

## Old Man Lundy

In a way I was doing him a favour. The place was a tip - piled up like a junk yard - so if I could clear some stuff and get a few quid for it from the scrappers or wherever, well, like I say I was doing him a favour. He was ancient, Old Lundy, way past seventy. He fought in the First World War, that's how old he was.

Anyway there was no way he was going to miss the odd roll of wire, or stack of slates or whatever. Most of it had been there so long it had weeds growing out of it.

He had a couple of greenhouses out the back too and he grew tomatoes like nobody's business. Me dad kept his eye out for the sign shoved in the hedge: *Home-grown Tomatoes 5p a lb*. He'd tell me to get a bag when I delivered the milk.

I took Old Lundy a pint every night after we'd done milking. Then me and my dad'd eat tomatoes and bread for our tea. Only we wouldn't bother with knives and forks and plates like we used to.

On a Friday Old Lundy left the milk money on the door step with the empties. He'd wrap the coins tight in a bit of newspaper and fasten them with sellotape. The newspaper was usually a cartoon strip, Rupert the Bear or something – I don't know how he knew I liked cartoons - but by the time I'd got the sellotape off I usually couldn't read it. There'd be a couple of boiled sweets in there too, like I was a kid or something, even though I left school ages ago.

By rights I shouldn't have left, I was supposed to go on until I was 16 - but who was going to make me? Not me dad – he wanted me working on the farm all hours, especially as he reckoned he didn't have to pay me. 'I don't charge for your board,' he said. 'Think yourself lucky.' All I got was Old Man Lundy's milk money.

That's why I had to take Old Lundy's stuff, because you've got to keep body and soul together – that's what Ma always said when she was alive: You've got to keep body and soul together.

Old Man Lundy lived with Old Mrs Lund and Old Miss Lund. I only ever saw them when I knocked on the door for the tomatoes. I'd not get invited in. Old Man Lundy would pull at the door like it was too big for the hole. It took him ages to get it open it - like it had been fastened since last time I knocked on it - and he'd blink at me through his wonky glasses waiting for me to ask for something, as though it wasn't always two pounds of tomatoes.

I'd hang about on the doorstep like a spare part as these two faces beamed at me over the back of the sofa. 'It's Young Lenny,' one of them always said and then the other would go: 'By, you've grown.' Same every time. Every. Single. Time.

I had no idea which one was Old Mrs Lund and which one was Old Miss Lund - only one was fat and the other was thin and they were always sat on the sofa doing absolutely nothing at all. Ma used to say it was a shame for Old Miss Lund because she couldn't find a man to marry her when she was young after they were all killed in the war.

The room they sat in was tiny and dark with no television and just the ticking of a clock to keep them company. They had no electricity and at night me Dad said they lit paraffin lamps. I always thought that cottage smelled like death – well not really like death, I mean, just stale and fusty and, well, dead.

It took ages for Old Lundy to come shuffling back from his greenhouse with his cardi pulled out at the bottom and filled with tomatoes. He'd roll them onto the drainer and lift a massive pair of scales down from a kitchen shelf and weigh two pounds – taking one tomato off and putting another one on until the scales balanced at exactly two pounds. God forbid

he should give us an extra ounce of tomato. Then he'd put them in a brown paper bag that was too small so he couldn't twist the corners without them ripping.

He'd mark the bag '2lb' in shaky writing with a thick black pencil, like I might forget what I'd bought, and if I didn't have the right money he'd shuffle back to the kitchen and open a little drawer at the end of the table and root about in it for loose change.

It was when he was messing with his change that I noticed the roll of notes.

I walked back to the farm thinking about Old Man Lundy and Old Mrs Lund and Old Miss Lund and how they'd spent their lives shut in that pokey cottage surrounded by piles of rubbish and never seeing anyone from one week to the next. It was a wonder them old women weren't covered in cobwebs.

The tomatoes were still warm from the greenhouse. I bit one and sucked the seeds out and I got to thinking about Old Man Lundy and his roll of cash. He had nowhere to spend it and nothing to buy. What did he want it for? I watched the farmhouse getting closer and closer and I walked slower and slower.

That night when it got dark I went back. I sat on the wall down the side of Old Lundy's garden and had a fag like I always did while my eyes got used to the dark. As a rule, I sat there deciding what to take, but tonight I knew what I was going to take - and I knew by the look of that roll there was enough to get me away from the farm and me dad for good.

The kitchen window was open an inch and it was easy to put my hand in and open it wide. I squeezed through hardly making any noise even when I jumped off the sink. All I could hear was the ticking of that clock, sounding louder and louder as I stood still, not breathing, to make sure no one was coming. I unlocked the back door so I could get out quick, and then I opened the drawer in the kitchen table. I felt inside and there it was. A fat

bundle; even fatter than I'd thought. I shoved it in my pocket and I was away through the back door and over the wall like a streak of lightning.

I ran for a minute then stopped and looked over my shoulder – no lamps were lit, nobody was coming. I started walking, a fast walk though, and I kept on walking – right past the farmhouse without even looking at it - till I hit the nearest town.

Took me nearly two hours and when I got there the place was fast asleep. Everywhere was locked up bar the bus station so I found myself a bench tucked down the side and tried to get comfy but I couldn't doze off for thinking about that bundle. I could feel it wedged in my pocket. It meant I could get away – get away from the farm and working for me dad for nothing and being buried in the village for the rest of my life like Old Man Lundy and them old women.

