

Cafe Society

The scene is the gentle landscape of Midlothian, a warm afternoon in May. The year is 1948. Food is still rationed and motor cars are only gradually emerging from their wartime hibernation. Two boys crouch over the handlebars, urging their bikes uphill. They are dressed in white shirt, navy shorts and scarlet stockings.

‘Come on Rob, we’ll never get there at this rate,’ Andy says.

‘It’s this flippin’ bike. It’s helluva heavy to pedal.’

‘Don’t I know it.’ Andy has borrowed his friend’s bike a few times. ‘I reckon there’s something wrong with the design of that machine.’

‘Next term I’ll be getting ma brother’s bike - three-speed gears an’ all,’ Rob says.

‘Aye, there’ll be no catching you then.’

Andy knows Rob’s brother’s bike too. At their boarding school a boy’s bike is as familiar as his face. Much of their free time is spent on maintenance – mending a puncture, tightening a slack chain, adjusting a brake cable.

The sun is on their backs as they climb the hill, chasing the shadow that pedals along in front of them. Four boys come free-wheeling down, their shirts billowing out behind them. No greetings are exchanged – these are fifth formers. Rob and Andy are in the fourth.

‘Is there anyone behind us?’ Andy asks.

‘None that I can see just now.’

Rob knows what is behind Andy’s question. They’re approaching the sign on the roadside that announces the mining village of Tranent. That sign is as far as they’re allowed to go. The village, like nearly everywhere else, is out of bounds to them.

‘How much cash have you got on you, Rob?’

‘Ah’ve got one and six.’

‘Jeez, how did ye get that?’

‘It’s supposed tae be for a new puncture outfit.’

‘Och, ye can always borrow mine.’

‘How much money have *you* got?’ Rob asks.

‘Ah’ve got eightpence ha’penny. We’re rich, eh?’

When they reach the sign they dismount. This is the limit of their prescribed ride. Ahead of them the road continues straight for a hundred and fifty yards before turning left into the village.

They look back down the hill, shielding their eyes against the sunlight. No one in sight. They listen out for voices but there is only the buzzing of insects. The stretch of road in front is ‘no man’s land’; they will be exposed until they cross it. If spotted they risk being reported and the crime is serious, the punishment a severe caning, four strokes at least.

They mount their bikes, one foot on the pedal, ready to go. They nod to each other and set off, shifting their weight from side to side to gain acceleration. Soon they are pedalling flat out, heads down, legs driven ever faster by fear. Andy is in the lead, Rob struggling to keep up. They don’t look back any more, it’s too late for that. Now they can only trust to luck.

They round the corner into the village. They've made it! The momentum in the wheels carries them on, feet lifted from the pedals, in a celebratory circuit of the war memorial.

'Marco's it is, then,' says Andy.

They lean their bikes against the wall of the Italian café at the end of the High Street. The heady aroma of frying greets them inside the door. They look round quickly. Only a young couple with a child and an old man, sitting on his own. No one who will tell on them. They walk up to the counter to see what they can have. There's fried fish, black puddings, pies and pasties, the scarcity of meat disguised in a variety of offerings.

'What will it be then, boys?' Marco's wife Jessie would never report boys from the school. She knows they are forever hungry. Marco, who first came to Scotland as a prisoner of war, gives them a friendly greeting.

'So - today the prisoners have escaped,' he says. The boys laugh.

'What shall we have?' asks Andy. At school there is never a choice and for Rob and Andy selecting their food is almost as pleasurable as eating it. In Musselburgh, where the school is, there are two or three tempting cafés but, dressed in their conspicuous uniform, they don't take the risk of entering them. There are only four shops they are allowed into and two of those are bicycle repair shops.

'Can we run to pie and chips and a Tizer, d'you think?' asks Rob.

'Why not?

Andrew Forrest, successful adapter of crime stories for the small screen, is in a Brighton café, at a corner table with his laptop. Chained up outside, visible from where he is sitting, is his new bicycle. This morning he is making a first draft of an original screenplay for the cinema, a project that has been in his mind for a long time.

He scrolls back to the top and reads what he has written. His senses are bringing back other scenes from his school days: the smell of linseed oil on a cricket bat, the sound of boys' voices singing in the chapel, the exhilaration of propelling the wheels of a bicycle. The school was on the windy east coast of Scotland, but the memories are of long, sunny days. Other characters are ready to take the stage. He is feeling excited. Then the phone buzzes in his pocket. He grunts his impatience.

'Andrew!' There's no mistaking the voice, even if it has shed its former country-boy accent.

'Jeez Rob,' he says, 'you won't believe it. At this very moment I'm sitting here writing a piece about the pair of us - back in the fourth form, getting up to no good.' It's years since Andy heard from his old schoolfriend.

'Must be telepathy,' Rob says.

'Aye, it must.' Andy knows that his friend has transformed himself from Rob Nesbitt into Robert Lavigne, writer on food and wine for the glossy magazines. He once saw him on the telly, leading a camera round his mews house in Belgravia.

'I've just had a commission to write up a Brighton restaurant for one of the magazines; it seems they have a lot of readers down your way. I thought perhaps you could recommend somewhere and join me for the meal. Besides, we've both got a birthday coming up next month and it's a bit of a milestone.'

'It is indeed - sixty years. That's very generous of you, Rob.'

'There's no need to thank me, Andy, it's not going to cost me anything.'

Andy knows a number of Italian family-run cafés along the Sussex coast. They have survived the years relatively unchanged, still serving the kind of food you got at Marco's. It seems that the choice of restaurant is to be his, but he knows what sort of place Rob will

have in mind for the birthday meal - food elaborately prepared and pretentiously described; wine carefully selected, sniffed, sipped and discussed at length. All good to taste no doubt but, for Andy, lacking that special ingredient: the sense of illicit pleasure that followed a cycle dash into the forbidden village of Tranent. No food would ever taste as good as that.

'Well,' Andy says, 'since it's my choice, I'm going to suggest an Italian place I know - Marrocco's. It's up the far end of Hove.'

Rob, the gastronome, is not familiar with the seafront cafés.

'I don't know it, but I'm sure that'll be fine, Andy. It's your choice.'

'Great. We'll go by bike.'