

Who Pinched Grandad's Goosegogs?

A My Grandad story by Bill Lennox

It was Grandad's first summer without Grandma so I went to look after him. He lived near a long flat beach with a big forest at each end, so there were plenty of places to take him for a walk.

Before I went to Grandad's, Dad taught me to make toast and jam. Mum showed me how to mix up corn flakes and yoghurt and banana for Grandad's Healthy Breakfast. And I taught myself to make ham sandwiches. I already knew how to pour juice into a glass without getting any on the bench.

So every day I made breakfast and lunch for Grandad. He had to make his own cup of tea.

Grandad told me he was teaching himself to make dinner, so it was all good. He made pretty good dinners too. Meatballs and salads and pasta, and always lots of fresh veges.

Some days I didn't even see him in the kitchen cooking dinner. I thought maybe the Lovely People Next Door helped him out, but I didn't say anything. One day I hid behind the sofa to spy when Marg came over from next door but I didn't see her sneak in any food.

It was good making toast and jam because there were lots of jars of jam in Grandad's cupboard. There was strawberry and plum and apricot and some other jams I've never seen before. Grandma made them last year from the fruit Grandad grew in his garden.

I knew Grandad would be worried about what he would do when all the jams ran out. I told Mum on the phone when Grandad wasn't listening and she said she would send a recipe book so Grandad and I could teach ourselves to make jam.

Every day after breakfast we went down to the garden and stayed there for ages. Grandad got a bit grumpy when he saw white butterflies near his cabbages. And he put big nets over his fruit trees so Those Blasted Birds couldn't pinch the fruit when they were nearly ripe. But most of the time he was happy in his garden, so I let him stay there as long as he liked.

Some days Grandad lifted me into his hammock and gave me a book to read. It's a big soft stripy hammock with white ropes at each end. Grandad has it tied to two big fruit trees.

The hammock is so big the sides come up round me. It was so cosy that some days I nearly fell asleep a bit. One day I rolled over and fell out so Grandad loosened the ropes to make the hammock closer to the ground. Then I could climb in and out by myself. That was better for him so he could get on with his gardening.

Grandad had lots of fruit trees. He had apricot and plum and cherry and lemon and grapefruit and other ones. There were so many I don't remember all the names. And he had strawberries and blackcurrants on stalky bushes and rhubarb with big floppy leaves.

He was really keen on a special bush he called a Goosegog. It was much smaller than the others and had prickles. Grandad was very careful with it. He said Grandma planted it last year so it was Just A Youngster and wouldn't have many fruit this year.

But the Goosegog was doing pretty good for a young tree. One day we counted 16 fruit on it. They were small – like those tiny tomatoes – and they were a yellowy-green colour. They had short white hairs all over them and a little brown tuft on the end. I didn't like the look of them but I didn't say anything.

One day I stayed in the kitchen to clean up the breakfast dishes and when I went down to the garden Grandad was sitting on the grass beside his Goosegog. He was just staring at it.

"Look at that," he said. "All gone. All but one anyway. What Blasted Pest this time?!"

I had a look and he was right – most of the Goosegogs were gone. There was just one left, high up under some leaves. Grandad sat there screwing up his face and shaking his head. At first I thought he was laughing but he had tears in his eyes so he might have been crying.

I took him inside for a cup of tea. I always left the mugs out with tea bags in them so Grandad just had to pour in the hot water. I got some biscuits from the jar and we sat on the back step. Grandad said he couldn't figure out where

the Goosegogs went. If they had fallen off they would be on the ground. I said it might be birds but he said they must have mighty beaks to get a grip on a Goosegog. It was a mystery.

“Well, never mind,” he said. “Next year is another year.” I said that was right.

After we had our walk Grandad said he wanted to sit in the lounge out of the sun and have a read. Pretty soon he was asleep on the sofa. I tiptoed outside and went down to the garden to give him some Quiet Time.

I climbed into the hammock and thought about where the Goosegogs had gone. The sides of the hammock came up round me and all I could see through the gap was the Goosegog bush. Then I realised I was in the perfect place. When the thief came back for the last Goosegog, I would see them. I settled down to look out for Suspects.

I knew I had to go in and check on Grandad soon, so I tried hard not to doze off. But it was so comfy, sometimes I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming.

Soon there was a little peep peep peep from one of the fruit trees and two really tiny birds zipped into the Goosegog bush. They had white circles round their eyes. We watched some in the bottle brush the other day – Grandad said they were pihipihi, but most people call them silvereyes. They were always busy poking their beaks into the flowers for nectar. There were no flowers on the Goosegog bush so the pihipihi lost interest and flitted off somewhere else. Anyway their beaks were too short and pointy to get hold of a Goosegog. They weren't Suspects.

