn't have been described as a saint by anyone—worked on the docks by day, lived in the pub at night and came home the next morning because it was the only place he could fall asleep without being disturbed.

The rest of my family was made up of three sisters—Sal, the eldest, who was five and knew when she was born because it was in the middle of the night and had kept the old man awake; Grace who was three and didn't cause anyone to lose sleep; and redheaded Kitty who was eighteen months and never stopped bawling.

The head of the family was Granpa Charlie, who I was named after. He slept in his own room on the ground floor of our home in Whitechapel Road, while the rest of us were herded all together in the room opposite. We had two other rooms on the ground floor, a sort of kitchen and what most people would have called a large cupboard, but which Grace liked to describe as the parlor.

There was a lavatory in the garden—no grass—which we shared with an Irish family who lived on the floor above us. They always seemed to go at three o'clock in the morning.

Granpa—who was a costermonger by trade—had secured the pitch on the corner of Whitechapel Road. Once I was able to escape from my orange box and ferret around among the other barrows, I quickly discovered that he was reckoned by the locals to be the finest at his trade in the East End.

My dad, who as I have pointed out was a docker by trade, never seemed to take that much interest in any of us and though he could sometimes earn as much as a pound a week, the money always seemed to end up in the Black Bull, where it was spent on pint

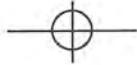
local /
in the early /

not only because he was the oldest but because he paid the rent always so / (any)

worked /
in /
in /

already told you /





AS THE CROW FLIES

after pint of ale and gambled away on games of cribbage or dominoes in the company of our next-door neighbor, Bert Shorrocks, a man who never seemed to speak, just grunt.

In fact, if it hadn't been for Granpa I wouldn't even have been made to attend the local elementary school in Jubilee Street, and "attend" was the right word, because I didn't do a lot once I'd got there, other than bang the lid of my little desk and occasionally pull the pigtails of "Posh Porky," the girl who sat in front of me. Her real name was Rebecca Salmon and she was the daughter of Dan Salmon who owned the baker's shop on the corner of Brick Lane. Posh Porky knew exactly when and where she was born and never stopped reminding us all that she was nearly a year younger than anyone else in the class.

I couldn't wait for the bell to ring at four in the afternoon when class would end and I could bang my lid for the last time before running all the way down the Whitechapel Road to help out on the barrow.

On Saturdays—as a special treat—Granpa would allow me to go along with him to the early morning market in Covent Garden, where he would select the fruit and vegetables that we would later sell from his pitch, just opposite Mr. Salmon's and Dunkley's, the fish and chippy that stood next to the baker's.

Although I couldn't wait to leave school once and for all so I could join Granpa permanently, if I ever played truant for as much as an hour he would refuse to take me to watch West Ham, our local football team, on Saturday afternoon or, worse, he'd stop me selling on the barrow in the morning.

"I 'oped you'd grow up to be more like Rebecca Salmon," he used to say. "That girl will go a long way—"

"The further the better," I would tell him, but he never laughed, just reminded me that she was always top in every subject.

"'Cept 'rithmetic," I replied with bravado, "where I beat her silly." You see, I could do any sum in my head that Rebecca Salmon had to write out in longhand; it used to drive her potty.

My father never visited Jubilee Street Elementary in all the years I was there, but Granpa used to pop along at least once a term and have a word with Mr. Cartwright my teacher. Mr. Cartwright told Granpa that with my head for figures I could end up an accountant or a clerk. He once said that he might even be able to "find me a position in the City." Which was a waste of time really, because all I

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(P)

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JEFFREY ARCHER

wanted to do was join Granpa on the barrow.

I was seven before I worked out that the name down the side of Granpa's barrow—"Charlie Trumper, the honest trader, founded in 1823"—was the same as mine. ~~Father's~~ first name was George, and he had already made it clear on several occasions that when Granpa retired, he had no intention of taking over from him as he didn't want to leave his mates on the docks.

✓
Dad's/
D/
decision/

I couldn't have been more pleased by his attitude, and told Granpa that when I finally took over the barrow, we wouldn't even have to change the name.

Granpa just ~~sighed~~ and said, "I don't want you to end up working in the East End, young 'un. You're far too good to be a barrow boy for the rest of your life." It made me sad to hear him speak like that; he didn't seem to understand that was all I wanted to do.

✓
2/

✓
granted/

School dragged on for month after month, year after year, with Rebecca Salmon going up to collect prize after prize on Speech Day. What made the annual gathering worse was we always had to listen to her recite the Twenty-third Psalm, standing up there on the stage in her white dress, white socks, black shoes. She even had a white bow in her long black hair.

