



Go Home, Mr Frigg

By Jamie Mitchinson

Read at Storytails on 25th April 2010

'You can't stop me,' said the old man, sizing up the opposition. 'You're not the real police.'

Definitely, Frigg had seen better foes in his time. This sorry pair showed just how far he had descended in the world - Vic and Val, crimefighters ordinaire. The Static Duo.

So there in front of him was Vic, standing erect with his hands by his sides, with the battered street furniture of East London seeming to slouch around him, and the night air toying with the last strands of his receding hair. Frigg didn't really know him, but he envied the man's invulnerable stupidity, his town councillor probity. Envied it. Hated it.

And there too was Val, her face starched and institutional. Frigg tried looking at her feet for relief. If she had ankles above those sensible shoes, he certainly couldn't see them. He wondered whether she'd even put her legs on the right way round.

Val sighed, and put her notebook away. 'We *are* the real police.'

'Well in that case, I'm the real police too. I'm just in plain clothes.'

'Filthy clothes,' said Val. 'Look, Mr. Frigg. A community support officer is a real police officer. I am a real police officer. Vic here is a real police officer too. You will be visiting a real and not at all imaginary police station if you don't behave yourself.'

'People will get the wrong impression, Val. I do have this effect on the older women, but honestly love, I think you're abusing your powers.'

Frigg had had a bad, bad day, to say the least. Exposing his soul to this unblinking pair of waxworks was not an option. He rocked a little on his feet, hoping in vain for the courage to paint a fresh gloss of story, one more time.

'You know I wasn't always like this,' he said, truthfully for once. Just to see if Vic or Val could tell the difference.

'I should hope not,' said Val. 'Now go home. Home home, I mean. Not just back to the pub.'

Home home would be an odyssey to the halcyon days of 1982. Paddling through the grass and moss and mist with Rollo, the Corporal. Back there, there was never any shortage of puddles to jump in, should a soldier be so inclined; if being shot at really wasn't enough to occupy his mind. He remembered the foxhole the two of them fell into, in the lee of a large boulder. He remembered the Corporal, assuring him that They - their colleagues - would do

something, soon. They’d come through, for sure. He was still in awe of the Corporal, back then. He admitted to him that he was afraid, and had in fact soiled himself, actually, yes really, not metaphorically. He was simply told to wait, so he waited. There wasn’t a whole lot else to do.

Homely civilian folk liked to say you can’t put a price on human life, but Frigg thought otherwise. When the artillery announced itself, he tried to count the shells; he tried to imagine a neat pile of every one that was fired on his behalf. He tried to imagine the sheer weight of metal, the explosives, the cost of materials, the munitions designers, the engineers who maintained the artillery, the factory workers who made it all, the dockers heaving it onto boats, the sailors who brought it, and the men heaving it off onto the beach, left exposed without air cover – all of that was his price, and the thought of it would challenge him not to feel emotional. More metal passed overhead than any mere unfortunate ever thought he could be worth. He felt giddy with undeserved luck. Seconds after each round of explosions, the water in their hole rose a little, then dropped back. Curious. Five times he saw his own face in silver ripples, winking and pulling faces back at him. He remembered inspecting his boots, unrecognisable from the parade ground, and all at once being reminded of Vicky Clarke’s foot, swinging in the shade of the picnic table outside the Golden Guinea the previous summer. Twice that bittersweet day, the breeze had seemed to steer it against his khakis. Her foot was a thing so tiny it seemed entirely possible it might blow away in the wind, and spin to the ground like sycamore seeds. He remembered - even as the guns roared like a lioness to protect him - wondering where Vicky would be now. And then another boom, from somewhere inside, and there was no sound, and the water didn’t rise. It was long, and painful. He remembered thinking about the kind of people out there who fell in love, and wondering what it felt like. Whether a man who soiled himself had the right to love someone. Whether, when the dashing Corporal stole off with his Vicky to the bower of a Ford Granada and - so people told him - broke the suspension, the Corporal really loved her. Whether, thinking of her now, he was mistaking his fear for something not entirely unlike, unrequited, broken hearted, it.

He remembered the guns falling silent, and the burning need for a cigarette. Reaching for his pocket, only to find it empty, of course - a recurring motif in his dreams. Most of all though, he remembered the courage of that very same Corporal who’d stolen his sweetheart. We’re on our way, he said. Stay with me, Frigg...

Yes, these were among many thoughts he had no intention of sharing with Val and Vic, in this young and complacent century.

‘Look,’ he said to Val. ‘I don’t want you thinking I’ve been out on a bender. Please don’t.’

‘You should see yourself in a mirror right now,’ said Val. ‘Blind drunk. And quite frankly, argumentative -’

Frigg’s arms flew upwards in protest. His hands settled briefly on his temples, as if to contain what was inside.

‘Drunk and argumentative,’ he said. ‘Well. I’d hate to disappoint you! You’re right. I’m an unreformed pisshead, it’s true. I also smoke like a coal-fired power station. So I just popped out from the pub to find some cigarettes to keep me company. It took me onto your patch. When you so rudely apprehended me, I was just trying to get back to the pub. My habitat. My hole in the ground. And I’d be back there now, if you weren’t holding me up with your sparkling Presbyterian banter. I’d be back there with my cigarettes, and my sweet pint – we’re very much in love you know - to have and to hold, light or bitter, in sickness or in health... I’d swear I’d have fought off hordes to get back to me pint.’

‘Go home, Mr Frigg.’

‘I will, when you’re quite finished talking. Back to where I belong – leaning on me elbows, a flying buttress to the bar – ready for trouble. I’ll say to them right, matey, outside. Car park, now. Time for a pissing contest against the lock-ups. It’s the only way. And they will know me by my pissing prowess.’

‘Go home, Mr Frigg. I really think you’ve had enough.’

Frigg took a long, trembling breath while he tried to find the right baby words to reply. He swallowed hard.

‘Now, Val. Don’t tell me you believe all that?’

She sighed. ‘What’s not to believe? Go home.’

‘I’m sorry for bothering you. I guess I have one or two little things on my mind right now. Tiny little things though. I’d almost blush to mention them.’

Rollo’s body had proven surprisingly hard to identify.

Earlier in the day, the real police had tried to get one of the Corporal’s neighbours to provide confirmation, but few of them knew who Rollo was, and those that did, did not much care to take a look. In the absence of anyone willing or able, it was Frigg who’d agreed to identify him.

And it was a real police officer who came and put a hand on Frigg’s shoulder, and said, very quietly, Ready. It was not even a question – just a suggestion of confidence, passed from one old man to another. Then they proceeded to the bathroom without further explanation.

And it was Frigg who had to look upon the mangled head, with a hole from one side of the face, through the hinge of the jaw, and a furrow across the side of the neck, and Frigg who had to imagine how violently Rollo must have been shaking for him to have so nearly missed,

and consequently how very, very long it must have taken his friend to die. There was room on my horse, Frigg wanted to tell him. We help each other. That's what we do. There was room on my horse.

He confirmed the identity of the deceased: the deceased, he told the officer, was a tosser. Then he walked out, without letting anyone see his face. No-one stopped him. After that, it was hazy. And now here he was, the sun going down, trying to be go easy on Val and Vic, two life-sized cardboard cut-outs with less depth than his own shadow. Burying everything inside behind a wall of bluster, because Rollo had confronted despair, and stared into the sun. Frigg could not be caught making that mistake.

'Home, Mr Frigg!' said Val, one last time.

He really wanted to go home. Only now, he had no friend worthy of the name, nor any foe worth fighting. He wasn't sure he had a home any more, in this insipid, pale little century.