Black Country Stories 1

Too Skinny

I was too skinny, the whoreman said, but he took both my sisters.

Have her for nowt, said my father, and put his hat on to go.

But the whoreman was cannier than that and said something about feed me at whose expense, and me no use for nothing what with being so scrawny. And pushed me towards the door after him.

I thought of saying I wasn't too skinny to scrub floors so that he'd keep me, but children have no say, they're not supposed to speak. Not that it was being a scrubber I wanted, I wanted something more than that. I wanted to stay with my sisters and be a whore.

Anyway I assumed my father was going to throw me in a ditch or down a mine shaft if he couldn't get rid of me any better way. I traipsed after him into the rainy night. I didn't have a hat.

He wasn't my father neither, he was one of my sisters' father that had come back after years at the brick kilns.

My father was a crock seller from Wigan that had left his wife behind and was fair bursting. So when it came time that he couldn't hold his seed in any longer and saw my mother doing laundry he had to love her on a pile of ironing and piss it into her, and that's what made *me*, she said.

Wigan's a long way though. I once set out to walk there but didn't get further than Tipton before I was worn out and thirsty. A sand girl gave me a drink of her water and took me back with her to Gornal. The man there said I should set my sights no further'n Wedgebury, if it were crocks I were after, and laughed.

That was the time I first realised I was too skinny, when I set out for Wigan and didn't get there. But the whoreman not wanting me was worse, because I knew my father wasn't going to be lumbered with me now my mother was marmalised.

The drunk washerwoman that wiped her sick up said she was no use for nothing but the freak show. He'd given her a right good thrashing and thumped her in the bargain. Then he buggered her up the bum, to make sure.

He said it served her right for having a navigator when he was four days in the round house.

The crock seller he didn't mind, the time he was at the brick kilns, as that was years and he'd no mind to come back till he got to thinking. But four days in the round house proved her no better than she was, he said.

I followed a few paces behind him. He looked round a couple of times, probably hoping I'd strayed off so he wouldn't have to be bothered. If I wandered over the heath I'd like as not fall down a mine all by myself.

I expected he'd clout me and push me in the ditch, and either I'd drown in the mud or if I didn't I didn't know what would happen next.

He turned off down a rough path that went through soggy hollows and past big lumps of clinker. I stopped when the path dipped down into pitch black, it looked like a better place to murder me than the ditch.

He turned round and said Come on wench. When I caught up with him he pinched my cheek and said Thou'rt drenched as a drownded kitty but there's shelter yonder, we're nigh there.

There was a metal grating and machinery and they were protected from the rain by a hovel, an open-sided roof on poles.

Sit here till mornin shift comes and they'll tek thee down wi em, like as not. He left me sitting there and went off into the darkness, and I never saw him again.

I sat all night, except when I lay on a piece of wood because the ground was gravelly and wet. After hours and hours of sitting or lying there shivering it started getting light and the morning shift came.

It was two men and a woman and some children. They put me in a bucket with three other children, two boys and a girl, tightly wedged in, and lowered us down into the blackness of the mine. Then after a while the two men came down with candles, and we walked along a narrow passage to a dead end.

There were shallow slits in the wall at the dead end, or face as they called it. That's why they take skinny children, because we're the only ones that can crawl into these slits and get gypsum.

It's hard work, being all day hour after hour on your belly in the slit, or seam as it's called, loosening the gypsum with an iron bar they give you. Wriggling backwards to lug it to one of the boys, then crawling back to get more.

And all the while you're getting it there's this dust comes off it and you have to breath it in because there's nothing else to breath, and it clogs up your eyes and nose and ears, and your hair gets full of it.

They shriek when we come out and pretend to think we're ghosts because the dust is white and we're covered in it, as well as being all skin and bone in our rags. We walk, or more like crawl – after being all day squashed in the slit we can't stand upright – we crawl up the hillside to a kind of shed called a bothy, and that's where we live.

We have to strip off and go in a tin bath for a scrub. Then they give us a dish of hot gruel and a lump of hard bread.

There's a bare wooden shelf that we sleep on, it's everso uncomfortable, but you're so worn out from being all day crawling in the seam getting gypsum that you fall asleep in no time.

When you wake up you ache all over and are desperate to go to the lavatory. This is just a mess of straw outside at the back. Then you sit on your shelf as it begins to get light, waiting for them to fetch you for the morning shift.