✓
even/

"And I expect she wears a new pair of knickers every day," little Kitty whispered in my ear.

"And I'll bet you a guinea to a farthin' she's still a virgin," said Sal.

~~Th down~~
~~PS~~

I burst out laughing because all the costermongers in the Whitechapel Road always did whenever they heard that word, although I confess that at the time I didn't have a clue what a virgin was. Granpa told me to "shhh" and didn't smile again until I went up to get the arithmetic prize, a box of colored crayons that were damned-all use to anyone. Still, it was them or a book.

✓
admit/

✓
returned/

Granpa clapped so loud as I ~~came back~~ to my place that some of the mums looked round and smiled, which made the old fellow even more determined to see that I stayed on at school until I was fourteen.

By the time I was ten, Granpa allowed me to lay out the morning wares on the barrow before going off to school for the day. Potatoes on the front, greens in the middle and soft fruits at the back was his golden rule.

"Never let 'em touch the fruit until they've 'anded over their money," he used to say. "'Ard to bruise a tato, but even 'arder to sell





7
AS THE CROW FLIES

a bunch of grapes that's been picked up and dropped a few times."

collecting/

By the age of eleven I was taking the money from the customers and handing them the change what they were due. That's when I first learned about palming. Sometimes, after I'd given them back their money, the customers would open the palm of their hand and I would discover that one of the coins I had passed over had suddenly disappeared so I ended up having to give them even more *bees and honey*. I lost Granpa quite a bit of our weekly profit that way, until he taught me to say, "Tuppence change, Mrs. Smith," then hold up the coins for all to see before passing them over.

97 (P)

handing/

By twelve, I had learned how to bargain with the suppliers at Covent Garden while displaying a poker face, later to sell the same produce to the customers back in Whitechapel with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. I also discovered that Granpa used to switch suppliers regularly, "just to be sure no one takes me for granted".

OK EA TT

(Tr down) to read

By thirteen, I had become his eyes and ears as I already knew the name of every worthwhile trader of fruit and vegetables in Covent Garden. I quickly worked out which sellers just piled good fruit on top of bad, which dealers would attempt to hide a bruised apple and which suppliers would always try to short-measure you. Most important of all, which customers didn't pay their debts and so could never be allowed to have their names chalked up on the slate.

sussed/

back on the pitch I learned/

I remember that my chest swelled with pride the day Mrs. Smelley, who owned a boardinghouse in the Commercial Road, told me that I was a chip off the old block and that in her opinion one day I might even be as good as my granpa. I celebrated that night by ordering my first pint of beer and lighting up my first Woodbine. I didn't finish either of them.

I'll never forget that Saturday morning when Granpa first let me run the barrow on my own. For five hours he didn't once open his mouth to offer advice or even give an opinion. And when he checked the takings at the end of the day, although we were two shillings and fivepence light from a usual Saturday, he still handed over the sixpenny piece he always gave me at the end of the week.

I knew Granpa wanted me to stay on at school, but on the last Friday of term in December 1913, I walked out of the gates of Jubilee Street Elementary with my father's blessing. He had always told me that education was a waste of time and he couldn't see the point of it. I agreed with him, even if Posh Porky had won a scholar-

and improve my reading and writing/





JEFFREY ARCHER

ship to someplace called St. Paul's, which in any case was miles away in Hammersmith. And who wants to go to school in Hammersmith when you can live in the East End?

Mrs. Salmon obviously wanted her to because she never stopped reminding anyone who was held up in the bread queue of her daughter's "interlectual prowess," whatever that meant.

"Rebecca seems to do so many things long before other children of her age," she once told my dad.

"And I can think of something else she'll probably do long before her mother would expect her to," Dad whispered in my ear and added, "Stuck-up snob."

I felt much the same way about Posh Porky as Dad did about Mrs. Salmon. Mr. Salmon was all right, though. You see, he'd once been a costermonger himself, but that was before he married Miss Roach, the baker's daughter.

Every Saturday morning, while I was setting up the barrow, Mr. Salmon used to disappear off to the Whitechapel synagogue, leaving his wife to run the shop. While he was away she never stopped reminding us at the top of her voice that she wasn't a *five by two*.

Posh Porky seemed to be torn between going along with her old man to the synagogue and staying put at the shop, where she'd sit by the window and scoff cream buns the moment he was out of sight.

"Always a problem, a mixed marriage," Granpa would tell me. It was years before I realized that he wasn't talking about the cream buns.

