

Fishermen

Rab looked down at Dale, smiled, and shook his head.

The boy was four now, and to Rab's great joy and amazement they were out together and making their way along the canal tow-path. Barely four weeks earlier, Dale would settle for nothing but his grandma's attention, often screaming for several minutes if he couldn't get his way. Too often, Rab supposed, they'd given in and Grandma had indeed gone to him when probably it would have been better to take a stand; but that's not what grandparents are for, is it? Grandparents are for ice-creams, days out, and chocolate biscuits, particularly the latter when Mummy and Daddy aren't looking. But today's adventure wasn't to be about chocolate biscuits.

"Where are we going to, Grandpa?" Dale was asking.

"We're going fishing, son. You'll see."

"Will we be trying to catch fish? Like Peppa?"

Rab had read many Peppa Pig stories to Dale but couldn't recall any about fishing. He took the easy option. "Yes."

"Will we be going in a boat? Peppa and George are in a boat when they're fishing. Have we got a boat, Grandpa?"

Rab realised that Peppa Pig's involvement wouldn't be as straightforward as he'd imagined.

"We're not going in a boat, Dale. We'll be fishing at the canalside. Are you looking forward to it?"

“So we’re not going in a boat, Grandpa?”

Rab could sense the disappointment in the boy’s voice, but knew all about ‘spin’. “It’s much easier to fish if you’re *not* in a boat, Dale. Oceans have a lot of water in them and it’s harder to find the fish.”

Dale didn’t reply. He was only four, after all: working that through was enough to keep his mind occupied for the moment.

Meanwhile, Rab was leading them to a place just beyond the Slateford aqueduct. Rab was carrying all of the equipment: two fishing nets, two empty jam jars and a stick; on his back was a small rucksack. The stick had been Dale’s contribution to the fishing trip – it was his ‘fishing rod’, picked up shortly after arriving at the towpath but then passed over to Grandpa as soon as he’d realised that he needed a piece of string and a hook to make it complete. Rab would have given the lad a jam jar to carry but his daughter Lisa, Dale’s mother, wouldn’t have been happy with her son responsible for looking after anything made of glass. Rab understood, but wondered at the same time if kids weren’t sheltered too much from life’s risks.

Rab didn’t have to say much. Dale was acting out some action-hero scene he’d been watching on the television that morning.

“Batman zings The Joker kerpow kerpow!” having to be saved by Rab from falling into the canal as he performed a complicated spin. Even Batman makes the odd false move. Meanwhile Rab wondered at the miracle

that a child could grow from Peppa Pig to Batman in the space of just a hundred yards or so.

“Grandpa, will we be able to have tonight’s fish for tea?” Dale asked.

Rab explained patiently that they were hoping to catch minnows, and that they’d need an awful lot to make a decent meal even for one. Anyway, he added, they weren’t going to kill them, these were nice minnows that deserved to live, even if it was only in a jam jar for a little while.

Eventually they reached a spot where the path widened quite a bit, and where the grassy slope down towards the canal wasn’t too steep. Rab took off his backpack and laid it on the ground, then sat down and instructed Dale to sit beside him. Then they each removed their socks and shoes and Rab introduced Dale to the pleasures of dangling feet in the cool canal water; it was a hot summer’s day and it wasn’t too hard to persuade the young man to try it for size.

“Cool, Grandpa!” Dale said, and of course, it was.

Rab leant down and filled each of the jam jars with water before laying them to the side. “We’ll need them later, hopefully,” he said.

“We’re going to catch fish!” Dale said, excitedly kicking his feet in the water.

Rab patiently explained that the fish were likely to be frightened away if he splashed his feet in the water. What was needed was patience. He knew that four-year-olds generally don’t have a lot of patience, but it was worth a

try. But Rab could hardly blame the lad: after all, cooling his feet in the canal had been his own idea.

Reaching behind, Rab now brought one of the little fishing nets forward. Gently, he leaned forwards once again and laid the net into the canal. He could see some minnows swimming under the surface and reasoned that they should be quite successful. Upstream, however, there was competition.

“Look up there,” Rab whispered very quietly to Dale. “We’ve got company.”

Less than thirty yards away on the opposite bank, a heron was standing in a slightly overgrown area of reeds. Rab hushed the boy to be quiet.

“That big grey bird is looking for its lunch, Dale. Can you see it?”

Dale, of course, had no idea at first what he should be looking for, but even a four year old boy can spot a grey heron given enough help.

“Do you know what that bird is called, Dale?” Rab asked him.

Dale thought for a moment, then said, “Leonardo?”