I've been here a while now. I don't like it but I look forward to the gruel, and also to the boy that lies next to me cuddling me and moaning in the night.

When I get too big to crawl in the slit in the gypsum mine I'm going to marry him and be a sand girl, and he'll get a donkey and be a proper grit carrier. And we'll both of us have hats.

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No Use For Nothing

The freak show stopping on the heath was my chance.

Fattest woman. Ugliest man. Frog boy. Snake girl. Living skeleton. Tumbling dwarfs. Naked black savage. Mermaid. Monkey wife. Singing bear. A goat with two heads.

I had the drunk surgeon from Bilston come and saw my legs off and stitch up the stumps. I felt a bit queazy at first, but I dragged myself to the heath and saw the showman.

I got a frog boy, he said.

I'm a girl.

He frowned. Show us your tits. But when I did he shook his head. You're a lad, a lad whose voice ain't broke.

I'm 31, I said.

Then you're a bloke whose voice ain't broke.

I unbuckled my short breeches (what do you wear when you've had your legs off?) and facially gestured for him to put his hand in.

Blow me down, he said.

He fingered me for ages. I might have got fed up and yanked him out, but I wanted him to give me a job and take me with him. So I left him to it.

By the end I wanted him to give me babies, or fetch the naked black savage.

I thought I'd clinched it when he finally brought his hand out and sniffed his fingers. Then twiddled one of my nipples.

A boy-girl I could use, ain't got one, a flat-chested girl-boy, ain't had one o' them since Hairy Olive scarpered with them siamese twins ... When your legs grow back I'll take you.

What use're you without legs? the sandman said when I went back to reclaim my day-job in the sand pit. You're no use for nothing.

I can shovel into baskets, I said.

And lift them on the donkey? Try the freak show, it was on the heath yesternight, it won't have got further'n Tipton.

My uncle said the same. What use're you now, with no legs? I'll have to be using Twinky for waitressing and you know she's more profitable above stairs.

That's something you can do without legs, I said, legs just get in the way.

He gave a laugh. What, with your flat chest! You're too skinny. Never mind that nose of yours. You're a freak, you're no use for nothing but the gypsum mine.

I'm not a freak, I said, as if I was sneaped. I'm not a freak I'm a novelty, they'll pay more.

He shook his head.

They will, they'll like it more, legs just get in the way. When they do their grunt and piss their stuff up me the joy will be greater.

He did a short dismissive laugh.

And men who prefer boys might *like* my chest.

They'd want you up the backside.

Yes, and *pay* more.

His laugh had shortened to more of a Hrmm ...

I wasn't as confident as I sounded, about the Enochs weaning themselves off the delights of Twinky's big wobbly bosoms (and big wobbly other bits) to patronise a flat-chested tight-arsed snub-nosed skin-and-bone girl-boy with no legs.

Still less that we could compete with the boys' school for the bum-trade, the sodomites, in term time anyway. But now, well, I even get some of the masters. And a sore bum.

I never had much schooling but I'm making up for it. Next to being naughty my favourite subject is flagellation, I love a good thrashing.

So it's all worked out. My uncle's so pleased he pretends it was his idea. And sometimes sneaks in himself of a rainy afternoon ...

So I'm no use for nothing am I? I say, teasing him as he sucks my shoulder and sobs.

So, that's how I came to improve myself from being a sand girl by day and waitress of an evening to being a Gornal whore by both, evening and morning and all afternoon, as my mother intended. Cheap rate for afternoons and relatives.

It's a freak show of sorts – I'm the only legless titless two-way trollop in all of the Black Country. Or leastways this side of Wedgebury.

The freak show man came to me next time they were on the heath.

Twinky left about the same time, though I'm sure he'd not been one of hers. He is definitely not a blubber man.

After he'd finished in my bottom I turned over and let him twiddle my nipples. Then I rubbed his fingers on my fanny, and said You don't remember me do you?

No, he said.

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Not a Freak

I was cursed with a curvy figure and pretty features – or anyway big blue eyes and big white wobbly boobies. So it was no surprise once my mother put me out to the beerhouse as live-in waitress that I spent more time serving pork pie and strawberries on my back above stairs than waiting in the taproom.

That's till that snooty cow the beerseller's neice (no, I don't believe it either) fetched up one day with her legs off and couldn't waitress any more. She could lie on her bony back though – and on her bony front, the slut.