The day I left school I told Granpa he could lie in while I went off to Covent Garden to fill up the barrow, but he wouldn't hear of it. When we got to the market for the first time he allowed me to bargain with the dealers. I quickly found one who agreed to supply me with a dozen apples for threepence as long as I could guarantee the same order every day for the next month. As Granpa Charlie and I always had an apple for breakfast, the arrangement sorted out our own needs and gave me the chance to sample what we were selling to the customers.

From that moment on, every day was a Saturday and between us we could sometimes manage to put the profits up by as much as fourteen shillings a week.

After that, I was put on a weekly wage of five shillings—a veritable fortune. Four of them I kept locked in a tin box under Granpa's

told everyone /

Stuck-up snob
Granpa used to whisper in my ear & she's the sort of person who has a bowl of fruit in the house when no one's ill

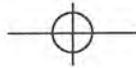
Granpa /

start scoffing /

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AS THE CROW FLIES

bed until I had saved up my first guinea: a man what's got a guinea got security, Mr. Salmon once told me as he stood outside his shop, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, displaying a shiny gold watch and chain.

In the evenings, after Granpa had come home for supper and the old man had gone off to the pub I soon became bored just sitting around with my sisters for company, so I joined the Whitechapel Boys' Club. Table tennis Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; boxing Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. I never did get the hang of table tennis but I became quite a useful bantamweight and once even represented the club against Bethnal Green.

Unlike my father I didn't think much of pubs, the dogs or cribbage but I still continued to support West Ham most Saturday afternoons. I even made the occasional trip into the West End of an evening to see the latest music hall star.

When Granpa asked me what I wanted for my fifteenth birthday I replied without a moment's thought, "My own barrow," and added that I'd nearly saved enough to get one. He just laughed and told me that his old one was good enough for whenever I was ready to take over. In any case, he warned me, it's what a rich man calls an asset and, he added for good measure, never invest in something new, especially when there's a war on.

Although Mr. Salmon had already told me that we had declared war against the Germans the summer before—none of us having heard of Archduke Franz Ferdinand—we only found out how serious it was when a lot of young lads who had worked in the market began to disappear off to "the front" to be replaced by their younger brothers—and sometimes even sisters. On a Saturday morning there were often more lads down the East End dressed in khaki than in civvies.

My only other memory of that period was of Schultz's, the sausage maker—a Saturday night treat for us, especially when he gave us a toothless grin and slipped an extra sausage in free. Lately he had always seemed to start the day with a broken windowpane, and then suddenly one morning the front was boarded up and we never saw Mr. Schultz again. "Internment," my granpa whispered mysteriously.

My old man would sometimes join us on a Saturday morning, but only to get some cash off from Granpa so that he could go to the Black Bull and spend it all with his mate Bert Shorrocks.

listening to what my sisters had been up to all day

went on / sing

(PE) 5

old man / go / on

hesitation / the time came for me

almost a year

of his shop

occasionally / ed

191 (PE)





JEFFREY ARCHER

Week after week Granpa would fork out a bob, sometimes even a florin, which we all knew he couldn't afford. And what really annoyed me was that he never drank and certainly didn't go much on gambling. My old man would always pocket the money, touch his cap and then head off towards the Black Bull.

both / a bundle /

That didn't stop / ing / over to /

This routine went on week after week and might never have changed, until one Saturday morning a toffee-nosed lady wearing a long black dress and carrying a parasol strode towards our barrow, stopped and placed a white feather in Dad's lapel.

who I had noticed standing on the corner for the past weeks

I've never seen him go so mad, far worse than the usual Saturday night when he had lost all his money gambling and came home so drunk that we all had to hide under the bed. He raised his clenched fist to the lady but she didn't flinch and even called him a coward to his face. He screamed back at her some choice words that he usually saved for the rent collector. He then grabbed all her feathers and threw them in the gutter before storming off in the direction of the Black Bull. What's more, he hadn't returned home by midday, when Sal served us up a dinner of fish and chips. I didn't complain as I went off to watch West Ham that afternoon, having scoffed his portion of chips. He still wasn't back when I got home that night, and when I woke the next morning his side of the bed hadn't been slept in. When Granpa brought us all back from midday mass there was still no sign of him, so I had a second night with the double bed all to myself.

PS 15/3

ed / Dad /

didn't come / at / never / returned / home /

"E's probably spent another night in jail," said Granpa on Monday morning as I pushed our barrow down the middle of the road, trying to avoid the horse shit from the buses that were dragged backwards and forwards, to and from the City along the Metropolitan Line.