Rab smiled. “No, it’s not one of the Ninja Turtles, Dale. It doesn’t have a name like that. I wondered if you knew what kind of bird it was.”

Dale tried again. “A pigeon?”

Again, Rab held back a laugh; the boy was doing his best, and the colour was right. These were rewarding moments with a grandchild. He explained that the bird

was called a grey heron, and it was fishing for the same fish that Dale and Grandpa were after. In the short time they watched, the heron caught five fish; Dale watched captivated as it slowly swallowed each one.

Then Dale turned to more important matters.

“Can I have a biscuit now, Grandpa?”

“You can have a packet of raisins soon.”

“Can’t I have a biscuit?”

“No, Dale. Mummy said no biscuits today, especially chocolate biscuits, and I promised. We must keep our promises, mustn’t we?”

Dale didn’t reply. Dale was fed up with raisins, even although they were better than nothing. The heron flew off.

“Shall we see if we’ve caught any fish?” Rab said. They looked down: the net had been in the water unmoved for a while and a shoal of little fish were swimming, unconcerned, in and out of it. “Let’s see if we can catch some now.”

Rab moved the net slightly to and fro; several minnows and a couple of other little things were inside. With an adept flick of his wrist, he made sure they had all escaped.

“Oh dear,” Rab said, “I wasn’t very lucky there, was I, Dale? They all got away.”

“Bad luck, Grandpa.”

Rab played the same trick again, then reached behind for the other net and said, “Suppose you try, Dale. You might have better luck than me.”

Rab held the stick with Dale and they lowered the second net into the canal together. The boy was tense and the net waved about underwater, frightening all the nearby fish away. Not realising what he was doing, Dale was simply happy enough to see evidence of fish. They sat together for a little while; Rab doing nothing with his net, Dale catching nothing with his.

Eventually Rab said, "Well, Dale, do you know what all good fishermen do when they don't catch anything?"

"No."

"They have something to eat. Would you like a packet of raisins?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, please."

From the rucksack, Rab produced a little packet of Sun-Maid raisins and a paper plate. Carefully, he laid them out, counting them one by one as he did so for the boy's benefit. There were forty-one. Meanwhile, Rab himself took a swig from a bottle of water. He offered the bottle to Dale, who had a swig, too, just the way all fishermen do.

They turned back to the canal and resumed fishing. Rab told Dale some old fishing stories – the one about Superman going fishing, the one about Spiderman going fishing and of course the one about Batman going fishing. Dale told his grandpa a joke.

"Grandpa, what did the lion say to the elephant?"

"I don't know, Dale. What did the lion say to the

elephant?”

“Arrrrrrrgggghhhh!!!!” said Dale, and they both laughed out loud; their laughter could be heard all around as it carried in the still air.

But Dale wasn’t finished.

“Grandpa, what did the tiger say to the elephant?”

“I don’t know, Dale. What did the tiger say to the elephant?”

“Arrrrrrrgggghhhh!!!!” Dale said again, falling backwards at the same time and letting his net slip into the canal. The lad was momentarily distraught, but of course the current was so slow that Rab was quickly able to rescue the situation, reaching across to fetch it back.

Just before midday, Rab pointed out that there were fish in Dale’s net – Dale hadn’t noticed himself. Guiding him gently, Rab helped his grandson lift its contents out of the canal and into one of the jam jars, which Rab had previously labelled with a waterproof marker ‘DALE’. Dale was thrilled to be the first to catch anything.

“You’re obviously a better fisherman than me, Dale,” Rab said. Then Rab allowed himself to catch a net-full – deposited in the jar marked ‘GRANDPA’ – and then they each had one more catch before Rab decided it was time for lunch. He peered down into the backpack.

“Guess what’s for lunch, Dale?”

“I don’t know. Cheese sandwiches?” It was a decent guess. Dale’s lunch had been cheese sandwiches every day for each of the past two years. He loved cheese sandwiches,

but he was a creature of habit, too.

“Well guessed, Dale, my boy! Grandma has made us cheese sandwiches. But first we have to wash our hands. The canal water will be dirty.”

Dale wasn't so keen on washing his hands, especially using the antibacterial gel that Rab had brought with him, but Rab insisted that real fishermen always used gel before eating and Dale reluctantly joined in. They each ate a cheese sandwich, then they had some grapes. Dale washed his down with water and a little carton of apple juice from Sainsburys; Rab drank from a flask of coffee. Then it was time to catch some more fish, then they lay back on the canal bank and Rab suggested that they look at the sky.

“What colour is the sky, Dale?”

“Blue, of course. Silly Grandpa.”

“Do you see those clouds?”

Dale vaguely pointed upwards. “Up there, Grandpa?”