I wouldn't have minded sharing the duties with her, except the Enochs liked the scrawny bitch better than me, and paid more. More for less – for as well as having no legs and no tits and no morals she's got no softness to her at all, she's just like a boy, a bony boy. What with her cropped hair and stupid nose, when she was waitressing they thought she was the pot boy. A pot boy in a frock.

She says she's not a freak. Legs get in the way, apparently.

But mine are the better to run away with, I told her.

You won't run off, she said, like she knew.

I *shall* when I've a mind I shall, I said, but more's the point I *can*, when I'm inclined ever, nair-hair, so there.

Who'd have you? she said. You're no use for nothing, you're all paint and lard.

So who'd have *you* then? You're *stuck* here, where can you crawl to?

Lard and face-physic and blubber.

Too skinny for a Coseley oatcake and too bony for gruel.

Blubber and udders and cunt.

And what are you? Three holes in a bag of bones, so there.

She lets them have her up her bum and in her gob, the dirty hussy. Mouth I can swallow but the back way I won't ever allow, it's wicked and sinful, though they *do* sometimes ask you, the Enochs.

It's a sin against God and the magistrates, I tell them, there's no going to heaven if you do that.

One time we had one that claimed he was heir to an Earl (no, I knew, just wait). He wanted me to leave the beerhouse and go with him as his mistress. *Chief* mistress, he said, it sounded better till I got to thinking.

Chief scrubber more like. I knew he was a fake (what heir to an Earl ever lived in Bilston? or had to come to Gornal to get a whore, *or* a scrubber) but he rodded me right up the sough, rigid as Wedgebury Oak on a wakes wednesday, and had a pedigree russet cock that had won prizes. So I caved in and went with him.

We went through the window down a ladder, it was like something in a play by that Shakeshaft but more ricketty, and windy. He said he'd been playing the beerseller at cards for me – and lost.

He kept up this fib about being a toff by winning lots of money at card games and cock fights. Sometimes he *lost* lots of money instead, and when he did he made me go back to the whoring. I didn't much mind it to be honest, it's good to have a trade to fall back on.

What I didn't like was when he took his prize cock off one Sat'dy, for the noble sport, and I never saw either of them again. Leaving me chief scrubber to his father.

He didn't claim to be an Earl or a Lord or anything, his father. He was just a miserable old Bible-thumping drunk with one arm, but a strong one. He thumped *me* with it as well as his Bible, he gave me a right good thrashing every time before he took his proper pleasure with me. I don't think he could summon up the ardour for loving except by this biffing and pummelling of me, and seeing how my flesh wobbled.

When I'd had enough of it I ran off. On my two legs.

I was sitting in the rain wondering if there was something more than whoring and scrubbing, or if I should open a laundry. When by chance the freak show came trundling through Tipton and the showman recognised me (no, he did too, he was an old Enoch of mine at the beerhouse). So he stopped the caravan and I went with him.

It crossed my mind *he* wanted me for a scrubber as well – seeing as how the freak show is filthy and always stinks of piss.

I'm not a freak, I said jokily (I meant it jokily anyway).

You're the world's most beautiful woman, he said. Once the swellings go down. I thought he was agreeing with me but he wasn't.

I don't know any more whether I'm not a freak or not now.

World’s Most Beautiful Woman, the sign outside the tent reads (I’m told). Ordinary Viewing a penny, Private Viewing a groat, Enoch’s Treat one-and-nine. That includes moaning, grunting, and pissing their stuff in me, but it’s mostly snoring.

One-and-ninepence though – if my mother could see me now!

I was disappointed the showman didn’t lie with me himself, well, not after the first three nights he didn’t. Turns out his idea of a treat is the monkey’s bum. So he’s got no going to heaven pretty much sewn up.

I’ve stuck it for a while but I’m a bit fed up. I’m thinking of going off with this crock seller from Biddle. He pops up here and there as we waggle about the country – and blow me down here he is all smiling with his fiddle and his ferret and his big basket of crockery.

He always tries to persuade me to take dishes in place of the one-and-nine ...

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No Going To Heaven

All day when it's light in the world we crawl in our crevice, getting the gypsum with cleavers. Let down the shaft into pitch dark, crammed in a bucket, me and two skinny boys and a smaller girl we found all wet-through one morning, waiting.

