

FANCY BREAD

A Boyhood Memoir

This was written around 1973, but the time it refers to is over twenty years earlier (1950–51).

Wednesday was Fancy Bread day, when I would set off after school by green bicycle along the green lanes, past apple orchards, lavender fields and flocks of skipping lambs – for it was Kent, and spring – to sleepy Minster bakery to bring back milk loaves and currant loaves, swinging from the handlebars in a string bag. How I enjoyed these weekly commissions! The quiet traffic-free lanes wandering through a countryside enchanted by the late afternoon sun, the plunge into Minster down the steep lane into the village, the stark white War Memorial announcing your arrival; heroic efforts on the uphill gradient on the return, sunset spread out ahead of me as I arrive home. But most of all what was delightful was the sense of loneliness and speed – the being entrusted with money (a whole three shillings), the being on a quest, three miles and back by myself, they are relying on you Pete, the fancy bread must get through.

Our village had no bakery – merely a general store where they cut coupons from your ration book with little scissors, and whose richest prize was Invicta minerals, Kent's finest, gassy and artificial tasting, with three-pence on the bottle, religiously returned each week.

On other evenings, when I was allowed, I mostly used to play with the girls. They were the daughters of the publican, and they were identical twins, Angelina and Elizabeth, tall girls they seemed to me, sophisticated, twelve years to my ten. To them I was The Hedgehog – apparently their father said I looked as if I had been pulled through a hedge backwards. I knew what he meant. In those days I used to live permanently in Wellington boots, and my grey school trousers, torn and parting at the seams, lasted me all of three years. I never wore a shirt, but I had a roll-neck pullover of nondescript fawn. I don't seem to remember washing or combing my hair at all.

I lived with my father and his second wife – Auntie Pam – in a brick house in The Grove, an unmade road lined mostly with bungalows put up in a hurry before the War, when it seemed for a time that the village would develop as a holiday resort. The garden was lumpy with my father's sporadic attempts at raising vegetables, but the house shone, pertly through my efforts, for it was my weekend chore to polish the furniture and the floor. The furniture was no trouble, but the acres of board in every room made my arms ache.

My father came and went about the country on a superior roadster bike, fitted with one of those spluttering clip-on engines that drove the front wheel by means of a carborundum roller. He was by turns an insurance agent, a photographer at parties and weddings, an election agent, census official, advertising agent and hopeful journalist.

One of his friends was Harry, who drove an excavator on building sites and quarries. Harry's work took him around the country with a caravan, like a gypsy. He was an old school friend of father's, but he was coarse and used to swear, which father seldom did. However, he fascinated us all with his wealth. When Harry came, he would take us four miles up the road to *The Witches' Brew*, a transport café where we all perched on stools drinking milk shakes and watching Yankee airmen conjure into life the mysterious and brightly coloured juke box. Harry boasted that he earnt forty – fifty – even sixty pounds a week.

One day, with Harry's encouragement, my father got a job as an excavator driver at Deal, having apparently convinced the foreman of his suitability by means of what Harry called 'flannel'. The night before he started he sat up late practising with a set of brooms and garden tools arranged before him to represent the control levers. I never heard what happened about that job, but it didn't seem to interrupt for long the life he had been leading, popping off to register offices in Margate and Sandwich, camera round his neck, or to 'do's' at the Aylesford Trades Hall

My own means of transport was less illustrious. A twenty-four-inch-wheel job, rescued from the scrap heap, fitted up and painted a bright green by my father. It had no mudguards, but to a lad of spirit what were they but an encumbrance? Everyone knew a really sporty bike, a real racer, had no mudguards.

Down the green lanes to Minster it sped me, or over the cliff paths to school in Ramsgate.

These cliffs were the playground of us village boys. They were mined with secret tunnels and passages, left over from the War. There were various points of entry into the labyrinth – some ordinary doorways inside the concrete pillboxes with steps leading down, others mere holes in the ground like foxes' earths, hidden among the gorse bushes. Some of the passages were ordinary sized, and some opened out into rooms and compartments underground, but in one place there was a tight bit just big enough for a boy to squeeze through, torch gripped awkwardly, half choking, in the mouth, to emerge suddenly at the cliff's edge, hundreds of feet above the sea.

