

# Paperboy

Christopher Fowler

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Extract

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Most of all, this is for my mother and brother, who were probably happy to have forgotten these events, until I had to dig them all up again. And, of course, it's for my father, whose memory grows dearer with passing time.

‘My, you do like a good story, don’t you?’

*Sweeney Todd,*  
Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler

## The First Patch of Sunlight on the Pavement

Early one morning at the height of summer in 1960, I returned from the corner shop with a packet of Weetabix\* under my arm and stopped to stare at the alien death ray that was scorching the pavement in front of me.

What I saw was a fierce yellow cone of light, ragged at the edges, smashing on to the concrete slab beside the green front gate with the power to melt a thousand suns. It was filled with sparkling, shimmering life forms that writhed and twisted like an invasive virus under a microscope.

I shrugged, navigated my way around the beam, went into the house and ate my breakfast (two Weetabix coated with snowy-white Tate & Lyle sugar and soaked in evaporated milk until they attained the consistency of rotted chipboard). Then I cut out the coupon on the back

\*Breakfast cereal in tablet form that resembles roofing felt, or, when milk is added, wet roofing felt.

of the packet and sent away for a 3-D Spectroscope, so that I could view the three-dimensional animal picture card they gave away free inside.

I only needed Number 32, the Marmoset, and Number 28, the Diplodocus, to complete the set. The cereal company had no qualms about mixing dinosaurs and furry woodland creatures. Earlier that year I had sent off for the 31-in-1-o-scope, a pocket gadget with supposedly myriad uses, although I could only find about seven. It included a pocket knife that had snapped on first use and a magnifying glass that couldn't even burn an insect. Before that I had collected a Cornflakes marching band finished in red plastic, and a set of Shredded Wheat bath-time submarines propelled by baking soda.

I needed to keep an eye out for free offers. A child marooned in a London backwater with no ready cash was automatically rendered passive, a watcher-listener. At the mercy of my family, I could not go very far or do anything too unusual. My only consolation was that things were probably better than they would be as an adult, when, as my father constantly reminded me, I would have to find something useful to do, like mending carburettors, or else face a miserable fate. So I passed my childhood reading, watching, listening, and soon found that I could create something out of nothing, because the tools of imagination were everywhere I looked.

Having reached this frame of mind, I discovered that it was possible to stare at the first patch of bright sunlight on the pavement outside the house on a summery morning and see what others could not see. When I looked at the light falling through the dusty, unkempt hedge on to a section of warm grey stone flecked with mica, where ants filed past each other with shreds of leaves and ladybirds dotted the branches like shiny spots of poster paint, I was transported to a hostile jungle, a parched desert waste-

land, an uncharted forest. In sparkling motes of dust, I could witness a fiery apocalypse, the scorched surface of Mars, the arrival of deadly space spores, the mistrustful eye of God, the light of salvation in ascending angels.

Born in suburban post-war Greenwich with no money, a mystifying family and an uncertain future, I was uncomfortable even entering a shop or talking to classmates, and felt that I might not survive long enough to ever be considered part of the real world. But I was sure of one thing. Imagination, in one form or another, would always provide a means of escape.

In the summer of 1960 an impoverished London was limping into unknown territory, still bearing war wounds that successive governments had not been able to heal. The re-elected Conservatives were intent on building homes and motorways, creating jobs, ending debt, changing the lives of working men and women, but nothing much seemed to be happening. The New Elizabethans' England\* felt dictatorial, not democratic. 'Do Not' and 'We Know Best' were the orders of the day, as if knowledge and freedom were things to be afraid of.

London, said one radio comedian, had spent the last fifteen years tidying up after a very messy party, and the Hitlers wouldn't be invited round again. The city had swept all the debris away, shovelling the rubble of destroyed houses into vales and ditches, even managing to turn the hilly scrubland of nearby Blackheath into a great green billiard table. It had eradicated all the stubborn stains and had set about replacing the damaged ornaments with ugly, cheap-looking utility versions. Everything would soon be back to normal, even if it was all much scrappier and poorer than before. But where

\*Faintly pretentious but peculiarly charming term chosen for those born in the reign of Elizabeth II.



on earth did the country go from here, now that the framework of the past had burned down? What was going to replace it?