Hauled back up at dusk, covered in dust, we crawl – we can't walk upright after all day in the crevice – we crawl up the hill to our tin bath, our gruel, and our sleeping planks in the bothy on the hillside.

Sundays we get the half day. We'd rather sleep, but they make us go to chapel in the chapel-in-a-hut at the top of the hill. We have to join in singing songs and sit still (if we fidget they thump us) while a miserable old one-armed man from Bilston tells us how wicked and sinful we are.

He says we're slaves of Satan, and there'll be no going to heaven unless we throw off his chains and love Christ.

Christ is what grown-ups call Jesus, that came down from heaven made of flesh and lived in Bethliham, or was it Netherton. We think Satan lives in his flesh in Dudley, and though we've never seen him he gets all the money for the gypsum and keeps it.

It might be nice to throw off the chains and not be slaves any more, nor ache from the crawling nor cough from the white dust. But if we did I don't know what would happen next – who'd give us gruel? and where would we lie down to sleep, especially when it's raining?

The skinny boy that lies next to me on the planks gets everso lonely in the night. I think he was spoiled when he was little, having a mother and a blanket. But I let him move up against me and cuddle me while he moans. It makes me a bit warmer.

Sometimes he does something more and we giggle, well, I giggle, he's usually sulky. Once one time I leaned my head up and gave him a kiss. I wondered if he'd wipe it off and say Yuck like boys do. But he didn't.

I suppose it was sinful, I'm sure Satan wouldn't approve, nor Jesus neither.

I told him about my sisters and my step-father and how I couldn't stand the grunting and ran off, and how thirsty I was by the time I got to Gornal. And how a sand girl let me share her water.

He said *his* step-father grunted, mostly while giving his mother her conjugal thrashings. She got such a good one one Friday they had to carry her off in a box and that was that. Then he cried.

She'll like as not have gone to Jesus so you shouldn't worry about her, I said.

He said he'd seen a sand girl once, with long hair and rosy cheeks and nice plump boobies, she was lovely.

I felt ashamed for my flat chest and pale skin and short hair. They keep our hair cropped or it drags about in the seam and gets in the way, as well as being harder to brush dust out of.

Sand girls *are* lovely, I said, they're the nicest girls for miles.

But mam was a Sedgley slut, he said, crying again. Wicked and sinful she was, like us. There's no going to heaven for them sort.

I wished he'd shut up about his slag of a mother, but I didn't say it.

I told him I thought it was only if you'd done it up your bum you couldn't go to heaven. Except for that Jesus lets whores off, you're not even allowed to throw stones at them unless somebody else throws one first. That's what they told us in chapel one time.

She never did it up her bum *ever*, he said.

I wanted to be a whore, once, but my sisters told me I was too bony for men to do their loving with, and too skinny to piss their seed into.

I don't think you're too bony, the boy said, straight out. It made me fall in love with him.

Once we're too big to be Satan's slaves any more I'm going to marry him. We'll set off for Tipton or Wedgebury, or Bethliham if we can find it, and get a donkey with a hat, and see if there isn't something more than crawling in the crevice getting gypsum.

When we heard the freak show was up on the heath the men let us come out of the mine early, as a treat, and gave us some pennies.

We shouted Yippee and crawled up the hillside, past the bothy and past the chapel-in-a-hut, and by then we'd got our legs back and stumbled across the heath and ran about the freak show, waving our arms.

The men made out they weren't scared but the women and children shrieked and ran off, being as we were covered in the white dust and all skin and bone in our rags. There's no going to heaven for ghosts.

Then we went to see the mermaid, that is just like a dried-up dead fish with long hair.

And the world's most beautiful woman, all blubber and face-paint, lollopping with her big bosoms and belly that are not properly covered up. She is definitely not going to heaven.

And the naked black savage, squatting there chained to a tree-stump. When you go closer he suddenly rears up and shakes his chains and you get a good look at his cock, which is like a donkey's.

And the living skelington, who is the thinnest girl in the world, even skinnier than we are, she'd be just right for getting the gypsum. She comes alive out of a heap of dirt, stark naked after she's writhed enough to shake most of it off her. Then she opens her gob as if doing a big yawn and that's full of dirt as well, and wriggling grubs.

It was horrible.

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Something More

The freak show stopping on the heath was my chance.

I'd long-since beaten my uncle's prize heifer Twinky at her own game, before she went off with that fake lord, the slut. But I wanted more.

