

Jack the Gypsy

Jack was a pathetic, skinny, undernourished little chap that had scrappy grey clothes with holes in his pants at the most unfortunate of places and always barefooted. Even in cold weather. He had warts all over his hands and scuffed knees with wire rimmed glasses trying to hold in lenses that I'm sure came from the bottom of a couple of beer bottles. His hair was clearly cut by placing a bowl on his head and trimming around the base of it. He looked like a farmer's animated scarecrow. He was the focus of all the pre-teen bullies in the school.

When he started at our school he was treated like a feral animal and beaten up with words as much as fists by the little shits that were soon to get their comeuppance. By me. At that early point in my life I had always been drawn to protecting young animals and Jack didn't seem to be much different; Not handsome in the slightest, close-cropped hair looking a bit like a hedgehog, warty hands and knees and obviously half-blind. He was a perfect target for equally young but unequally blessed human animals. And that's when my protective nature mutated and I became, in turn, a bit of a bully myself - dishing out punishment in like manner as received to the nasty little cretins that started closing in on him.

Every day I used to walk home with him to the caravan he lived in with his Gypsy parents and it wasn't hard for me to see how lucky I was and how sad it was for many such as Jack. Apparently roasted hedgehog and wild (or stolen) vegetables and fruit were what they managed to live on but they were clearly very poor.

As that final year and days at primary school were drawing close and we were all saying our final goodbyes – we knew we were going off to our secondary schools and probably never going to see each other again, Jack did something very special. He taught me something I have always held on to as to what friendship can really show. He gave me a couple of empty pop (lemonade) bottles that I could redeem for two pennies each saying he wanted to give me a going away present but that is all he had. It probably was.

If someone gave me thousands of dollars today, it would come nowhere close to the significance of that humble gift.