

The Family Picnic

In 1959, the summer of my thirteenth birthday my father bought a car, a second-hand Rover, registration FKA 377. We lived by the coast in a pleasant part of the Wirral peninsula but my Caernarvon-born mother loved to escape back across the Dee and, now that transport was available, she occasionally managed to persuade my father to take us on a family picnic.

The announcement would be made over Sunday breakfast, filling me with foreboding, for the car had smelly leather seats which combined with the exhaust fumes to make me nauseous. Unless I stared straight ahead for the entire journey I would feel sick within ten minutes of departure.

My mother's idea of a picnic included hard-boiled eggs, ham sandwiches, lettuce, tomato and cake. So the eggs would go on to boil and out would come an unsliced white loaf which she would attack with a bread-knife and a dish of mixed butter and margarine. Mustard was freely applied to the ham which added to my growing sense of gloom. The resulting sandwiches were wrapped in greaseproof paper and stored in a brand-new Tupperware box, together with the salad and the eggs. Salt and pepper were put in to twists of paper, and sugar for the tea in a little plastic pot. The box would go into a large wicker basket and then my mother would go upstairs to get ready.

Time would pass, I reading my Enid Blyton book and my father packing the car with macs, umbrella, two folding chairs and the Primus stove. It was now well after eleven and there was no sign of my mother. It would be nearer twelve o'clock by the time she came down, suitably attired for a picnic; and after frantically searching for forgotten items - a blanket, cups, maybe the milk for the tea, we would pile into the car.

Journeys into Wales involved crossing the Dee at Queensferry and there was always a big tail-back. We inched forward, my father trying to hide his irritation and my mother adjusting her make-up in the vanity mirror. I was counting red cars, buses, cyclists with beards - anything to stave off the nausea. Once over the bridge we headed towards the Llandegla moors, my mother pronouncing the Welsh names of all the little hamlets we drove through. Her aim was to find a quiet lane-side field and there were plenty of them but often steeply sloping or with too much mud by the gate. When we did finally choose a field it would be half past one and we were all hungry. If the gate did not open we had to climb over and receive the picnic items from my father. Then we walked a little way so as to be out of sight. The chairs were unfolded and, if the grass was not damp the rug was spread out. Hard-boiled eggs were distributed first, along with bread and butter for me if my mother had remembered I did not like mustard. The egg was consumed without the benefit of a single drop of liquid, for the Primus stove was only lit after we had eaten and there was never enough water for anything but the tea. Usually the egg would lodge stubbornly in the oesophagus, despite being followed by tomato and copious amounts of lettuce.

Making tea was my father's job. The siting of the Primus stove was the first decision - level ground, out of the wind, not too near the rug etc. Sometimes a wind-break had to be constructed. While the tiny kettle was struggling to boil my father would light a cigarette and I was encouraged to explore. My mother would say "Go and see if you can find a stream/blackberries/mushrooms". I duly explored, picking harebells, following the scent of foxes and getting stung by nettles through the holes in my sandals. There often was a stream, but the cows had rendered the bank a quagmire. When I came back I was usually dirty and dishevelled and more than once my lovely new sandals with their white stitching would be coated in cow-dung. "Where HAVE you been?" my mother would wail, and in the days before kitchen roll or handy wipes, she would fish in her handbag for a hankie after getting the worst off with handfuls of grass. The tea had been drunk but I would be offered a piece of home-made fruit cake.

If there were blackberries we would spend a happy hour gathering them whilst my father dozed. Then it was back to the car to join yet another queue at Queensferry. Wine gums would be handed back from the front seat to quell the nausea and we would sing 'Ten green bottles' as we headed for home. "What a lovely day out" my mother would say. "You can't beat a picnic in Wales".