

Choc Ice

By Paul Lister

Things looked different when you're old. The summer walk to get his pension was along streets that Alf remembered as joyful in his long-ago teens. But they were different now. Corners where innocent children once played were now populated with hooded youths of the same age, but with bleaker intent.

Fear forced him onto the beach. He didn't recognise it at first. But when his toe stubbed against half hidden metal, Alf looked down to see the rusted spokes of a bicycle wheel.

"Choc ice?" whispered the briny breeze as it crept between the dunes. Alf stumbled over the abandoned cycle and his glasses dropped to the sand as he fell. He struggled to find them, and his eyes caught sight of a figure standing in the surf.

A figure wearing an ice cream man's peaked hat.

"No," said Alf, his search becoming more frantic until he found his spectacles and looked up. The man was gone.

He cursed himself and got to his feet. It wasn't their fault. There had been rumours of missing children and when they found a body with ice cream it-

The sound of the bicycle bell rang shrill across the blue fringed landscape. The harsh metallic noise drove the July warmth from Alf's bones. It seemed to come from everywhere, peeling concentric circles that closed in on him.

"Probably just a kid," he said to himself. But then a speaker crackled into life.

Greensleeves.

No one was doing anything about it. Everyone knew it was him. His cheap freezer full of tempting treats and his sing-song cassette player with children's tunes. He was foreign, or a gypsy, or something 'not' Alf or his friends, and when the children went missing, well everyone knew-

"Choc ice?" whispered the voice in his ear, a breath smelling of sickly melted chocolate and off dairy products.

And something was there in Alf's face, thrashing and screaming. He found himself doing the same, wind milling his arms and running as best he could with his aging muscles. The thing followed him, and he staggered toward the only shelter that he could see.

The bunker.

Alf didn't want to enter the damp edifice, but it was his only escape. He made it through the entrance and turned to face his attacker. The silhouette of a seagull wheeled away and flew into the shining aquamarine sky.

Just a bird. He was so stupid. So paranoid. Like he was when he was a teen. No one was going to do anything, not the police, not anyone. So, he did, and his friends did. The ice cream man would never hurt a child again.

Too late Alf felt the skeletal hands pull him into the darkness, into the place where they burned the gypsy.

They arrested the real murderer a week later.

Alf tried to scream as the rotten milky treat was pushed into his mouth, hearing those two questioning syllables one last time.

Choc ice?