

The Crazy Man

By Mike Cummins

Sugarman Road began with house number 23; everything before that house had either been destroyed by a V2 rocket or knocked down by the council because it was unsafe. This left an area of bricks and rubble which the locals found to be an eyesore. But to the children it was a vast area where their imagination could run free. To some it was Wembley Stadium, to others it was an Island with a hidden treasure. To Kenny Rees - 'Kenneth' to his mother - it was a reminder of how strict his parents were with him; all the other kids were allowed to go to Tim Crichton's house and watch the television, which happened to be the only television in the street. But Kenny was banned from visiting the Crichton household since the incident with the football and Mrs. Rees' kitchen window. This meant that Kenny was usually excluded from the games that were centred on the previous night's viewing.

Today, however, Kenny had been invited to take part in a reconstruction of a scene from one of last night's television programmes. This seemed like good idea to Kenny - until he was violently hit over the head with Mrs. Crichton's prized cactus plant, and then told to play dead.

After about a minute of being "dead" Kenny slightly opened his eyes to see what was happening in the reenactment, unfortunately the drama was being concluded somewhere beyond Kenny's vision.

Kenny decided it was time for his character to be resurrected and was about to stand up when he noticed the Crazy Man (as he was called by parents and children alike). Kenny lay perfectly still on the uncomfortable bed of bricks that he was lying on.

The Crazy Man glanced around to ensure nobody was watching him; satisfied that he was alone he knelt down and rolled back a sheet of sodden material that had once been somebody's bedroom carpet. Under the remains of the carpet the Crazy Man found a trap door and opened it; he climbed through it and was able to toss the carpet back so that it re-covered the trap door.

He was living in the cellar of what used to be number 5 Sugarman Road.

The Crazy Man had been sighted many times over the past six weeks; at first he was considered a tramp, and was duly avoided. His age varied from sighting to sighting but generally fell between sixty and seventy-five. Then it became clear that he possessed a sizable sum of money.

Mister Robert L. Tenser was the first, and only, person to speak to the man, and his impression was less than favourable. He reported to the local gossips that the man talked of "far-off lands" and his need to be alone; within hours this had been condensed into the word "Crazy". One thing, however, that nobody knew was where the Crazy Man lived. Kenny had information that the gossips would die for.

Kenny had made his mind up; he stood up and bravely walked towards the sodden carpet. By the time he reached to immediate vicinity of the carpet Kenny was not quite as brave as he had been moments before. *I'll show them. Who needs television anyway? It's just a poor copy of the Movies...* Kenny pulled back the carpet and leaned down to open the trapdoor. He stopped. He decided to try a different approach. He knocked on the trapdoor.

A few moment passed and the door remained shut. Kenny knocked again. 'Piss off!' a disembodied voice shouted from below.

'No,' replied Kenny, more of an instinct than a wise decision.

The trapdoor began to open; Kenny hesitated for a brief second, and then began to run. His first step was his last as he slipped and fell onto the carpet. The trapdoor was fully open by now and the Crazy Man's head and torso were above ground level. 'You want to speak to me, eh?' said the man, who was somewhat surprised to be talking to a twelve year old. 'It might be a good idea to get up off that stinking carpet.' Kenny took a good sniff of the carpet and realised that the Crazy Man was right; the carpet did smell of damp. 'What's your name then?' Kenny waited until he was on his feet before he answered, 'Kenny...Kenny Rees, Sir'. 'Well, do you want to see where the Crazy Man lives?' the man invited. Kenny was unsure, but decided to go anyway, *at least this adventure was a real one, and not some television fantasy*. As Kenny was being assisted through the trapdoor he glanced behind him, in the direction of his friends, from the noise they were making it appeared that their dramatisation had ended and they were now having a game of football.

Kenny expected a large drop to the floor of the cellar but his descent was halted by an old table that had obviously been positioned for use as a step up to the trapdoor. The cellar of number 5 was not as Kenny had imagined it; candles illuminated much of the room. The brick walls had been whitewashed by the previous tenants; the whitewash seemed alive as the candlelight danced upon them. The Crazy Man tossed the carpet back to camouflage the entrance to his home, this caused some of the candles to flicker, and one was extinguished entirely. The hinged trapdoor fell into its frame, almost blocking out the sound of the football match. 'What do you think?'

'It's...nice.'

'Bollocks, it's a dump. More than that it's a cold and smelly dump.' reported the Crazy Man, but in a way that didn't alarm Kenny who searched for a reply...but was unable to think of one. 'Sit down, make yourself at home,' offered the Crazy Man before

returning to his complaints about the accommodation, 'To think that I've dined with Byron and Shelley, and now I'm reduced to living in this cellar...you do know who Byron and Shelley are don't you?'

'Eh...,' suddenly a flash of inspiration hit Kenny. 'They wrote Frankenstein.'

The man laughed. 'Yeah, that's right, they wrote Frankenstein.'

'But aren't they old? I mean...very old?' The Crazy Man noticed the extinguished candle and walked over relight it using a nearby candle.

