

Gnostic Sandwiches

When I was fifteen I only had one pair of jeans and they had gone through the seat and the knees - about ten years before it was fashionable. My own fashion statement was elastoplast. I had fetching nude brown plasters stuck over the holes.

There were two problems with this method of repair. After a period of sitting it was common to find the jeans stuck to my bottom and their subsequent removal excruciating. And the patches curled up at the edges quickly becoming dirty and skanky, but somehow retaining potent adhesive properties.

Kevin's Mum was not pleased one day when I rose to find several tassels from her new settee stuck to my rear.

But don't misunderstand me. We were not poor. In fact things were going quite well for my Dad at work. Guess a teenager has to find some way to rebel, and this was mine. Mum died a thousand deaths every time I went out in those jeans.

As a teenager, of course, I knew it all. My particular brand of precocious wisdom was a homespun syncretism which might be called 'gnostic anarchism'. What's that, you ask? I thought property was theft, I gave my money to anyone I felt needed it...and I knew that ice creams and toast racks were icons of middle-class decadence. God told me so.

So I went to Kevin and said. 'We need to feed the hungry. Let's go to Brighton beach and give sandwiches to the homeless.'

Kevin was clever and liked the logistical challenges presented by this proposal. We had little money and the scheme was unlikely to meet with parental approval. In his family caravan he found a jar of jam, which he brought round to my house with as much sliced white bread as he could liberate from home without detection.

The jam was covered by a thick layer of mould which we scraped off and put in the garden under the lupins. We thought the removal of butter would be noticed, so we spread the jam on the bread without it. It made a couple of rounds. Not enough to end poverty and hunger in Brighton and Hove.

So we pooled our financial resources, visited the grocers round the corner and bought six slices of reconstituted ham. We spread it thinly on more bread, taken this time from my family's breadbin, and laid the sandwiches in an empty *Christmas Assortment* tin. That's better. That may even feed five thousand.

We didn't need bike locks because we had guardian angels. Though we did help them a bit by hiding our cycles behind the beach huts near Hove Lagoon. I had cycled with the *Christmas Assortment* tin under my arm, which meant that the loose sandwiches had rearranged themselves, subtly remixing processed ham, mouldy jam and bits of bread, now soggy and disintegrating. But we reassembled them artfully and we were sure that the homeless would still be grateful.

Neither of us wanted to admit how nervous we were now we had arrived. An orderly queue of needy, thankful people had not appeared despite both the epicurean aroma emanating from our tin and the compassionate half-smiles on our faces. The setting sun threw long shadows from the iron railings edging the beach and dog walkers and joggers passed on the promenade. We may have been a bit early for homeless bedtime.

We decided we would walk towards the West Pier, underneath which, we had been told, a passable night could be spent by those without a home. As we walked we eyed anyone who was neither jogging nor clutching a dog-leash.

'What about him?' I hissed. As we passed a middle-aged man wearing a dirty raincoat.

We circled round, pretending to watch the herring gulls flying out to sea after a days scavenging.

'He's got a pink paper under his arm,' said Kevin.

'So?'

'Financial Times.'

Kevin was doing an Economics 'O' Level and I deferred to the fact that he had obviously been trained to identify businessmen and investors.

These assessments continued as we strolled towards the Pier with our biscuit tin. We tried to be inconspicuous but received several glares, one *Wot you lookin at?* and an enticing smile from a girl about our age.

When we took the path under the West Pier we found only one person - a bored looking policeman.

'Alright lads?' he said, as he saw us loitering.

We suddenly felt guilty. With our hidden sandwiches suspiciously oozing jam and criminality.

'Wouldn't hang around here. Been told to keep the place clear. 'Keep the hobos away,' they said, though God knows where else they've got to go.'

There was no alternative but to continue purposefully and innocently along the lower promenade towards the Palace Pier. It was now nearly dark and a cold breeze was blowing from the sea, misting our skin and our clothes with salty moisture. I was getting hungry and wishing I had worn a coat.

'Fancy a sandwich?' I asked Kevin.

We agreed to eat the jam ones as they were the most manky and sat on a bench chewing without relish. We nobly saved the quality processed ham ones for the homeless, though the bread had gone pink due to jam seepage.

'Look,' said Kevin suddenly, pointing to a man in his twenties who had a blanket wrapped round his shoulders and two carrier bags at his feet. More tellingly, he was eating cold chips directly from a wastebin.

We looked at each other and without speaking stood together and marched towards him with the *Christmas Assortment* tin carried in front of us like a sacrament.

'Would you like a sandwich mate?'

'Fuck off.'

