

## The scrap yard

I was a shy kid, and my father's hand discreetly pushed me further back when he haggled over prices with Joe Hunt. Joe used what my mum called "Language", mouthing a capital 'L'. Joe cut his adjectives down to just one word. Besides, Joe smelled pretty rank even from a distance; my dad smelled too, of course but just sweat and work. Joe's overalls, whoa!

The big tractor tires, wheels, and spare parts that farms need, cost a fortune, new. As the farm's manager, my father refused to buy new what he could get second-hand and serviceable, and Joe Hunt and his brother Jacob had a sprawling mountain of scrap that contained, somewhere, whatever you might need.

Joe and my dad wrestled with arithmetic in the dust, on the hood of Hunts' breakdown truck. The squiggles they drew with their fingers were not what I learned at school, but they flew fast, and a mutual nod confirmed their bargain. When Joe Hunt had unloaded the tractor tires he had brought over, and had left in a cloud of diesel smoke, my father looked down at me and said: **"We'll drive over to their place another day, see what else they have. You might learn something."**

Joe and Jacob Hunt, with their families and dogs and ponies, ruled over acres of scrap metal: cars and trucks, airplane parts, marine engines, scaffolding and rusted tanks were arranged in rows on the oil-soaked ground. Along one fence stood an unlikely row of old double-decker buses, where birds nested. This unwanted jumble the Hunts bought in bulk at government auctions, or bankruptcies; or scavenged themselves for nothing, and sold on to foundries for melting down, what they couldn't sell to bargain hunters who came poking around. Like us.

It was all cash, and although the Hunt brothers didn't read or write much, their fingers knew accurately the value of bundled bank-notes. Their money, people told each other in the pub, and it must be a bloody fortune, was hidden in the

guard dogs' kennels. And Joe Hunt's wife was the only person who could safely reach the money, that's God's truth, the locals would all swear to it.

The Hunt family were **diddicois**. **Not** gypsies, my dad warned me never to say gypsies -- because diddicoi was a Romany name for the turncoats who desert the travelling life to live in permanent buildings. The Hunts were halfway there; they lived in an outcrop of caravans and trailers.

You could wander freely among old vehicles stacked four high, and find whatever you needed. If you brought tools, you could unbolt a gearbox and take it home for very little. "**5 quid**" Jacob or Joe would say, and walk away while you thought about it. If you wanted them to remove the gearbox (or axle or whatever), and have them deliver it, then "**15**" Jacob might say. There was only ever one fixed price if you dealt with the Hunts. The figure was tossed to you quietly, because who might be listening. One price, that existed only at that moment, for you, and might not stand the next day. One price, because Joe or Jacob had already summed you up as soon as you entered their yard, and the Hunt brothers were nothing if not fair.

An antique car dealer had driven up from the city, the day we were there, and parked his luxurious saloon outside the compound. Dad was talking to Jacob at his trailer office while I played with hub caps. The dealer smoothed his hair, adjusted his fine overcoat, and tiptoed into the maze of scrap. Somewhere in there, he evidently spotted an unregarded treasure: a vehicle he coveted on sight.

If he bought it at a typical scrap car price, he'd be able to take the car away and restore it enough --- it was a rare 1930's Lagonda --- to sell on at an enormous profit.

Joe Hunt was no fool, he knew the man's trade, and would in any case make his money on the price he proposed. "**£500, delivered,**" and looked up at distant clouds. The London dealer agreed, and Hunt's sons used their mobile crane to pry the Lagonda from its perch and lower it onto the back of Hunt's delivery truck. But then the dealer flicked his fingers in apparent irritation, "**Oh-oh,**" he murmured and held up a hand. "**Wait a minute.**"

Joe Hunt said nothing, stood like an oak tree.

**“No, wait. See all that damage under there? The springs are broken, see. Oh, and someone’s taken the steering arms. It’s a lot worse than I thought, Mister Hunt. I can’t give you £500, but I will give you 300.”**

Joe Hunt said **“£500’s the price. 500.”** The dealer chuckled and shook his head, **“Mister Hunt, let’s be sensible. The state of that thing, you’ll never get 500 for it. Look, how about 350, as it’s on the truck already. 350 cash and we’re done.”**

Joe shook his head, **“Then you’re not having it. 500 was the price. You’re not having it.”**

The dealer fanned some banknotes in his hand **“Come on, Joe: 350 pounds in your hand, cash.”**

Joe Hunt looked the man in the eyes, **“I named you a fair price, and you’re trying to rip me off. You’re not having the car.”**

The dealer frowned, **“£400, then.”**

Hunt ignored him and called to his sons, **“Get it back off the truck, lads.”**

The dealer’s face turned pale, **“Mister Hunt, okay okay, you’re a hard man, I give in, here’s all your 500, here take it.”**

Hunt looked at him with scorn: **“You come here and try to cheat me ‘cos you think you’re better than us. Well you’re not.”** Joe marched back towards the trailer where we stood, shouting over his shoulder: **“In the crusher, lads.”**

And the old car was dropped into the massive steel jaws of the scrap crusher, and Joe himself reached over to press the big red button. Above the ominous creaking and snapping, he growled at the dealer: **“Now go back where you came from, and learn some manners.”**

We said nothing on our drive home, but my father grinned across at me, just once, and winked. **“What do you reckon to that?”**