

JUDY  
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*Stories from the*  
Otto Bin Empire



ADAM'S MUM  
AND DAD

Adam was fifteen years old when he first arrived at The Corner – fifteen going on sixteen, his birthday only a few weeks away.

‘Welcome to the Otto Bin Empire,’ Madge had said, but he hadn’t got the gag and she hadn’t bothered explaining it. The situation was too dire. Winter had arrived with a vengeance and the kid needed help. Adam had been sleeping out on the streets for several weeks now, but the cold snap had hit him hard.

It had been Benny who’d directed Adam to the inner-city spot fondly referred to as ‘The Corner’, which wasn’t really a corner at all, but just a collection of wheelie bins that sat under the flyover down near the docks, where an eclectic group of homeless regularly gathered.

‘Ask for Madge,’ Benny had said. He’d been cross when the coppers had kicked young Adam out of the laneway next door to Woolies. Well, he’d been as cross as Benny could be anyway; nothing much ever bothered Benny.

Benny sold *The Big Issue* outside Woolies six days a week, and was a cheerful chap who loved nothing more than a chat. ‘I’m not the full quid,’ he’d happily announce

to a customer who stopped for a natter. Or his boast might be, ‘I’m bipolar,’ which wasn’t the case at all, but having heard the term bandied about he’d decided to adopt it. Forty-something Benny, in his scruffy baseball cap and minus several front teeth, was a loveable simpleton, whether by birth or substance abuse was anyone’s guess, but he’d been clean for several years now and was a gentle, kind-hearted soul. It had offended him when the coppers had ordered young Adam to pack up his grungy bedding and move on. ‘Not fair,’ he’d said. ‘Not right, a kid your age.’ So he’d directed Adam to The Corner and told him to ask for Madge. ‘She’ll look after you,’ he said. ‘She’s real mumsy, Madge is,’ and he’d grinned his foolish, gap-toothed grin. ‘She’s been a real good mum to *me*, anyway.’

The tough, beefy woman in the moth-eaten cardigan, ill-kempt grey hair scraped back in a ratty ponytail and dragging on a roll-your-own hadn’t struck Adam as the mumsy type. But she’d certainly looked after him. Benny had been right about that much. She’d even offered him floor space in her nearby bedsitter; one of the squalid, single-room, share-bathroom ‘apartments’ that were hired out to people on the poverty line.

Among those who gathered at The Corner, Madge was the only one who didn’t strictly qualify as a member of ‘the Otto Bin Empire’, a term she’d coined herself. But despite the fact Madge was not technically homeless, she was one of them nonetheless, and indeed the most important one, for Madge was the matriarch – to the habitués of The Corner, anyway.

‘Chuck your swag down there,’ she’d said, indicating the metre or so of space in her bedsit that wasn’t devoted to clutter. ‘You can sleep here for a while – till the end of the cold snap, at least.’ She rummaged about in a large cardboard box in the corner, coming up with a faded check lumberjack-style jacket, which she tossed to him. ‘There, you’ll need that,’ she said. ‘And that’ – a bright blue woollen beanie followed – ‘and you’ll need some heavy socks too.’ More rummaging. ‘There you go.’ A pair of khaki socks followed. ‘That should do you for now.’ She ran a critical eye over his threadbare jeans. ‘We’ll get you a pair of tracksuit pants at Vinnies tomorrow.’

‘Thanks very much . . . Madge.’ He was hesitant coming out with the first name she’d insisted upon. He found her rather formidable, and she had to be in her sixties at least, maybe even seventy – it was so hard to tell. He’d rather call her Mrs or Miss or Ms somebody, but she hadn’t offered a surname. ‘Just Madge’ll do,’ she’d said. ‘Everyone calls me Madge.’

