Quick Feet

by Stuart Finegan

The whole street knew Tommy O'Shea. You could hear him before you saw him: thump-thump-thump, his football bouncing off walls, kerbs, lampposts and, occasionally, someone's front door.

"TOMMY!" Mrs Kearney would shout. "Will ya pack it in before ya break somethin'?"

"Sorry, Mrs Kearney!"

He'd start again the second her curtain closed.

Nobody hated the sound more than Frank Grimcall. He lived alone in a red-brick terrace, thin as a rake, with bitter grey eyes and a face that suggested smiling might hurt.

Tommy loved tormenting him.

The football slammed against Frank's garden wall.

THUD.

His front door burst open.

"Would ya ever give it a rest?"

"Give what a rest?"

"The football!"

"What football?"

"The one attached to your bloody foot!"

Tommy laughed and kicked again.

THUD.

"You're doin' that on purpose."

"I haven't a clue what you're talkin' about, Mr Grimcall."

"Don't give me that."

"It's a free country."

"One day, young fella, you're gonna regret windin' people up."

Tommy trapped the ball.

“One day you’ll learn to have a bit of fun, old man.”

Frank muttered something rude and went indoors. Tommy believed he’d won.

Every afternoon became a battle: Tommy arrived after school, the ball struck the wall, and Frank emerged to complain. Neighbours watched from their windows. The postman laughed. The shopkeeper started taking bets on who’d shout first.

One rainy Thursday, Tommy sent the ball skidding into Frank’s gate.

“Jesus, kid, do ya sleep with that thing?”

“Nah. I bring it to bed, but she snores.”

Frank nearly smiled.

“You’re a smart mouth.”

“That’s what me mam says.”

“And does she say what’ll happen when somebody finally loses patience with ya?”

Tommy shrugged.

“Nothin’.”

“You shouldn’t be so sure.”

Something in Frank’s voice unsettled him, but only for a second.

Then he kicked again.

Months passed. Tommy grew taller, Frank grew older, and their routine never changed.

Until one autumn evening.

Walking home from football practice, Tommy spotted Frank beside an abandoned warehouse near the canal.

That was strange.

Stranger still, he was carrying a shovel.

Frank glanced around before disappearing through a broken side door.

Tommy crept closer.

Inside, dust thickened the air. Rain hammered against shattered windows. Then he heard Frank and another man.

“...can’t leave it there forever,” the stranger said.

“We managed twenty years.”

Twenty years?

Tommy edged forward. Gravel scraped beneath his trainers.

The voices stopped.

“Who’s there?” Frank called.

Tommy backed away. One shadow moved, then another.

He ran home.

That night, he couldn’t sleep. What couldn’t be left there forever?

The next day, Frank was outside his house as usual.

"You look tired, kid."

"Yeah. Didn't sleep much."

"No? Bad dreams?"

"How'd you know?"

"Oh, just a guess."

Frank smiled for the first time. Somehow, it was worse than his scowl.

Over the following weeks, Tommy returned to the warehouse every evening.

No Frank. No voices. Then, one Saturday, he found a collapsed section of flooring. Beneath it lay a hidden cellar. He climbed down. The air smelled of damp. His torch swept across the darkness and landed on something white. Human bones. They lay scattered across the floor. A board creaked overhead. Tommy spun round, his torch trembling.

"Found what you were lookin' for?"

He stumbled backwards.

Frank descended the broken stairs slowly.

"What is this?" Tommy whispered. "What happened here?"

"A very long story, kid."

"Those are people."

"Aye."

"You killed them."

Frank gave a low, sinister laugh.

"No."

"Then who did?"

"They did."

Tommy stared as Frank pointed at the bones.

"Every one of them came pokin' their nose where it didn't belong."

Tommy swung the torch towards the stairs. Frank stood between him and the only way out, one hand resting on the broken rail. Above the old man's shoulder, daylight showed through the hole in the floor. It looked impossibly far away. The cellar walls seemed to close in.

"I should call the Guards."

"Yeah, you could."

Frank stepped closer.

"But by the time anybody believes ya…"

Tommy turned to run.

His foot struck a loose plank. It shifted beneath him, exposing a black gap. For a moment, he teetered above it. Frank didn't move. Didn't reach out. Just watched.

Tommy flung himself sideways and caught the edge of a solid board. His torch rolled away, its beam turning across the bones before settling on Frank's shoes. For once, Tommy had nothing to say. He dragged himself back, keeping his eyes on those shoes. They hadn't shifted an inch. He scrambled clear, his breath rasping. When he looked up, Frank was smiling again. That same smile. The one that made every complaint, every warning, sound different now.

From somewhere above came the faint patter of rain. Tommy pressed his palms against the floor, testing it before he dared move. Frank waited patiently, as though they were back outside his house and Tommy's ball had rolled into the road. The old man tipped his head.

"I'd watch my step, young Tommy, if I were you."

He spoke softly.

"Accidents are terribly punctual around here."