

A Real Purple Patch

RUSSELL READER

HE'D BEEN AWAKE since half-past five, holding it in, jiggling, twitching, trying desperately not to wake his brother and sister who he shared the mattress with, or – worse – his dad, who was snoring in the bed in front of the window, his bulky body hardly a foot away, rising and falling to a soundtrack of whistles and heavy sighs.

Sam refused to use the bedpan, though nobody else seemed to mind it – their urine fermenting like punch at a party until his mam swilled it all down the drain the next morning with a bit of carbolic.

A thunderstorm of hot piss hit the freezing pan of the shared outside toilet, washing off a stranger's skids and leaving the seat peppered with yellow pearls. That'll teach them, Sam thought, as he tore the last square of newspaper off the string and scrunched it up into a ball. Dirty bastards.

He was out of the house before seven; they all were. Mary and George – younger than him, only two and four – went to Nana's next door. Sam walked with his mam and dad to the mill at the bottom of the street; his dad going down to the warehouse, him and his mam climbing up the stone stairs to the spinners where they'd stay until six.

His dad spent Saturdays in the con club. Sam spent them entertaining Mary and George, wandering around town with them until the bakery put the *Half Price Bread* sign in the window just before closing. Quick, grab it. This particular Saturday – this

lifeless, shivering Saturday – seemed to go on and on and on. As he loitered on the high street, his siblings playing hopscotch as he patrolled the precinct; both eyes locked on the bakery, he felt something under his shoe. Hard, solid. He instinctively dropped, pretending to tie his laces. It glimmered in the winter sun as he moved his foot slightly, making him squint.

He'd never seen a pound coin before, never felt one in his palm. His whole body shook as he twirled it around in his pocket, hoping that nobody had noticed him pick it up, his hands sweaty, his heart racing. He strode straight into the bakery and bought the bread at full price – two loaves this week – then went to the grocers next door. *Half a pound of cheese please, and six slices of that ham.* A block of Dairy Milk for his mam, the newspaper for his dad, a bottle of pop for Mary and George – and a roll of Andrex for himself.

His mam's eyes lit up when he told her what had happened. She grabbed plates from the cupboard and starting laying the table, excitedly humming show tunes, the spring back in her step. Mary and George ran around her legs, giddy at the thought of a mouthful of pop. Then his dad walked in.

The pop bottle smashed against the grate, specks of sarsaparilla flying into the flames and making the fire spit and crackle. He threw the brown paper bag against the wall, a heavy thud of ham and bread and chocolate and newsprint and toilet roll bouncing off it in different directions, then he turned and glared at Sam, his round face pumping with crimson veins, like a balloon that was about to pop. *You should have given it to me,* he roared.

Sam gingerly tore five sheets off the roll before he went outside the next morning, folding them up neatly. He sat on the broken seat, watchful of the daddy longlegs on the ceiling and the cobwebs in the corner, and traced his fingers over the blue and mauve splodges on his thighs. When he'd finished he took the sheets out from his pocket, unfolding them onto his lap with delicate fingers, like a historian might unfurl a rare tapestry, and wiped them softly against his skin. He'd never felt anything like it. *This is the life,* he whispered, under his breath.

This is the life.