They’d been assessing each other equally. The kid would find out soon enough, Madge had thought, that no-one at The Corner had a surname. *I’ll bet he doesn’t want his own name known – he’s bound to be a runaway. Probably another case of domestic violence; there’s enough of them around here all right.*

She decided there and then that she’d try to persuade him to get in touch with Family and Community Services – when she got to know him better, anyway. He was too young to be alone on the streets. Tall enough, adult height but with the scrawny, lanky body of a teenager yet to flesh

out. Fair-haired, blue-eyed and baby-faced. *Jeez, not even bum-fluff on his chin; he can't be more than fifteen. Yeah,* she thought, *FaCS would be the way to go. But a lot of runaways don't want to make contact with the authorities, do they? Too frightened their parents'll find out where they are and come after them, poor little bastards.*

Madge had determined to bide her time until she'd gained the boy's trust. She didn't want to scare him off. *He'll be safer if he sticks around here with us. At least I'll be able to keep my eye on him.*

She was proved right. Adam was quickly adopted at The Corner. As he was taken under Madge's wing, and already a mate of Benny's, those who regularly gathered at the collection of brightly coloured, plastic wheelie bins down near the docks accepted the kid as one of their own, a member of the family, so to speak.

Old Syd the dero, as he was referred to among the group – and not without a degree of fond familiarity – had summed it up to perfection. 'You're one of us now, Adam,' old Syd had said. 'You're one of the Otto Bin Empire,' and he cackled with pride.

When Adam asked Syd what he meant by 'the Otto Bin Empire', Syd hadn't been able to adequately explain the term, an inadequacy that clearly hadn't bothered him in the least. 'Just one of us,' he'd said gesturing airily at the motley group resting their longneck bottles, takeaway coffees and elbows on the garbage containers. 'We're all part of the Otto Bin Empire,' he said happily. Old Syd the dero just loved the thought of belonging somewhere and to something.

‘So what does it mean, Madge?’ Adam asked one afternoon as they ate the pies she’d bought them from the bakery up the hill. They were leaning on the particular wheelie bin that was Madge’s special preserve, although anyone was invited to share it if they cared for a natter, as Adam regularly did these days, no longer finding Madge daunting. He didn’t even find it daunting the way she sat her pie directly on the lid of the wheelie bin, which at first he’d considered most unhygienic. He’d been dossing down on Madge’s floor most nights for nearly a month, and Madge had become just Madge. She’d even bought him a birthday cake. He was sixteen now.

‘What does what mean?’ Madge drenched her pie in tomato sauce from the bottle she’d fetched from the bedsit – she hated those piddly little plastic things they gave you at the bakery.

‘The Otto Bin Empire. I asked old Syd a while back, but he didn’t seem to know. He said it was “just us”, whatever that means.’

‘Well, for once Syd was right,’ Madge replied. She took a huge mouthful of her pie, having tested it to make sure it wasn’t too hot. Tomato sauce wreaked instant havoc on her face, but who cared anyway – God, she loved pies.

Wiping the residue off with the sleeve of her voluminous cardigan and chomping away happily, she looked over at the wooden bench where old Syd had passed out, as he so often did. The bench was one of two, both well worn, that sat in the dockside suburb’s tiny communal ‘park’, which was really no more than a patch of dried grass and a few small scrawny trees.

*God knows what the poor old bugger drinks from those bottles in brown paper bags, she thought. Metho probably, but we'll find him dead on that bench one of these days.* Washing down the mouthful of pie with a swig of Diet Pepsi, she went on: 'The Otto Bin Empire is people like us, Adam. People who hang around the city and form little communities like we've got here at The Corner. We're an empire, you see, strung out all over the place but with a connection between us. Well, that's the way I like to think of it, anyway.'

Madge smiled, proud of herself for having invented the term, but Adam continued to stare at her blankly.

'It's a play on words, love,' she said patiently. 'The Ottoman Empire . . . ?' She shouldn't have expected him to understand – few of the others did – and he was only a kid after all. She was about to explain further, but he interrupted.

