

Socks

School socks

When I was eight there were lots of things I didn't understand. Why did they say that children should be seen and not heard, but when I said nothing for a few days people got worried and asked scary questions? Why, after Mummy was crying again, did I have to go and live at the local prep school? And on my first day I really couldn't understand why I was called John at home, and 'Smith Minor' at school?

Life was very confusing.

I was not happy at Boldsover Prep. I couldn't see the point of rugby, the authorised religion of the school, or any other sport. I'd never done French before, and I learnt to accept my teacher's belief that my inability came from lack of effort rather than an absence of previous lessons. Bedtimes were the worst. I longed for home, my books and my bedside light. In the dorm it was lights out and a hail of shoes thrown at the funny little boy who tried to read under the cover with his torch.

One morning, after I was threatened with the cane in assembly for yawning, the tall, florid, French teacher stood over me shouting "Comment t'appelles-tu? Smith minor – even you should know this one by now. Comment t'appelles-tu?"

My tears made him even more animated – furious at the idiot child.

"Comment t'appelles-tu? - come on – pull your socks up and learn your vocab properly. Now sit down and stop snivelling."

As I went back to my seat I focused on my smart shoes and school regulation socks that were pulled up to the knee.

I didn't understand.

Darn it

I understood more when I went to secondary school.

I had been the odd scruffy kid when I was boarding, so it was a relief when Mum said that she couldn't afford it anymore, and I had to go to the local secondary school. Not that going to a new school was without expense, she grumbled, what with the new uniform and sports kit. Each school has its own brand, and when you change school you have to buy the matching clothes.

Now I could be my own person outside school hours I managed to fit in more during the day. I even managed to worship at the omnipotent altar of rugby and, whilst I did not excel, I held my own.

Now I could do it I could enjoy it and, of course, as I enjoyed it I got better at it. One evening we had a match against the school down the road and I scored a drop goal that swung the match. It was amazing. Lots of smacks on the back as we went in for showers, and none of them too hard either. The flicking with towels was no longer a problem as, after many hours of practicing, I'd learnt to crack whip a towel on any backside. I was one of the first to grow hair so that stood me in good stead as well. Anyway, then we started putting our clothes on again.

For some reason a kid called James, our scrum half that day, had gone into the showers after everyone else. We were almost dressed as he came out with a little faded towel wrapped round his waist. Jonathon noticed he couldn't defend himself, so he snatched his towel away and tried to whip him with it. Other, partly dressed, boys picked up the scent and joined in the sport as James hopped round trying to avoid the stinging blows and eventually dashed back into the showers.

Everyone laughed and went back to getting dressed. Then a mother's voice called from the door and people soon drifted away. I was the only one left when James came out of the shower, still wrapped in that little towel, and walked along the wall to his pile of clothes.

He didn't speak, kept his back to me and sniffed occasionally. Having finished dressing, I pretended to look for something in my bag. My moment of triumph shouldn't end like this.

I looked round at him. Still with his back to me, he was down on the floor, on all fours, trying to reach under the benches.

"What'you lost?"

"Me sock."

"Can ya see it?"

"Yeah, but I can't reach it."

I went over and stood above him. I could see dust and litter down the back of the bench, the detritus of young sportsmen. I lay down on the bench and pushed my hand into the rubbish, past the heating pipe, feeling for the texture of wool.

I pulled it out and offered it to him.

"Thanks."

I left the changing room, maybe not the sporting hero I had been 20 minutes earlier, but a valid human being. But I didn't understand why the sock I handed back to him had different coloured wool woven into the toes.

Thick warm socks for a walk

I got out of the carriage and started walking up the platform. As the train left I saw him coming up the steps. James hadn't changed. Lanky and scruffy. For our planned day of walking I'd squandered a lump of my grant on a pair of walking boots. Not so for James who was wearing a scruffy pair of lace-ups.

I laughed and went to shake his hand. There was a moment of misunderstanding as he went to hug me, and we did that awful British male thing of a half hug handshake.

But then we talked. We talked as we used to at school. He told me what lectures were like in Birmingham, and I told him about girls in Manchester. A bus ride took us to the foot of the hill, and we both looked up in silent wonder. Neither had hill walked much before and Scafell Pike had seemed such a good idea in our letters of planning. Now it towered ominously above us, but the sun was behind us and the ordinance survey and acorn footpath signs were there to guide us, so we set off.

We stopped for a swig from the plastic bottle after an hour and again after two. I sat there and loosened the laces on my stiff unworn walking boots. My Millets socks were too thick for the warming spring weather and a new blister stung as we got up to carry on up the incline.

Just past the summit we shared sandwiches and I actually took my boots off to James' ribald comments about sweaty feet. I removed one sock and showed him the burst bloodied blister on my heel and another tight bubble near my big toe. After that he was quieter and our rate slowed as I took to limping down the hill.

It was he who suggested stopping again.

As I sat there he carefully removed my boots and the stinking socks. My feet were discoloured with two bloodied blisters and more that hadn't burst. My friend sat back on his haunches and started to massage my feet before replacing the socks and lacing the boots more loosely before putting his arms round me to help me to my feet.

As I leant on him and we struggled through the last mile of our walk I felt, once again, that there were things I did not understand.