

S for School

*“Stand on a square, you’ll marry a bear
Stand on a nick, you’ll marry a brick”*

We jump and hop all the way home from school, me and Dorothy. We’ll have to gobble down our dinners to be back in class by half past one. It’s Wednesday so it’ll be fish and chips for my dinner. Not from the ‘chippie’, that’s only for special treats, but straight from our chip pan, sizzling with golden fat. I can tell you what day of the week it is by what we are having for our dinner. Mondays are hash days (left-over Sunday meat, potatoes and carrots); Tuesdays - beefsteak puddings, suet pastry filled with meat, wrapped in a cotton rag and boiled, delicious covered with H.P. sauce; Wednesdays - fish and chips; Thursdays - sausage and mash and Fridays - pork pies from Borseley’s pork butchers, with chips, and a custard tart for ‘afters’.

I liked going to school. We learned new things by chanting out little rhymes or reciting our times tables.

“30 days hath September, April, June and November, All the rest have 31, excepting February alone which has 28 and 29 in each Leap Year”.

My Grandad taught me riddles:

“ Two n’s, two o’s, an L and a D, can you tell what I might be?”

“YYURYYUB I think you are, YY4me”

I raced through the Beacon Readers and, every few weeks, I had to read to Mr Beard, the Headmaster, in his office. There was a long list of new words to pore over whilst he puffed on his pipe, the smoke forming a wreath around my head. I am stuck on the word ‘choir’ and have to be helped.

In my first school, Elgin Street Primary, we have a nap in the afternoons. Little folding camp-beds are put up in the school hall and we lie down under coarse grey blankets, each with a picture sewn on it which matches the picture on our coat-hook. We are supposed to sleep but the sun shines red through my eyelids and the blanket scratches my bare legs.

I call for my friend Lorraine every morning and we walk to school together, crossing several roads, at the age of five, without any adults to guide us.

I’ve been going to school for ages now. I’m in Miss Hall’s class. I have to sit next to Wilfred; he smells and his glasses have one eye covered up with sticking plaster. His shoes are dirty and have big holes in the bottom. His grey socks are always wrinkled around his ankles. My socks are grey too and I have elastic garters to hold them up. My shoes are shiny black with a bow on the front and silver buckles. We went to the big shops in Manchester to buy my gabardine raincoat. It has a big hood lined with tartan for when it rains. I hang it on my coat peg with its picture of a Queen wearing a golden crown. Lorraine hates her picture...it’s a ladder.

I love ‘reading time’. We read about a farmer called Old Lob and his horse called Dobbin. Percy the bad chick gets up to all sorts of mischief. Miss Hall tells us the story of Henny Penny and Chicken Licken.

I love ‘Music and Movement’. We have to find a pair of pumps that will fit our feet from the big cardboard box. They are black with a wide piece of elastic which stops them falling off. The Schools Broadcast is playing on the radio which Miss Hall puts high up on

the table so we don't trip over the wire. The lady's voice says "*Children, pretend you're a leaf. The wind is gently blowing you along. Now the wind gets stronger and whirls you around.....*" I twirl so much I am dizzy and fall over.

I moved from Elgin Street School when we moved to Waterloo. My new school was Waterloo Council School on Worthington Street. My first teacher was Miss Fielding who taught the top Infants class. Then I moved into the Junior school next door.

When we have Art and Craft lessons Mr Solan plays music as we paint. I like "Peter and the Wolf" and a piece called "Peer Gynt". We have to mix the paint before the lesson. I want to be Ink Monitor so that I can mix blue ink for the children and red ink for the teachers. You have to be very careful filling the inkwells on each desk. Perhaps I wouldn't be very good at pouring. My Dad calls me "Calamity Jane" because everything I try to do seems to go wrong. I make big blots when I am writing when there's too much ink on the scratchy nibs of the school pens. I am getting a Fountain Pen if I pass my 11+. I already have a pencil box, made of wood with a sliding lid. It holds two pencils, a sharpener and an India rubber. The lid makes a ruler to measure 12 inches = one foot.