“Those are the ones, yes. What colour are they?”

“White?” Dale said. For some reason he was doubtful.

“Yes, they're white. Clouds aren't always white. Sometimes they're grey, even dark grey. But those are thin clouds, aren't they?” Rab pointed to some in the distance. “Those ones over there, they look like cotton wool, don't they?”

“What's cotton wool, Grandpa?”

Suddenly, Rab realised that Meteorology Lesson One was in danger of going pear-shaped, so he cut his losses.

“Well anyway, when the sky is blue and the clouds are

like the ones above us, it means it's not going to rain for a while. We don't need a coat or anything."

Dale wasn't too impressed with Meteorology Lesson One.

"Did we bring a coat, Grandpa?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I reckoned that if it started to rain, we could probably just run home."

Dale didn't say anything for a while. Then he asked, "Have we finished fishing?"

"I suppose so," Rab said. "Do you want to go?"

"I wish I could have a chocolate biscuit."

"I told you, Mummy said we weren't to have any chocolate biscuits. But... oh you'll not be interested."

"What, Grandpa?"

Rab delved into his rucksack and produced another carton of apple juice.

"Like some?"

"Yes, please, Grandpa."

Then Rab produced his trump card: a bar of Cadburys Dairy Milk chocolate.

"Would you like to share this with me? Fishermen eat chocolate."

"Is this chocolate, Grandpa?"

"Yes, Dale, but it's not a biscuit. It can be our little secret."

They shared the chocolate squares, broken off one by one, while Dale drank some apple juice and Rab the rest of his coffee.

“Good, son?”

“Yes, Grandpa, thank you.”

“My pleasure, Dale, my pleasure. Remember, though, it’s our little secret. No one must know.” Then Rab sat up. “Now I think you’d like to go home wouldn’t you? You can tell Grandma all about your adventure.”

“Yes. Can we take the fish home?”

“No, son, the fish belong here in the canal. They need to get the chance to grow up, just like you’ll grow up.” Rab omitted to mention that the minnows were probably full-sized already, and prayed that Dale had forgotten that the heron would probably eat half of them. He poured the contents of his jam jar back into the canal, then held Dale as he did the same.

“You should be very proud, Dale. Well done.”

The meandered back home. Grandma was in the kitchen preparing some food for the evening meal and she was delighted to hear Dale retell the entire story of the day spent fishing with Grandpa, how Grandpa was hopeless at fishing but that he, Dale, was a champion fisherman and had caught hundreds of fish although they’d had to put them all back and that they’d had cheese sandwiches and grapes for lunch and that he’d told Grandpa a very funny joke about lions and tigers and elephants.

Grandma suggested that he drew a picture for Mummy, who would shortly be calling in to collect him on her way home from work. That kept Dale amused for a bit; children’s television did the rest.

Around half past five Lisa appeared.

“Had a nice time with Grandma and Grandpa today, Dale?”

Dale was too busy concentrating on the Ninja Turtles to do more than grunt an ‘Uh-huh’. To be fair, he was a bit tired anyway.

“What did you do?”

Suddenly Dale was quite animated. He told his mummy all about the day fishing with Grandpa, in particular how bad Grandpa was at fishing and how he’d shown Grandpa how to do it. Some of the fish had been huge, but they’d put them all back. They’d had a lovely lunch of cheese sandwiches and grapes by the canal.

“That’s wonderful, Dale,” said Lisa. “Did you say thank you to Grandpa?”

“Thank you, Grandpa,” Dale said.

“It’s a pleasure, Dale,” Rab said. “Thank you for the nice company. I really enjoyed my day.”

“Can we do it again?” Dale asked.

“Oh yes, I’m sure.”

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“Well, maybe not tomorrow, Dale, because you don’t come here on Thursdays. Only on Wednesdays. But soon.”

Lisa thanked her mum and – especially – her dad again for looking after her son.

“OK, Dale,” she said. “Shall we go? Get your stuff.” Then, as an afterthought, she said to him, “Which bit of

the fishing was the best bit?"

Dale fought for a moment, then said, "Chocolate."

Embarrassed, Rab said, "It wasn't a biscuit, Lisa."

Lisa screwed her eyes up in mock anger at her dad. then laughed and said to Dale, "Your Grandpa's a bit naughty, giving you chocolate."

"Mummy," said Dale. "All the best fishermen eat chocolate. Don't you know that? Grandpa said so."

Lisa chuckled. "Well, Grandpa should know, I suppose. He's the one who knows all about fishing."

Dale looked at her. "Apart from me, Mummy?"

Rab smiled. "Apart from you, Dale. Apart from you."