

Jim C. Wilson

*from: 'The Messages'*

Green stamps were introduced at our local confectioner's in the 1960s. A thin strip would be given out with each purchase. So, with money from my paper runs and grocery deliveries, I bought enough Coke, Crunchies and crisps to fill a library of books of green stamps. Eventually, I earned myself two pint and two half-pint dimpled beer-mugs. I was thrilled: I'd got something for nothing. Then I calculated that I'd had to spend £26 on sweets and soft drinks to get this something for nothing. In those pre-inflationary times, my second-hand racing bike cost £3.50. So, I'd spent the cash equivalent of about seven bikes to get four cheap glass mugs. The green-stamp system didn't survive. I reckon I wasn't the only person who did a bit of calculating. Incidentally, I still have the set of mugs, pristine and unchipped. How could I bear to part with them?

There is one shop I remember which seemed somehow eternal: Remo's Café, in Stockbridge's Raeburn Place. The owner was Remo Mancini, but his surname was never used. He was Remo to everyone, except me: trying to be polite, I developed the habit of addressing him as Mr Remo. I was 'sonny' until I became 'Mr Wilson'.

My mother, in heels as high as her expectations, shopped there as a newly-wed in the 1930s. Remo, in his white coat, handed me ice-cream cones with raspberry in the 1950s. My brother, nine years older than me, and a would-be Teddy boy, drank Coca-Cola and smoked in the long narrow corridor that was the café. The juke-box could be heard in the street — *Volare* and *I Ran All The Way Home (Just To Say I'm Sorry)*. Dad, on his way home from the early shift, would stop off for twenty Senior Service. In the 1980s, Remo and I would have lengthy debates on the utter awfulness of the various Edinburgh architects we'd encountered. And, of course, one day the shop didn't open. 'Where's Remo?' I asked the Italian owner of the nearby chip shop.

'Liberton.'

'Hospital?'

'No, cemetery.'

He'd served behind his high glass counter for over half a century. He'd never married, and had lived with his sister until her death. Keeping his shop open until eleven at night was probably preferable to sitting alone in his flat.

Now, his Craven 'A' clock is long gone, with the tall jars of sweets, and the displays of Terry's All Gold. Remo liked to walk; he always walked home, by the Water of Leith river, for his lunch. It is probably sentimental to imagine him walking now, somewhere warm. Somewhere Italian.

*Extract from Spalebone Days*