Blow me down, my uncle said. Nor boobs nor legs, nor hair more than wigless parson from Walsall, not to mention nose like a dunted apricock and too skinny to roast, but you're the most popular trollop I've ever bred.

I asked him for a better share of the takings instead of flattery. He's put the rate up several times without increasing my Gornal shilling, as we call it. But I wanted something more.

Don't I feed you and house you and clothe you and slop you out, and launder the sheets and ... don't I?

Yes uncle, I said.

And get you ointment for your bumhole?

Yes uncle. I always seem to end up saying Yes uncle.

Wigless parson! He knows full well I keep it cropped for the Enochs that like boys – what with the slums and the grammar school (in term time anyway) they could easily go down the road, as we don't have *real* boys, my uncle doesn't like them.

But even some of the masters come now, moaning as I do my conjugations, grunting in satisfaction when I finish my declensions. They're more than happy with me – you can tell by how they slobber and sob and hum the school anthem – but it's only so long as I keep my hair short and let them feel my flat chest.

And if they want to give my bottom a good thrashing it's just a penny extra, so long as they've brought their cane. I like it actually.

I like being buggered, it's more restful than the usual rummage up the Dudley Tunnel, legs or not. But I want something more.

What I dream of is the freak show. I dream of being exhibited at the freak show. Being a freak, exposing myself to view, wicked and sinful and stark naked, penny a gawp – seeing them gasp in horror and pity at my having no legs, no tits and no shame.

I don't see why I couldn't still be a whore in the bargain – it's more than beerhouses and laundries that have them. Penny to gasp, groat to grasp and wriggle, any hole, unencumbered by legs or long itchy hair.

I think my uncle jokes about my nose because uncles are like that. When I was little he used to say it was like a squashed tomato, and press it with his finger. And twiddle my nipples.

It was his fault I was fond of the freak show. As long as I remember we visited it every time it was on the heath. And he told me about my mother, how she loved the freak show so much she gave her life to it – it was her we went to see really.

My mother went in the big fishtank so she could go with the freak show, be part of the freak show, stay in the freak show for ever. And she is – they've still got her, you can still see her there in the tank, all shrivelled up and grey and dead.

For my mother had no legs either – she had a tail.

So when I was little my uncle always took me to see her, whenever the freak show came to the heath. Or sometimes we'd go to Tipton Wakes to see her, or Wedgebury, if there was a cocking.

And on the way back or on the way there he'd tell me the story. How she came up the canal, and crawled out of the water and flopped about on the cobbles in the rain. And how the two twin brothers coming back from the brick kilns saw her there and loved her both together, and variously, over and over all the while she was writhing and wriggling and flopping about, till she was sore. And how all this loving of her and pissing their seed up her got her with child, which was *me*.

When she had to go back in the water to have me, they tossed a Bradley hape'ny for which of them would be my father and go back with us, and which would be my uncle and open a whorehouse.

My uncle never saw his twin brother again – for when mortal men go off with a mermaid they can never return to the breathing world. But my mother returned, for the sake of the freak show. She came back up the canal with me sucking on her breast, gave me to my uncle to bring up and tickle, and drownded herself in the fishtank.

I loved him telling me about her when I was little, and taking me to see her. I looked forward to it year by year – seeing my mother lying there, grey and dead, and hearing the story all over again.

After he'd told me a dozen times, that's thirteen, and finished bringing me up, he started me whoring. It's tickling, only without the laughing. But I wanted something more.

I wanted to have a little green tail like my mother, and also to have long red hair like my mother, and also to have plump white breasts like my mother. And I wanted to be exhibited in a tank of water, like my mother.

They're shrivelled and empty and lie flat on her ribs now, her breasts, but that's because she's been in the water so long.

They were so plump and succulent and wobbly when my father and uncle first saw her writhing on the cobbles, down by the canal, that it drove them rigid with ardour, my uncle says. Bursting to love her up and piss their stuff in her.

But mine never came, my boobies, wobbly or otherwise, I stayed near enough like a boy. A scrawny boy. Nor is my hair so red. Nor is my tail anything like as green and sexy as my mother's was. Is it?

No uncle.

Anyway, after Twinky legged it, the cow, and my uncle's new busty waitress wouldn't give him mouth, I thought No more Yes uncle. Next time the freak show stops on the heath I'm dragging myself off.

But the man won't have me. He says I'm too skinny and too talkative, and no use for nothing.

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