I hate school dinners. My aunty May is a dinner lady and she will tell my mum if I don't eat up. We have to queue up and the dinner ladies slap dollops of mashed potato and disgusting stringy meat on your plate which is then swamped in thin watery gravy. I pick at the food. It sticks in my throat. I can see Alan gazing at my plate. I push it along the table to him and he's wolfed it down in seconds. Pudding is prunes and pink custard. I might have eaten the pink stuff but now the black prunes have streaked the custard with grey. The noise is deafening. The clatter of knives and forks echoes in the hall. The windows are all steamed up and there's a strong smell of boiled cabbage. I need the toilet but the teacher does not see my waving arm. It's too late. I am led out, my face burning with shame. I have to wear a pair of boy's shorts from the Lost Property box and my knickers are screwed up in my bag.

School, in my last year of Juniors, is a round of practice comprehension, intelligence tests and short essays on '*A day in the life of a penny*' or "*When the circus came to town*", all in preparation for the Eleven-Plus.

I am still only 10, on that Saturday morning when I'm taken to Hartshead Secondary Modern to sit the exam in a large echoing hall with a slippery wooden floor. I write my essay, struggle with the mysterious strings of letters and numbers in the Intelligence test but enjoy the comprehension test. On the way home, on the Number 3 Hurst Circular bus, I confide in my Dad...

"Don't tell Mum but I think I've failed!"

He raises an eyebrow.

"I spelled Australia wrong."

"Don't be so daft!" is his reply.

The brown envelope arrives, when I lie, hot and feverish, in the throes of chicken-pox, to say I have passed for the Grammar school. Clearly, the examiner didn't know how to spell Australia either.

All our visitors that summer are required to admire my new uniform - navy knee-length skirt, white shirt, navy and red striped tie, navy V-necked jumper (embarrassingly hand-knitted, in my case), gabardine raincoat and, horror of horrors, a boy's cap.

My first day at the Grammar school is a haze of intimidating teachers who flap like large bats, in their black academic gowns; big boys and girls wearing their uniform like elaborate Fancy Dress and new ones, like me, wearing over-sized clothes as though we have been shopping at the "Giant" Superstore. I am mortified at being assigned to Form 1D even though we are assured this is not a sign of our educational attainment. Timetables, homework diaries, a mysterious subject called "Accidence", Latin and Algebra, Library and Needlework. I wake in the night, in a sweat, wondering how I am going to cope with such high-level learning.

Break-times are a noisy clattering exodus out into the playground or the toilets. I huddle in a doorway to avoid the more robust games of older girls until I team up with Cath, of whom my mother commented:

"She's never backward at coming forwards, that one!"

Cath. is bold; she is cheeky but so charming that adults usually forgive her. I trail along in her wake, occasionally emboldened by her example, to answer back, unbowed by approbation. Cath. almost wet herself laughing, the time I used "Piggy" Higginbottom's chair-back cover as an oven cloth in Domestic Science. The wrath of the Gods was unleashed that day as "Piggy" was more than a match for the average 13-year-old. Cath. was in trouble herself in another disastrous cookery lesson when she used the corner of her gingham apron (laboriously made in "Aggie's" sewing lesson) to lift a saucepan off the gas flame. The apron set on fire and Cath's arch-enemies, Rosemary and Vicky, delighted in throwing water all over her, dousing the flames but wetting her thoroughly in the process.

Cath. and I hate Double Games. We are always in goal in Hockey, not as the Goalkeeper, a much too important a role and one in which you had the opportunity to stomp around in huge shin pads which, on smaller girls, reached practically to the groin. No, Cath and I are defenders, that is, we ineffectually stab at the ground with our sticks whenever the ball looks as if it might be heading our way. Once, we were actually accused of running away from the ball by Miss Clucass, warmly clad in tracksuit and sheepskin jacket whilst we shivered in navy culotte shorts and thin aertex shirts, our knees and hands mottled purple.

All the new kids had been assigned to a House named after the former Lords of the Manor of old Ashton. I was in Grey House whose colour inexplicably was gold. I'd stitched my name in chain-stitched yellow embroidery thread across my pump bag, cookery apron and gym shirt. As my name had 16 letters, this required much effort and meant that my name spread right across my, then meagre, chest.

Moving between lessons was another novelty and a brilliant excuse to lose at least 5 minutes of each 40 minute period by 'getting lost' or hanging around the prefects' room in the hope of catching sight of the latest 6th Form heart-throb.