'Can you keep a secret, Kenny?'

'Yeah,' replied Kenny knowing full well that he couldn't.

'Alright, I'll tell you my secret: I'm a time traveller.'

'Like in Jules Verne?' asked an instantly excited Kenny.

'H.G.Wells,' corrected the man in a hushed voice as if to avoid Kenny any embarrassment.

'Oh yeah...I always get those two mixed up.'

'Anyway,' continued the Crazy Man, 'I've discovered that man has a natural ability to travel in time...'

'You mean without a time machine?' Kenny was amazed - this would be a story to knock the socks off Tim Crichton and his friends.

'Yes, without a time machine. In a country called Tibet the monks practice expansion of the mind to achieve greater physical power.' Kenny was confused by this explanation but didn't want to stop the man a further time. 'That is similar to how I've achieved the ability to travel in time...I simply concentrate on the time that I want to visit, and hey-presto! I arrive there.'

'Then...,' asked Kenny timidly, 'what are you doing in a damp cellar in 1953?'

Kenny had outwitted the Crazy Man. The man stared into the flickering flame of a candle,

his thoughts elsewhere. Kenny lapsed into an uneasy feeling. Then the man broke the silence...

'Do you believe the people that call me crazy?' Kenny replied with a diplomatic, 'No, of course not'.

'Why not? In a way their right...I am crazy. Just not in the way that they mean, that's all.' The now self confessed Crazy Man turned from the candle and stared into Kenny's eyes. The candlelight did not allow for a clear view of the man's face but Kenny sensed that the man was beginning to cry. 'Suppose,' proposed the Crazy Man whilst audible sniffing his nose, 'that you could go anywhere in the world - Where would you go?'

'America.'

'and...?'

'The North Pole.'

'and...?'

'Eh...maybe the Moon.'

'The point I'm trying to make is, you'd want to go everywhere; experience everything. Now imagine if you could visit everywhere in different eras...' Kenny understood most of what was said, and anything he didn't understand he took an educated guess at. '...do you know what happens to you?'

'No?' replied Kenny, suddenly realising the possibility of a scientific side-effect. 'You get addicted to travelling in time. *When next? Who do I want to meet?* You try to force yourself to stay somewhere but eventually you must give into the urge. And every time you leave, you leave behind people that you have come to love and respect.' The man was telling his story calmly as if he had played the speech inside his head over and over again until he knew it backwards. This familiarity seemed to override any inhibitions he may of had about repeating the story to an audience. 'Eventually you learn to control

your emotions, at least for most of the time. Occasionally you a get a pain, a pain that shouts, *For Christ's sake your a person; you're entitled to, need to, feel emotions!* Then, after a mental sparring-match within yourself, you regain control...and the pain goes away.'

'That doesn't make you crazy...' comforted Kenny to the man he now felt he could call a friend.

'No?' the man was now almost devoid of emotion. 'I've spent most of my life achieving something that most people dream about...and what have I gained? - Nothing. Instead I've lost my life...wasted it.'

Kenny was suddenly stuck by one of his brilliant ideas: 'Why didn't you teach someone else how to time travel - then you wouldn't be alone.' 'It's not an easy thing to teach and it takes at least ten years to learn the method. Anyway, why should I condemn someone else to the addictions and pains that I've gone through?' Kenny agreed with his friend, even though the twelve year old boy inside his head still thought that to be able to time travel would be a great adventure.

'Towards the end I would be walking down a street and see a beautiful woman and then I would travel back ten minutes and hide somewhere so that I could watch her again...and then go back another few minutes and hide somewhere else to watch her again...etcetera...etcetera...etcetera. My loneliness had made me sick - crazy'.

The man had apparently finished his tale and the room became silent. 'So why are you here? I mean why a cold cellar?'

'To die...' 'I can't hear the game of football!' panicked Kenny suddenly realising the trouble he would be in if his mother found out that he'd been talking to the Crazy Man.

'I've got to go, I told my mum that I'd be back for my tea.' With that Kenny jumped on to the table and tried to open the trapdoor but with the weight of the carpet it was too

heavy for him to fully open; he did however manage to open it slightly and pull himself to outside and into contact with the damp carpet. 'I'll come back tomorrow...' he shouted through the trapdoor before it fell back into its frame.

After taking the time to put the carpet back over the trapdoor - He had disturbed it in his hurried exit - Kenny ran home with the intention of eating his tea and then finding Tim Crichton so that he could tell him of his adventure.

'Well, if he was in there, he ain't there now,' said Tim Crichton while studying the bulldozer that had moved onto Wembley Stadium. Kenny looked at what used to be the cellar of number 5 Sugarman Road; it had been filled in with dirt and broken bricks.

Crichton and his friends decided to take their football to the park. Kenny went with them. As they approached the park they passed Anne Nicols; Crichton and his friends bowed their heads so as to avoid staring at the beautiful twenty-two year old woman.

Kenny Rees glanced down a alleyway and then towards the bushes that formed part of the perimeter of the park. He couldn't see anybody hiding, and wondered if he ever would...