



THE BUBBLE GUM SELLER by JOE MACHINE  
Art by JOE MACHINE in SAVAGE KICK #7  
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# **THE SAVAGE KICK #7**

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## **The Bubble Gum Seller**

I was five years old the first time I saw a beer glass smashed in someone's face.

I remember it because it was around the same time that I started working for my father. We lived in a run down seaside town in north Kent. Looking back on it, there was nothing much there to attract most people. A few rough beaches, a bingo hall and a handful of shops. What the town did have, was plenty of pubs and drinking establishments. As a result of this, it was known as a drunk town, a haven for the working class of London. Through the week, the pubs had steady business, but come Friday night, the builders, cab drivers, factory hands and cleaners poured into town to tank up.

My father ran an amusement arcade which was stuck between the beach on one side and three of the seediest pubs you can imagine on the other. The most notorious of these happened to be the one closest to us, the Seahorse summer bar. It was a long single story building with huge panel glass windows. These windows were always getting smashed and were boarded up most of the time.

My mother and father both worked in the arcade, which stayed open until after the pubs had shut. This meant that during the summer holidays, I was at the arcade until late with my parents. As a

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consequence of this, I often ended up seeing the fights which erupted at the weekends.

My father was one of those men who had started out with nothing and had made something of himself. He was always telling me how the world was a hard place and if you wanted to survive, you had to be prepared to step on other people. This was one of his favourite lines, he used to roll it out like a field cannon and fire away at anyone who'd listen. My father had voted for Ted Heath, he was always moaning about the trade unions and was very big on what he called 'Enterprise', which was possibly why he put me to work as soon as I turned five. It was nothing serious, he usually made me clean the slot machines, sweep up and carry the mop bucket. I wasn't much good at any of this. I couldn't polish very well, didn't push the broom properly and slopped the water out of the bucket. My father would look at me and shake his head. I was a disappointment. He would grab my arm and pull me around until a little patch of piss appeared on the crotch of my trousers. He would shout, he wanted to know what was wrong with me. Pretty much like everyone else I knew, I hated my father, but somehow, I wanted to please him too. I thought about what to do and one night I took an empty cardboard tray and filled it up with Hardball bubble gum from one of the vending machines. I asked my mother to make up a sign and I stuck it on the front of the tray with sellotape. The sign read 'Bubble gums, 2p each'. I took the tray and stood outside of the arcade hoping to make some sales. I felt fucking stupid standing there in my t-shirt and sandals, I almost turned around and went back in, but I forced myself to stick it out.

At first, people went by without even noticing me. Then I saw a few of them smiling, a couple of men pointed and the women

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who were with them laughed. Then there was a boy, taller than me, perhaps he was seven or eight, he stopped and peered into the tray. He sniffed, rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a dull copper coin. He held it towards me and I stared at it for a few seconds before taking it carefully from between his fingers and dropping it into the tray. He took a bright red ball of gum and walked off. I watched him like he was some kind of miraculous creature, listening to the sound of his rubber plimsolls on the concrete as he turned the corner. That was it, my first sale. A few others followed and after a while, I had a small stack of coins which I turned over to my father at the end of the night. My father took the coins and put them in the cash box. He smiled at me and later I heard him talking to my mother.

‘The boy is showing initiative, perhaps we can do something with him after all.’

I didn’t know what any of that meant, but I understood that somehow, I’d made him happy. So whenever I could, I took the cardboard tray full of bubble gum and went out to try my luck. I suppose that I must have sold quite a few during the long summer evenings of 1978, but I don’t recall too much else about it except for the faces of the people that passed by. The way the stink of sweat hung on their clothes or was masked by cheap aftershave or hairspray.

Usually, late at night, the trouble started. Perhaps there were other fights, things I saw but have forgotten since. This one I didn’t forget. I could say that there was something different about that night, some underlying sense of tension that made me uneasy, but I’d be lying. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it until I heard the screaming . I looked across the road, there seemed to be a group

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of people fighting outside of the Summer Bar. A couple of them had fallen over and were trying to crawl away, punches were being thrown amongst the others and a few more, carrying bottles and beer glasses had crossed the road into the area in front of the arcade.

I should've gone inside straight away, but for some reason, I stayed there. Either I was curious to know what was going to happen or I was too scared to move. Knowing what kind of boy I was back then, it was probably both.

The two men nearest me were arguing, their voices were flat and ragged and sounded more like dogs barking at each other. One of them was wearing a striped shirt, he was jabbing his finger in the other blokes chest. It went on like this for a few seconds and then the other bloke came forward suddenly and stuck his beer glass in the striped shirts face. There was a muted popping sound, as if the glass had broken under water. Beer splashed to the ground, foaming in white puddles on the tarmac. The glass went in again, this time it sounded like a proper smash. The man in the striped shirt staggered back, gasping, wheezing, like he was short of breath. I saw his face, his cheek was completely open beneath his left eye, the gouge was half round, like a crescent moon. The second blow had gone into the side of his head severing the lower part of the ear. He clapped a hand to his face, blood was pissing through his fingers. He swayed, buckled over and went down. The bloke with the glass tried to kick him but he was grabbed by two other men from behind. His legs flailed, pistoning out, he was screaming, spit flying from his lips.

They dragged him away back across the road.

The glassed man laid there, gurgling noises coming out of his throat. It was impossible to tell whether or not his shirt was striped now because it was covered in blood. His hands were red, there was

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blood on his trousers and on the ground. I stared at him while the lights of the amusement arcade flashed and coins fell into hoppers somewhere inside. My father came out then, I didn't know it was him at first. I felt his hands on my shoulders as he grabbed me and marched me back inside the arcade. As this happened, my tray tipped up and the bubble gums spilled onto the floor. I turned my head and looked at the brightly coloured balls rolling away across the tarmac.

**--- END OF SAMPLE ---**

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