As we passed Number 110, I spotted Mrs. Shorrocks staring at me out of the window, sporting her usual black eye and a mass of different colored bruises which she collected from Bert most Saturday nights.

"You can go and bail 'im out round noon," said Granpa. "E should have sobered up by then."

I scowled at the thought of having to fork out the half-crown to cover his fine, which simply meant another day's profits down the drain. A few minutes after twelve o'clock I reported to the police station. The duty sergeant told me that Bert Shorrocks was still in the cells and due up in front of the beak that afternoon, but they hadn't

7 # /





11
AS THE CROW FLIES

set eyes on my old man the whole weekend.

"Like a bad penny, you can be sure 'e'll turn up again," said Granpa with a chuckle.

But it was to be over a month before Dad "turned up" again. When I first saw him I couldn't believe my eyes—he was dressed from head to toe in khaki. You see, he had signed up with the second battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. He told us that he expected to be posted to the front at some time in the next few weeks but he would still be home by Christmas; an officer had told him that the bloody Huns would have been sent packing long before then.

Granpa shook his head and frowned, but I was so proud of my dad that for the rest of the day I just strutted around the market by his side. Even the lady who stood on the corner handing out white feathers gave him an approving nod. I scowled at her and promised my dad that if the Germans hadn't been sent packing by Christmas I would leave the market and join up myself to help him finish off the job. I even went with him to the Black Bull that night, determined to spend my weekly wages on whatever he wanted. But no one would let him buy a drink so I ended up not having to spend a ha'penny. The next morning he had left us to rejoin his regiment, even before Granpa and I started out for the market.

The old man never wrote because he couldn't write, but everyone in the East End knew that if you didn't get one of those brown envelopes pushed under your door, the member of your family who was away at the war must still be alive.

From time to time Mr. Salmon used to read to me from his morning paper, but as he could never find a mention of the Royal Fusiliers, I didn't discover what the old man was up to. I only prayed that he wasn't at someplace called Ypres where, the paper warned us, casualties were heavy.

Christmas Day was fairly quiet for the family that year on account of the fact that the old man hadn't returned from the front as the officer had promised.

Sal, who was working shifts in a cafe on the Commercial Road, went back to work on Boxing Day, and Grace remained on duty as a nurse at the London Hospital throughout the so-called holiday, while Kitty mooched around checking on everyone else's presents before going back to bed. Kitty never seemed to be able to hold down a job for more than a week at a time. But somehow, she was always better dressed than any of us. I suppose it must have been

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7/10/91

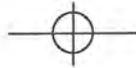
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7/10/91
10

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still



JEFFREY ARCHER

because a string of boyfriends seemed quite willing to spend their last penny on her before going off to the front. I couldn't imagine what she expected to tell them if they all came back on the same day.

~~Tr down~~
~~PS~~

Now and then, Kitty would volunteer to do a couple of hours work on the barrow, but once she had eaten her way through the day's profits she would soon disappear off. "Couldn't describe that one as an asset," Granpa used to say. Still, I didn't complain. I was sixteen without a care in the world and my only thoughts were on how soon I could get hold of my own barrow.

E/
but that time!

Mr. Salmon told me that he'd heard the best barrows were being sold off in the Old Kent Road, on account of the fact that so many young lads were heeding Kitchener's cry and joining up to fight for King and country. He felt sure there wouldn't be a better time to make what he called a good Metsieh. I thanked the baker and begged him not to let Granpa know what I was about, as I wanted to close "Metsieh" before he found out.

(lc) (ps)
(lc) (ps)

The following Saturday morning I asked Granpa for a couple of hours off.

"Found yourself some girl, 'ave you? Because I only 'ope it's not the boozier."

"Neither," I told him with a grin. "But you'll be the first to find out, Granpa I promise you" I touched my cap and strolled off in the direction of the Old Kent Road.

(lc) (ps)
(lc) (ps)

I crossed the Thames at Tower Bridge and walked farther south than I had ever been before, and when I arrived at the rival market I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd never seen so many barrows. Lined up in rows, they were. Long ones, short ones, stubby ones, in all the colors of the rainbow and some of them displaying names that went back generations in the East End. I spent over an hour checking out all those that were for sale but the only one I kept coming back to had displayed in blue and gold down its sides, "The biggest barrow in the world."

The woman who was selling the magnificent object told me that it was only a month old and her old man, who had been killed by the Huns, had paid three quid for it: she wasn't going to let it go for anything less.

I explained to her that I only had a couple of quid to my name, but I'd be willing to pay off the rest before six months were up.

"We could all be dead in six months," she replied, shaking her