From here I could get a bus to anywhere.

I needed to know how much I'd got. I went to the bogs and shut myself in a cubicle and took out the bundle. It was fastened with an elastic band which snapped and stung me when I took it off. There were £1 notes round the outside and fivers inside and tenners inside them. There was at least a couple of hundred quid maybe more.

I sat on the bog and fanned out the notes. I waved them about a bit and ran them over my face and I started laughing. It had been so easy. I wanted to throw them in the air and watch them flutter down like it was raining money but I reckoned they only did that on the telly. Anyway they might fly under the door and get lost. I slapped the stack of notes into my hand – it was the thickest wad of money I'd ever felt, bar monopoly money.

Then I noticed a piece of brown paper stuck in the middle. I pulled it out. On it was shaky writing in black pencil. Old Man Lundy's writing. I squinted at it. The yellow lights made it hard to read and to be honest I've never been the world's best reader. It took a

second to work it out: 'Young Lenny, spend it well.' I stared at it for ages with my heart leaping and crashing in my chest. I rubbed my eyes like they do in cartoons. Was I seeing it right? I held the paper close to my face and looked at each letter – yes, that was definitely what it said. 'Young Lenny, spend it well.'

I broke into a sweat. They knew. Or at least Old Man Lundy knew I was going to steal it. What else did he know? Had he seen me taking the stuff from his garden? Had he put it there for me to steal? I leant against the wall feeling sick. Had he opened that drawer and let me see the notes on purpose?

I was shaking. I felt terrible; I suppose it was shame, embarrassment. Whatever it was I could feel it dripping all over me. I didn't really think about what to do next but I set off walking back to the village as fast as I'd left it. There were still hours of darkness left. I had time to put it back.

It was still dark when I got back to Old Lundy's cottage. I hadn't shut the door so I walked straight in. I got my bearings for a second and felt for the table. The cottage was dark during the day so at night it was black as coal. I edged further into the kitchen and put my hand out to feel for the table. The next thing I knew there was a crash – I must have pulled the drawer out too far before and now I'd knocked the whole thing onto the floor. There was a clatter as it hit the tiles and coins scattered everywhere.

They rolled and settled and I held my breath. Why I didn't leg it I don't know. I think I was still set on putting the money back.

'Young Lenny is that you?' It was Old Man Lundy's voice coming from the living room. He sounded calm like he wasn't surprised and I heard him shuffling towards the kitchen.

I felt such a fury take hold of me. Couldn't I do *anything* without him knowing? I hung back against the sink. Perhaps he'd clear off if I kept quiet. 'Young Lenny, it's alright if it's you,' he said. It was like he was *trying* to make me ashamed. I didn't even breathe.

He shuffled into the kitchen. 'Young Lenny?' he said. His voice wasn't calm any more he sounded worried – he didn't know if he'd got some other nutter in his kitchen. I was glad. I was glad he was worried. What right did he have to tempt me with rolls of money and then shame me when I took it?

'Who is it? Get out whoever it is.' Old Man Lundy's voice had gone high and a bit mad sounding. I heard him grab a pan off the stove and I could see the shape of him against the moonlit window as he waved it over his head. 'Get out!' he shouted. 'Whoever it is. Get out.'

The pan whizzed past my head and crashed into the shelf behind. I put my hand up to find something to fend him off and I felt cold metal. I grabbed it and threw it towards him; it was heavier than I thought and nearly pulled my arm out of its socket. It was the old iron scales and they fairly flew across the kitchen catching Old Man Lundy about the head and knocking him flat, just like that. He flew backwards, and when his head hit the tiles I heard a crack.

'Tom?' said a quavering voice. 'Tom, what's happening?'

It was Old Mrs Lund or Old Miss Lund – one of them – and she was creeping through the living room. It was the first time I'd known her do anything other than sit on the sofa and listen to the clock.

'Tom!' She was kind of screaming now as she bent over Old Lundy, holding a light near his face. He didn't look good. His eyes were open and staring and there was blood

behind his head. 'Tom, have you fallen?' she said, and she started to cry. I kept in the dark, flattened against the shelves, not even breathing.

'Aggie,' she shouted. 'Aggie, Tom's fallen.' She was sobbing really loud now and I wanted to cover my ears. She scurried off to the bottom of the stairs and shouted again.

'Aggie, come quick.'

I heard her coming back, but I was gone. I was away; I was running as fast as I could through all that junk outside. As I legged it I felt the lump against my leg and I realised I'd not put the money back. I grabbed the roll out of my pocket and flung it as hard as I could. There was no elastic band on it now and it flew everywhere – fluttering down like it was raining amongst the weeds and the rubbish.

I ran down the lane and as I got nearer to the farmhouse I saw the lights were on. Dad was up to do the milking and he'd be expecting me to get the cows up.

I stopped running and bent forward to get my breath back. My heart was crashing. My hands were shaking. I wiped the sweat from my forehead. I looked back at Old Man Lundy's cottage but it was all dark.

Keeping really quiet I slipped in through the back door of the farmhouse and I grabbed the stick I use to get the cows up.

'Is that you, Young Lenny?' me dad shouted. 'About time them cows were up.'

'Aye,' I said. My voice came out funny and quite. I went back outside. I walked up the lane for the cows and I stared at the sun as it rose over the farm for another day.