The tunnels were the scene of the more daring ambushes and escapes of our war games: English and Germans, Jews and Arabs, Cowboys and Indians. And they were dirty, smelling like the outdoor lavatory at school, smelling of old, damp newspapers.

The girls never went down the tunnels or on to the cliffs to my knowledge; they seemed to spend most of their free time in their own garden. But they questioned me about them.

"You get in through the pillbox window. Then through the door and down the steps. It's very dark and you have to have a torch to go in. Once I was down there with Billy Yate and I dared him to go in though he didn't have no torch, and he was too scared to go in."

"Did you go in?"

"No. I didn't have no torch either. Anyway *I* was daring *him*. If he wanted me to go in, he should have dared me first."

"But you told us you had been in."

"Oh, I went there another time when my father was there and I borrowed his torch."

"What is it like?"

"It's like a passage with compartments and rooms made out of cement. Then in parts it is all earthy like a burrow. Then there's this part where you have to squeeze through – really squeeze. Then there are all these pictures on the walls."

Vague daubs, maybe indecent, maybe not, left by some soldier or someone who came after the soldiers.

"Sounds horrible. Let's go and play Red Indians by the incinerator. You shall be the Indian Chief, and I will be your squaw and Angelina –"

"I shall be your best warrior."

With one part of my mind I knew they thought little of me. After all, I was too young for them, really. I knew they only used to play with me when there was nothing else to do, and always in their garden, at their convenience. After a while, their mother would call them in and they would dismiss me

with "You'll have to go now", rushing in without a backward look. Their mother was always polite, but I was never allowed inside the house.

And yet they could be kind. Perhaps they had few other companions and were lonely.

Although I was aware of this ambivalence, I began to think about the twins more and more. In my mind, they became my *best* friends, displacing all my school mates and cliff-top war games companions. They were always saying I looked as if I had been pulled through a hedge backwards. I began to wonder what it was like to be pulled through a hedge – the sharp twigs snapping, parting, scratching, scouring from head to toe, the tall grey girls tugging at my arms and legs.

The crisis in our friendship came quite suddenly. I was invited to their birthday party – one party, two birthdays – a grand event to take place in a large pavilion in the grounds of the pub. All my friends, all the village children, were invited. We were to have a special tea with bread and condensed milk, and rumour said that everyone would receive a present. It was evidently to be a 'do' of some splendour, and my father would be there to take photographs. The invitation arrived a week in advance and, although I was aware that everyone had received one, I somehow knew that mine was the only invitation that mattered, that *I* was the chief guest, the party was for me – wasn't I really their *best* friend?

Lying awake in my bed (which had blankets but no sheets, and which I shared with the dog) it suddenly occurred to me what I should do. The party was to be held in the garden pavilion and was to last until the unbelievable hour of nine thirty; evidently all restraints were relaxed and every licentiousness permitted. I would entice the twins into the garden and there, in the moonlight, in the secret corner by the incinerator, I would embrace them, one arm around each girl, myself surrounded and enveloped by their girliness, and I would boldly –

And I would kiss them both on the lips!!

Next morning a stranger arrived at our house, a large-boned, energetic, loud-speaking, fair-haired lady whose beaming smile, apparently directed at me, bewildered me with its unexpected warmth. This, I was told, is your mother, come at last to take you back; back to the brick and chimney-stack city, to the top-floor rented rooms and the brown lino and the ugly landlady who smells of cats and cabbage, and the gas fires, and the fog, and the granite kerbed streets with green lamp-posts ...

My present, a cheap Ludo board with counters, arrived by post some weeks later.

Some time after this, a grammar-school boy with smart blue blazer spangled with club badges and a top pocket packed with pens and pencils, now no stranger to soap, water and the nail-brush, I visited my father and Auntie Pam for a week. By this time I had two half-sisters. I enquired about my school friends, of whom the blest and fortunate had gone to Chatham House or Sir Roger Manwood's, and the less favoured to Secondary Modern schools. Finally I asked about the twins.

"Oh, Mr Blakey's daughters. Did you know them at all? Well, they have gone to boarding school somewhere up North. We see them occasionally during the holidays. They always were very snooty, of course. Don't mix much, that family."