'Yeah, yeah, I get that,' he said. 'The Turkish Empire, multinational, massive for centuries – I learned all about it at school. I was good at history.' He had been, too, he'd been good at a lot of subjects – he'd liked school – but when he'd run away from home he'd had to run away from school as well, or his dad would have found him. 'But the "Otto Bin" part?' he asked, puzzled.

Madge was delighted, although equally puzzled. The Ottoman pun was the bit most people didn't get.

'*This thing here* is an *Otto* bin,' she said, spelling it out as she patted the lid of the garbage container upon which sat the tomato sauce bottle and cans of soft drink. 'That's the manufacturer's name. They're *all* Otto bins.'

she explained with an expansive sweep of her arm that embraced the colourful collection of plastic wheelie bins, 'and they're in bunches like this *all* over the city.'

'Oh,' Adam smiled and nodded. 'Oh, I *see*.'

'Yes,' she could tell that he did, she could tell that he understood completely – the kid was smart. 'It's the empire part that's most important, Adam,' she said in all seriousness. 'Human beings can live without a roof over their head, but they're not meant to live without the company of others. It's good for people like us to know we're not alone.'

She wondered why he hadn't come upon the term 'Otto bin'. *Everyone around the place refers to them as Otto bins*, she thought, *even if they don't actually know why*.

'Probably because it's a city thing,' he replied when she asked him. 'Where I come from they don't have a manufacturer's name. They're just "wheelie bins".'

She knew better than to enquire specifically where 'I come from' might be. She'd learned that lesson just the previous week. 'Where you from, Adam?' she'd asked casually as they shared a cup of takeaway coffee over this very same wheelie bin. She'd decided it was time to find out a little about him, perhaps to introduce the subject of FaCS, as she sensed that he trusted her now.

'The country,' he'd replied with a shrug.

She assumed his response was as casual as her query. 'So why'd you leave home? Why'd you come to the city?' She knew this might be taking things a step too far – no-one cross-questioned others at The Corner; any information offered was purely on a voluntary basis. But, hell, Adam

was a kid, he needed looking after, and she was old enough to be his grandmother. It was only right she should care.

‘My dad kicked me out,’ he said, looking her directly in the eye, and rather boldly, she thought. ‘He’s an alcoholic and I interfered with his drinking, in the early days, anyway, when I used to stand up for Mum.’

‘Oh.’ *Well, he’s letting it all hang out. No harm in probing a bit further.* ‘And what about your mum? How did she feel about you leaving?’

‘She was glad to see the back of me. I caused too much trouble.’ Adam continued to meet Madge’s gaze, but he spoke in a monotone, as if he didn’t care. ‘She was better off joining the old man on the booze – he left her alone when she got drunk with him.’

Madge couldn’t help thinking, *That poor bloody woman*, but she said nothing, waiting instead for the boy to continue, which he did, in the same dead monotone.

‘So they’d get drunk together and he’d take it out on me instead.’

‘And what did your mother do?’

‘She just watched. Probably glad it was me not her. But by the time he was laying into me she was legless, close to passing out.’ A steely edge had crept into his voice.

*Jeez, you’re not the only one who needs help, kid,* Madge thought. She wondered how to go about bringing up the subject of FaCS – she could tell the boy was getting edgy. But FaCS could help both him and his mother; surely it was worth a try.

‘You know, Adam,’ she said carefully, as if the thought had only just occurred, ‘it mightn’t be a bad idea for

you to get in touch with the Department of Family and Community Services –'

'Why?' he snapped.

'Well, they have a special family service that could help your mother and –'

'I have no family.' The blue eyes in the baby face now ice-cold, matched the tone of his voice. 'I have no mother and I have no father.'

Madge read in an instant what the kid was saying: *You asked, I told you, now fuck off.* That's what the kid was saying.