'We just made them...er, they're nice,' I said, without conviction.

The man looked in our tin, then tentatively lifted the edge of one of the sandwiches. But suddenly he flinched, jumped backwards and crashed into the bin, which fell over, spilling rubbish onto the ground.

'Fuck off, you bastards!'

'What's wrong?' We were aware that our cuisine was lacking in certain respects, but his reaction seemed a bit extreme.

'Meat is Murder!' he shouted.

We stood, speechless. Kevin looked at the ground. I wiped some jam from my chin with my sleeve.

'Piss off, murderers,' said the man. He turned his back to us, squatted down amongst the fallen rubbish and resumed his meal.

It was hard not to feel disheartened. We crunched down across the beach and sat on a bank of shingle facing the sea. It was a clear night and a quarter moon was rising over the water. The salty wind stung our faces. We huddled together for warmth and began to tell each other jokes to cheer ourselves up.

As I was laughing heartily about the one with the nun in the bath a dark pile of shingle a little way down the beach grunted, and then morphed into a huge figure. Someone had been asleep on the beach and we had woken him up.

The figure pounded through the pebbles towards us. Already we could see he was huge, the moonlight catching the tangled hairs of a magnificent, greying beard that reached his chest, his long, lank hair swinging as he strode. We could only wait - there was no time to run.

When he stood between us and the sea all we could see was the darkness of his bulk.

'Excuse me,' he said in a cut-glass public school voice. 'Could you lend me ten pee?'

Christopher silently ate all our sandwiches without complaint and it was us who felt grateful.

'Where do you sleep?' he asked me when he had finished, eyeing the elastoplast on my jeans and the jam stains on our jumpers.

'Oh, we...we're not...I mean..'

'At home. In bed,' said Kevin, rescuing me.

'Nice. This is my bed,' he said pointedly, patting the shingle.

He looked straight at me and it was disconcerting to notice that I could see white all around his irises. In the moonlight pale crumbs from our sandwiches twinkled in his beard.

'Do you live in a big house?' he asked, still staring straight at me.

I could see where this was going, and so could Kevin. We had a wordless conversation involving parents, wide-eyed vagrants, doorstep arguments and

being grounded for a very long time. At the end of this silent exchange we looked at each other and said just one word.

'Benny.'

Benny was part of our radical gang, but he was twenty three. Although it was treacherous from an ideological perspective we were glad, at that moment, that he had just bought a house. We were even ready to forgive his other bourgeois act – he and Jane had just got married.

It was a long walk to Poet's Corner from near the Palace Pier, especially as we collected our bikes on the way. But Christopher tagged along quite happily, stopping frequently to ask people to lend him ten pee.

At ten o'clock we finally reached Benny's house, but the only light on was in the front bedroom. A long time passed before he came to the door with a frown and a subsiding bulge in his underpants.

'Who is it?' Jane called from upstairs.

When Benny told her the bedroom door slammed.

Things had been tense between Jane and I since their wedding the month before when I had given them a humorous 'In Deepest Sympathy' card and a plastic sieve from Woolworths.

Benny quietly ushered the three of us into the living room and we sat down on the available boxes and cushions. He and Jane had just managed to buy the run-down house, but didn't yet have the means for furnishing or decoration.

'What the hell do you want?'

We introduced him to Christopher and told him how we met. A faint dawning of comprehension appeared on Benny's face.

Christopher just stared at Benny. He had developed a strong twitch and was muttering quietly to himself.

Jane knocked fiercely on her floor, our ceiling.

There followed a long cryptic conversation - translation of which might have been: 'If you think he is staying here tonight you are out of your minds. But how the fuck are we going to get him out of the house?'

In our focussed zeal to do good, Kevin and I were being slow on the uptake. Christopher, on the other hand, understood perfectly.

'Sometimes,' he said suddenly, interrupting our exchanges. 'Sometimes, when p..people really annoy me...I have to *harm* them.'

We became very quiet.

'*You're* really annoying me now!'

He began to mutter again, almost as if he was arguing with himself, and then stood up and advanced towards Benny with his arm raised and his hand open ready for a karate chop.

Then he collapsed on the floor and started to have a fit.

Christopher did get a bed for the night...in Brighton General Hospital. Benny eventually returned to his bed with Jane. And Kevin and I got back to our homes very late.

'I've been at Benny's,' I said by way of explanation, which was true. 'And we forgot the time because we were having a laugh,' which was not. It was more difficult to explain the sticky *Christmas Assortment* biscuit tin and the jam stains on my clothes.

But I escaped with a minor grounding. And the following week, when I got my pay packet from my Saturday job, I bought a new pair of jeans.

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