

The Red and the Grey

The Red and the Grey? The name of the shop? Squirrels. Squirrels - that's what it's about. Done good business with them. Got me started in the trade.

See, a few years back, grey squirrels were tolerated. Pests, a lot of them, but not badly thought of. Then along comes the Red Squirrel Defence League, and - wham! - a grey squirrel's too scared to be seen out and about. Shoot you as soon as look at you, the humans would, then maybe put you in the pot.

Now, back then, I was a young kid, fresh out of Hairdressing School, fashion-ideas between the ears, but not much else. No dosh, no readies. But I was pretty good with the comb, the scissors and the colours.

One night there's this knock at the door. Late. After midnight. I opens up and there's this grey squirrel outside, looking nervous.

"You Lemmy?" he says.

"Yeah," says me, suspicious. I looks over his shoulder. There was no one else out there, but there's a car further down the street with two official-looking types in it, the bored Fascist type.

"I got a deal for you," says the squirrel. "But first you got to let me in - now!"

He doesn't stand on ceremony, just pushes past me. When I protest, he shoves a crisp twenty in my hand. I shut up and listen then.

What did he want? He only wanted to be done up as a red squirrel. Red squirrels were all the rage - protected species, to be encouraged. Grey squirrel wanted some of the action. Well, I made a damn good job of it, even though I says it myself. In less than an hour, that squirrel's mother wouldn't have recognised him. Mind you, that squirrel's mum had been taken out of circulation some time before. Good spray of henna, some fancy trimming round the ears, tufts and the like. Keep the tufts up with a bit of gel. The bloke goes out the door an hour later and strolls past the pigs in the motor. Gives them a cheery wave as he bounds past, a flourish of the tail. Blow me if they didn't smile and wave back, grinning and chatting to each other like they just seen some kind of movie-star!

Well, that started the rush. Before I knew it, night after night they were turning up, begging to be turned from greys into reds. They were desperate some of them - seen their own families picked off one by one and sometimes in groups. But after I had turned them into reds, they'd go off bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Got news back from them occasionally - said they'd gone back into the woods, living the life of Reilly. Good luck to them, says I - just as long as they kept themselves out of heavy rain.

Illegal? I suppose it was. But I was young then, hard up. I didn't care. OK, I did wonder what these blokes would do to the real reds, but it wasn't my job to preach to them or maybe point out the error of their ways.

One night - oh, I got to tell you this! It breaks my heart now even to think of it. One night, see, there's the usual knock at the door. I still lived in that run-down squat then, before I bought this fancy place you see here. Bought it for my mum, you know - so she could have a real nice place to live in. Her and me. Anyway, there's this knock at the door, I goes and answers.

Blow me if it's no grey squirrel at all. What do you think? It's a red! Young one, like a teenager or something. That puts me on my guard - in all those months, I'd never had a red. So is he some kind of Red Squirrel terrorist, come to take me out? I reach for my scissors fast.

“You Lemmy?” says the red, just like all the greys that been through my door.

“Might be,” I says “What of it?”

“You turn greys to reds?”

“Might do, might not,” I says. “What’s it to you?”

The young bloke just looks at me. But, I tell you, I’ve seen plenty desperate squirrels in the past few years, and this bloke just takes the prize. He’s a bloke who’s reached the end of the road.

“You do reds to greys, then?” he wants to know.

I tell you, that floored me.

“Reds to greys?” I says. “What for?”

“That don’t matter,” says the red. “Can you do it? If you can do it, I got fifty quid in it for you. If you can’t, I’m off.”

“OK,” I says, “I can do it. Sit down in the chair over there.”

Took me two hours, that job. Had to trim back his tufts, had to bleach him, then grey up with wood-ash. That was some challenge.

Mister, that two hours near broke my heart. The kid didn’t say much. Said he came from a good family, parents had had a hard time of it against the greys, but now they were getting fat, thriving, prospering. That’s the word he used: “prospering.” He said the word like it was the worst anyone could do for themselves. They wanted him to settle down, start a family, enjoy the woods and the easy life of a red. He wasn’t having any of it. He wanted deprivation, danger, the threat of death at every turning. He wanted out of the system. He wanted the dark side of life. He wanted kicks and the fast road to hell.

Listen, kid, I says to him, I been there myself, I know what it’s like. Believe me, son, I says, you really don’t want to do that.

Kid says nothing, just places the fifty quid on the counter - I don’t ask where he got it - and looks me in the eye. “Don’t tell me what I really want,” he says to me, “just do your job.”

OK, so I kept stumm after that. Done a good job on him - you wouldn’t never know he’d been a red. Looks at himself in the mirror, nods kind of dangerously, then goes out the door shifty as anything. There’s a shout from someone down the road and the kid starts running for his life. Don’t know what happened to him after that.

Wish to hell I did. I lie awake nights thinking about that kid and what he asked me to do to him.

I stopped doing squirrels right after that. Shut up shop, moved to the smart part of town, changed my name, bought this place. All that’s behind me now - except the business name.

Now, that’s you done, sir. What d’you think? Classy-looking bill, feathers just like the real thing. You wanted the Golden Eagle - you got it! Thank you, sir, and I hope you enjoy your holiday in the Highlands.