1960 was not a time suited to imagining – but imagination held the key to the coming decade. The ideals of a new generation could, my parents were told, transform the country; goodbye sooty old industrialization, hello trendy young image. London's image, especially, was in line for a makeover, as a tiny handful of miniskirted dolly birds and Chelsea Set\* boys in military tunics prepared to spark a revival in the capital's dying leisure spots. Their psychedelic lifestyles were specifically designed to enrage adults, and yet there was a sense that something radically new was needed. Angry letters were written to *The Times* complaining about the young sporting their parents' War medals as fashion accessories. Later, punk would democratize rebellion. London's first swingers were few in number, and only appeared among the plum-voiced children of the rich. Their antics had traditionally been tolerated with a roll of the eye until their money ran out and they grew up. This time, though the air was thick with measured outrage, even I could sense that something fresh might come of it.

Unfortunately, I would never become a part of their exciting world. I was ten years old, for God's sake, a decade and a social class down, stuck in a suburban Edwardian terraced house with a family that wasn't even peculiar enough to be classed as eccentric. My classmates never noticed me, except when I accidentally found myself in charge of the playtime goalposts and let the ball into the net three times because I was busy trying to remember

\*Posh trendsetters showed their rebellious independence by spending Daddy's allowance at the Chelsea Drugstore, a groovy bar on the King's Road, Chelsea, now a McDonald's.

what Gold Kryptonite\* did to Superman – then they noticed me long enough to kick me into a hedge.

My formative years were to be filled with orderly lassitude, like those of a soldier posted to a peaceful backwater. These were days of strawberry jam on white bread, the squeak of chalk in hushed classrooms, *Hancock's Half-Hour*,<sup>†</sup> cold mutton on Mondays, Shirley Abicair and her zither,<sup>‡</sup> back-fence arguments, kicking about in the garden and walking alone through empty, silent streets. The only counter-culture I could experience was the over-the-counter culture of the local Co-op. The most exciting thing that happened that spring was the tortoise waking up. If someone bought a car, all the men in the street came out to look at it.

Barely dragged out of the threadbare fifties, South London was still sooty and pockmarked, its populace coughing and on the cadge. It was a strangely private place, divorced from what was supposedly really going on. The houses might have been in London, but London was not yet in many houses. Little of what was happening in the capital filtered through; the odd radio report was commented upon, an occasional newspaper headline was read aloud over breakfast, but apart from the scandalously unfilled bomb-site at the top of the hill, the part of Greenwich where my family lived was just the same as it had been for the last thirty years.

During weekdays the men were all off at work, and

\*It robbed Superman of his powers for ever. Needless to say, he didn't come into contact with it much.

†Seminal radio show by Galton and Simpson that changed the face of British comedy by foregrounding character. Sad, dry and hilarious if listened to with patience.

‡She sat and pinged it on her lap. An example of someone who became a TV star purely because she played an instrument no one had ever seen before.

their wives were busy waxing the lino in cool, shadowed hallways or in still, dead front rooms where even the dust hung motionless in the air. You could smell coal and lavender polish, cigarettes and steamed vegetables, mildew and fresh-cut grass. It was all so quiet and safe, full of purposefully pressed lips and chapped hands. The passing summer days were sensible, predictable and becalmed. *Housewives' Choice*\* was on the radio, and the choice was always the same. There was very little noise. Mangles were turned by hand, workmen dug roads with pickaxes, houses were swept with brooms. On Sundays it was so quiet that you could hear your neighbours cleaning their shoes next door.

But I felt that even here, behind the dullest daily routines, there was a dark and unruly strangeness that might somehow find a way to surface. It lay just behind a wooden fence, over a wall or through a hedge. It was hidden behind net curtains, in rooms where adults sat smoking in silhouette, in kitchens where wives washed up and whispered, in railway alleys where lovers clung guiltily to each other. It was tucked away just out of reach, on top shelves, in the backs of cupboards, deep under the stairs.

Or perhaps it lay within the pages of a forgotten book.

\*Morning radio show that played slush for women trapped behind ironing boards.