School dinners were always a trial for me, both eating them and taking my turn to serve them. I particularly remember a square of suet pudding with greasy mince underneath and the thin slices of grey meat which the sadistic prefect in charge of our table told me was "dog's heart". No-one had heard of vegetarians in those days. They'd be dismissed as hopeless faddy types, anyway. The puddings weren't much better - custard with a skin as tough as an armadillo's or soggy boiled pears or prunes and pink custard, turned

revoltingly grey by the prune juice. One of the dinner ladies knew my Mum. There was nothing more humiliating than discussing your family with her whilst the queue of starving kids behind grew ever more restless. The trays were always wet, often with suspicious liquid that definitely wasn't water and the cutlery was encrusted with a week's worth of old food. Metal water jugs and squat water glasses made of thick glass with the name 'Dulex' stamped underneath - a cue for rude jokes. Sounds echoed loudly around the canteen with its stone floors and hard surfaces. One day, I fainted spectacularly whilst carrying a pile of used plates to the scrap bin. I can still hear the sounds, as I came to, of benches scraping back as pupils craned to get a better look, voices rising and the clanging of metal utensils in the kitchen.

There was a teachers' area in the canteen which was not really separate, just half a dozen tables, just after the cutlery stand, which had an invisible barrier around them. I dreaded being on serving duty to wait on the teachers. I was asked by "Hoppy", Mr Hopkinson, the head teacher, to make a pot of tea. Unbelievably, I'd never been allowed to make tea at home so managed to make the tea (with proper leaf tea, no bags in those days) with almost cold water. There was always a teacher left on duty in school to make sure no pupils sneaked inside during the dinner hour. Mostly they patrolled the downstairs corridors and ate a belated lunch later in the canteen but "Piggy" Higginbottom did not patrol. She sat in the warm staff room, knitting, and was served her lunch there. I remember collecting the used dishes from her and was amazed to see that the chocolate pudding, which I'd taken up earlier, in a loaf tin intended to serve eight, was completely empty.

Mr Regan's English lessons have remained an inspiration. I fondly remember his reading of *'The History of Mr Polly'* aloud to the whole class and the day he sprang through the classroom door, dressed in red rugby socks with yellow cross-gartering, the manifestation of Malvolio, from 'Twelfth Night'. Tiny Miss Simpson ("Sammy"), our Latin teacher, had the boys cowering at her rage. She would march into the classroom and bellow *'Salve, puellae et pueris'* at which we all dutifully chanted *'Salve, Domina'*. Mr Eyre was our long-suffering French teacher, despairing at the crude attempts at pronunciation. I was once sent out of his lesson when Tim Heald threw a sheep's eye (stolen from the Biology Lab.) on to my French grammar as I was reading out loud to the class about Pierre and Janette's "vacances". I loved 'library' lessons with Miss Greenwood who read to us and instilled in us the mysteries of the Dewey Decimal System. "000 General works; 100 Philosophy, 200 Religion....." Little did I imagine that I'd have a career in libraries! We drove 'Tappy' Hanson berserk in Music lessons'; he was unable to keep control as we played 'Beatles' records & jived in the aisles instead of rehearsing for the latest Gilbert & Sullivan production.

In the 2nd year at the Grammar our form room was in the 'dountables' (a temporary set of three classrooms which were still temporary 30 years later!). Away from the main building, this gave us 'carte blanche' for bad behaviour. After some of the lads were caught selling 'fags' and 'girly mags' from the air-raid shelters, we were all assembled in the gym before the headmaster whilst he berated us for being 'the worst 2nd year he'd ever had'.

I looked forward to school Christmas parties which, in Years 1-3 took place during school hours, with jelly and ice-cream and dancing the conga through the corridors and up and down the stairs. Amongst the girls there was great rivalry over what you wore and whether you were 'allowed' to wear nylon

stockings. I had the ignominy of still wearing ankle socks well into the 3rd form. From the 4th year on, we had Christmas dances and, for weeks beforehand, we had to rehearse ballroom dances with the boys during P.E. lessons; they wore their ordinary clothes, the girls were in gym knickers and artex shirts!! In most cases it was like dancing with a broomstick! At one Christmas dance I almost died of embarrassment when my stiffened net petticoat fell down whilst I was on the dance floor and the red dress I was wearing leaked dye under the arms so that my upper arms looked as though they were bleeding profusely!!

GCE 'O' levels came round all too soon. Sitting in rows in the main hall with the bright sunshine beckoning through the window, we dissected a shrivelled fish, listed the main causes of the French Revolution and rifled our memories for the meaning of 'la plume de ma tante'. Then it was off into the big wide world, with just a return visit on Speech Day to receive our certificates.