She chastised herself. With the background of her own 'previous life', as she liked to term it, she should have known better. Adam might be young but he'd obviously lived through times that had wounded him deeply. He needed friendship, not the interference of a pushy old woman.

'Fair enough,' she said, and they left things at that.

Having finished her pie, Madge delved into the depths of her cardigan's pockets and pulled out her tobacco pouch, papers and matches. 'So, that's the Otto Bin Empire for you, Adam,' she said, sucking traces of minced beef from in between her teeth as she rolled herself a smoke. 'It's about humanity, really – we're a society of Otto bin gatherers, that's what we are.'

She ran the tip of her tongue very gently and deftly along the edge of the paper, her fingers sprang into action, and within seconds she'd rolled a perfectly shaped cigarette. Striking a match, she lit up and breathed in a hefty lungful, then gave a throaty chuckle that was halfway between a cough and a laugh.

‘I’ll tell you something else about these things,’ she said, slapping the bin playfully as if it were an old friend, ‘a bit of trivia I found out just the other day. Something I’ll bet very few people know,’ she added with a wink, considering it time she lightened up a bit; she hadn’t meant to lecture the kid. ‘They’re made out of money, would you believe that?’

‘Money?’ Adam looked confused. ‘Money like in what way?’

‘I mean money like in money. Literally. Banknotes, that’s in what way. Polymer money’s recyclable, you see. When notes are past their use-by date they’re shredded and fed through a machine that melts them and turns them into pellets. Then they’re used as raw material for making all *sorts* of things. Including these,’ she said triumphantly with another fond pat of her wheelie bin. ‘Just think, Adam, we could be leaning on money. Every tabletop in the Otto Bin Empire might be made out of money, you just wouldn’t know.’ She gave a hoot of laughter. ‘Isn’t that the perfect irony?’

Adam was fascinated. ‘Where d’you find out all this, Madge?’

‘On the net. I like to Google things.’

‘Yeah.’ His reply was wistful – he liked to Google things too. But he didn’t have a computer and he’d left his iPhone behind when he’d run away. Too risky to take it; they’d trace him in no time.

The boy’s reaction did not go unnoticed by Madge. *The kid’s not only smart, she thought, he likes to learn. He should be in school.*

The exchange between them that day introduced another shift in their relationship. Madge invited Adam to make use of her computer, a second-hand Toshiba laptop she'd bought from a pawn shop not long after she'd got out of jail.

'Hardly state of the art,' she said, clearing clutter from the tiny table and opening the lid of the laptop. 'Good for Googling, though.'

He was appreciative, and from time to time took her up on her offer. He could have used the computers at the neighbourhood community centre, but he was wary of council and government-run organisations where questions might be asked.

Despite the growing bond between them, or rather because of it, when the cold snap was over Adam moved on. He was grateful to Madge but didn't dare risk becoming too dependent on her – he couldn't afford the luxury. He needed to toughen up. Survival in the city was a battle he must learn to fight on his own, and already he was gathering the necessary skills. He was washing up several nights a week in the kitchen of an Indian restaurant; huge pots that left his fingernails stained yellow from turmeric and his clothes smelling of spices. Once a week he'd bring back to the bedsit a plastic container of curry, the last several centimetres scraped from the bottom of the pots always being the property of the lowliest kitchen hand, and they'd share it around on paper plates at The Corner.

'Thanks, Madge,' he said when he'd packed up his swag and was all ready to set off. 'Thanks for . . . well, everything.' His gratitude was heartfelt. 'You've been great, you really have. Dunno what I would have done without you.'

She wanted to ask him what his plans were, where he intended to camp out and more, much more, but what was the point? *Take care, Adam*, she thought, *kids on the street do it tough.*

‘You’ll be back, won’t you?’ That was all she said.

He laughed his gorgeous boy’s laugh. ‘Course I will,’ he replied. ‘I’m a member of the Otto Bin Empire.’

*Oh Christ*, she thought, *not for too long, I hope. Not for too long!*