Then there was a tiny kissing sound and a fantail darted down. Grandad calls fantails piwakawaka. This one sat right at the top of the Goosegog bush for a few seconds. Fantails never stay still for long. This one spread out his lovely tail to keep balance and pecked at a branch a couple of times. Then he hurried off again. Fantails just eat insects. They can even catch them in the air, that's why they follow you through the garden. I knew the fantail wasn't a Suspect.

It was quiet for a while, then there was a wild whirring above my head and a tui clattered onto the Goosegog bush. Tui are quite big so the little bush swayed. The tui had to flutter about to keep its balance. I've seen lots of tui - there are so many in our garden that mum complains about the noise they make. But I'd never been this close to one before.

The tui sat there, just above the Goosegog fruit, and did lots of gurgling and croaking and popping. It had shiny blue feathers on its chest - like they had oil rubbed on them - and I could see the cute white feathers on its throat. I was sure it was going to reach down between its legs and grab the last Goosegog. It would be no trouble with that big curvy beak. Tui can eat whole cicadas and even stick insects, which is a bit yucky.

But then a blackbird landed in the fruit tree beside the Goosegog bush and the tui screamed and took off after it. Tui are greedy. They won't let other birds near their food, even if there's too much for them to eat themselves. This tui is the best Suspect yet.

It was really peaceful after the tui left. Then there was a sort of careful scuffing noise and a thrush popped out from under the big hedge beside the Goosegog bush. It bounced a few steps and stopped to look around. It flicked some leaves around on the ground, probably looking for worms or snails. Then it bounced along again.

I get worried about thrushes because they don't know about Danger. They mess about on the ground even when there are cats around. One built a nest in our garden low enough for me to see into it. Our cat used to watch the mother and father thrush building their nest. Three weeks later there were dead baby thrushes on the ground. We buried them. The thrush isn't a Suspect.

I was watching out for Piri, the cat from next door, but the thrush was scared away by a sound like someone clearing their throat. Then there was a scratching noise and a heavy plomp - a small possum landed right beside the Goosegog bush. He sat there with his pink snout shining and waited to see if anyone had noticed. I was really surprised because possums only come out at night. He must have been a baby that fell out of its nest in the hedge.

He looked cute with his bulgy eyes and sharp black whiskers but I knew possums were Bad News. Everyone knows they eat the new leaves on trees and cause a lot of Damage. I've even seen a photo of one eating a kiwi's egg. That's why people trap them.

This one looked too cute to be a pest but he soon started eying up the Goosegog bush. He nibbled at a new leaf close to the ground. He didn't show any interest in the last Goosegog but I could see his curvy claws. They could easily grab a whole Goosegog. This possum was definitely a Suspect.

I was going to shoo him away but there was a scuffle under the hedge and Scout came racing through. Scout's the noisy brown dog from next door. She was howling and growling like mad. The baby possum shot up into the hedge. Scout barked for a while but pretty soon lost interest. She knows dogs can't climb trees.

I might have dozed off a bit because I lay still for a long time and when I peeped out of the hammock there was a rabbit. It was right by the Goosegog bush, sitting up and turning its ears almost all the way round, listening for Danger. I don't think a rabbit is a Goosegog Suspect but I knew Grandad wouldn't be too pleased to see one in his garden. Rabbits just love vegetables and they are hard to keep out because they can dig right under fences.

Grandad reckons the Best Defence against rabbits is a hungry cat, and just then I saw one. Piri was sneaking through the grass under the hedge. He was doing that stalking thing you see lions and tigers do on TV. They keep their bodies still and move one leg at a time. They have much better balance than me. I've been practising handstands but I can't stay up as long as the girls at school.

I must have been thinking about balance too much because right then I fell out of the hammock. Piri and the rabbit shot off and that was then end of my spying.

I went up to see if Grandad was awake. He was sitting at the dinner table with the lady from next door.

"Look at this," he said. "Found the Culprit!"

"What's a Culprit?" I said

"Found the Goosegog Thief!" he said. Grandad grabbed a dish from the table and held it under my nose. "Get a whiff of that!"

It was a small pie in one of those white dishes with wiggly edges. The pastry had holes in it and you could see yellowy-green juice inside.

"Goosegog tart!" said Grandad and winked at the lady from next door. "Mystery solved. Thanks Marg. Lovely." He didn't seem too upset that the Goosegog thief lived right next door.

That night Grandad made special meatballs with herbs and tomatoes from his garden, and we had Goosegog tart for pudding. It was lovely. I thought it was bit sour at first but it had a flavour like nothing I ever tasted. And mixed with whipped cream it was Bonzer. Grandad said that.

Later on, when I went to Grandad's bedroom to check he was well tucked in, he said he was a bit worried about the blackcurrants.

"They'll be ripe soon," he said. "We need to keep an eye on them."

"Watch out for Culprits?" I said. "No worries. I'll get onto that in the morning."

And I gave him a little kiss and turned off his light.

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