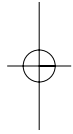
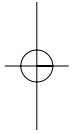


*After All These Years*



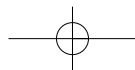
So, having passed the time of day with the other families and thanked them for the offer to pull in, on we travelled.

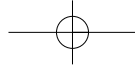
‘This road will lead us over to the Novers, where our boy Robert was born,’ said me Dad. ‘It’ll take us the best part of the day, but we’ll get there.’

‘That was a kushti common,’ remarked me Mam, ‘but it was no kushti to us my Len.’

‘Never mind, my Vie, the Novers is just as good. Plenty of tans [houses] for you and young Maggie to call.’

Although the Novers was a prime stopping place, no other wagons were around as we pulled off the road and made our camp. While me





Maggie Smith-Bendell

Mam prepared our meal, me Dad went off pegsticking – cutting hazel sticks to make a few gross of pegs. On the morrow I would go out hawking with me Mam, both to give her some company and to keep me and that little mush our Alfie apart. Me Mam always liked to call in pairs, because all through her young life, afore she had me Dad, it was her and her sister Ellen who hawked together each day. She had got used to this way of calling, so with me by her side it felt like her old life. Had she not took me, there was nothing surer than that Alfie and me would have got to fighting each other. So to keep the peace we got split up. Although all through his short bit of life (he died in 1985 at the age of 47) he and I loved each other to death, we could never agree on anything much and would fight like two juckles. He bossed me about but he also protected me when the situation called for it – he was my hero on many occasions. And my worst enemy on others. But most of all he was me big brother and I loved him dearly. I miss him and his antics to this very day.

Alfie was a very special person in my life. He knew so much about wildlife and often would whisper, ‘Come with me, I got something to show you.’ It could be anything from a nest of birds to fish in the river.

Once while we were stopped on Maiden Down between Taunton and Tiverton he found a little white effet (lizard) laying in the sun. Maiden Down is known for these little harmless effets – there’s thousands there – but this was an albino one and he shared his discovery with me.

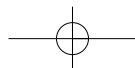
‘You’ve never dicked the like, have you, our Maggie?’ he said quietly.

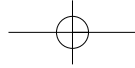
‘No, our Alfie. The sun must have bleached it white.’

‘You gert dinalow, this is a special one. It was born this colour. And don’t tell the rest, they might mour [kill] it.’

Yes, it *was* a special one, because he felt he could only show it to me. Funny how things stick in one’s mind over sixty or seventy years.

We two bonded when young and would stand back to back and fight the village chavvies and grown-ups as we got older, when the need arose. He was slow to temper, but when it did flare up he could do the





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business. I never feared for him in a fight.

He was never a tall chap but shortish and stocky. And, my, he was kushti-looking. All the bits of gals had a yock for him, which made me jealous. I could have took their lips off.

‘You likes they old gals, our Alfie,’ I often told him.

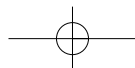
‘And you is a gert big dinalow,’ he would laugh, brushing back his mop of hair, feeling not a little proud of himself.

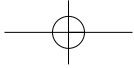
He was my friend and mentor.

As we rambled round the narrow lanes of the Novers with our little Jess and Robert tagging along behind, we had the world at our feet. We climbed the trees, played in the spring and got as dirty as they come. All the while knowing that just back down the road was our Mam and Dad, all and everything we needed in life. For these two people above all others were our protectors and would worry their lives away over us chavvies. Often, if we had been gone from their sight too long, me Mam would send me Dad dicking for us, in case we was hurt or in trouble.

‘Go fetch they chavvies, my Len, I wants to scrub them, head, face and ears.’ She would say this to allay her own fears – and me Dad’s – in case anything should have happened to us.

As I’ve already mentioned, accidents among our Travelling families were not rare. Many little chavvies were maimed or killed either by the yogs, the grys or from falling out of wagons or trees. We ourselves were not usually aware of any dangers when we were playing together out of sight of our parents, but screams soon had them heading our way, threatening to kill us if we had hurt ourselves: panic brought out all kinds of reactions but mostly it was threats, out of their love for us. A few years later when I fell out of Kizzie’s wagon on me head and needed stitches, me Mam screamed louder than me, and poor old Dr Williams had his hands full with her. ‘Hush,’ he told her, ‘You’re frightening your child!’ but that’s how Gypsy mams is. They panic and





Maggie Smith-Bendell

scream, while the dads tremble in fright.

So when we were out playing, there would eventually be remarks like, ‘Better head back to the wagon now, our Maggie, afore they two comes dicking for us.’

‘Aw, our Alfie, we ain’t bin ’ere long. It’s kushti, let’s wash our feet in the cow trough.’

‘Our Maggie, dick down the tober [road] yonder. It’s me Dad, and he ain’t out picking nuts. He’s got a stick in his hand.’

That would be enough for me and off we would run to him, full of woe: ‘Oh Dad, we fell in the trough, it was a mishap...’

‘Your Mam will give you lot a mishap. Get going and take yer punishment,’ he would laugh.

Yes, the lives of chavvies growing up on the road could be free and full of fun and laughter. Working in the fields beside our parents had its moments too, as did going out daily hawking the doors.

