

A Curvy Road Is Better Than a Straight One

A Child's Lunchtime Circuit

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Walking takes you back in time, especially old walks, the ones you know off by heart. Walking old routes catches you out: nothing you said about it was quite true. Nothing was quite where you left it, including the child who hurries on ahead, always trying to catch up with the adult in charge, who controls the parameters of her world.

That was Mrs Braithwaite, my English teacher, who said the world is made up of words and pictures: as if we didn't know that already; as if words don't follow you around the place, trying to catch you out. Words are like stray dogs looking for a master. Use the wrong word and you sound like a fool. Call the dog by the wrong name and he will never come to you. (Any writer knows *that*.) But Mrs Braithwaite has an attitude; she thinks she's superior to the rest of us because she lives on Maltravers Drive. Maltravers Drive is *going up in the world*. *Very smart. Very nice. Very la-di-da.*

Mum loved the Drive for its curves. ‘A curvy road,’ she said, ‘is better than a straight one. *Curvy roads produce a better class of people.* Maltravers Drive was one road up from ours, which was dead straight. Maltravers Drive was a *sweeping* S-shape that lay on either side of Lobbs Wood, and if you were trying to find our house (why on earth would you?), you’d walk down the Drive, nice and slowly. It’s the sort of road that asks for dawdling: Dawdling: to while away the time whilst moving forward in no particular hurry. Dawdling: for Saturdays, not schooldays, for Maltravers Drive.

The Drive was on the way to school. It was as on the way to anywhere that wasn’t a dump. It was like the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*, and anyone who lived on the Drive was likely to be found with a pretty wicker basket over their arm filled with lovely fresh provisions. On sunny days the people of Maltravers Drive stepped out of their houses clutching their baskets as they set off for a nice day of strolling across the Downs.

Mrs Braithwaite has one of those baskets and fills it with ART SUPPLIES. She carries her supplies around as though she’s carrying around the Crown Jewels: with her nose in the air. *Art supplies* just means stubby crayons and chipped paint brushes and a few bits of sugar paper covered in a red gingham cloth. Nothing to write home about. Mrs Braithwaite is teaching us how to compose a story. Stories go around and around in circles, like a dog chasing its tail. It’s half an hour before lunchtime. *Look sharp!* says Mrs Braithwaite. *Get set, children – Go –* and so we start to scribble. This is a story I remember about my walk to and from school, when lunchtime had a very short tail.

Some roads just lift you; it’s a funny thing. Mum would say it’s on account of her shape, because Maltravers Drive runs like

a *sinuous* river through this part of town. However, if you said the Drive was a *shapely* woman lying in the middle of the road you wouldn't be wrong. You had to find a way of stepping over and around her, for the Drive ran around Lobbs Wood: a little triangle of a place, an island of green, locked inside this lovely curve. If you lived on the Drive you were going up in the world, north, not south. It was the beginning of the end of our road and I walked it four times a day, morning, afternoon, and twice at lunchtime, because Mum made us come home for lunch. We weren't allowed free school meals, because free school meals were *for the kids on the estate*, and *no child of hers will be seen dead queuing for chips and beans*. 'Chips and baked beans won't do the job, not if you want to get your times tables right. What you need is protein!' So instead of lovely cold yogurt from the fridge with curranty biscuits to dip in, I ate tinned ravioli and half-walked and half-ran with a belly full of tomato sauce sloshing around suspiciously square-shaped pasta. Try moving fast with half a tin of ravioli in your belly and wellies slipping about. Even Daley Thompson would struggle.

My Return to School Walk

Twenty-five minutes and counting (↓)

Walk down Granville Road to the bottom and cross over. Look left towards Irvine Road, but whatever you do, don't turn down there. *Avert your gaze*, says Mr Cooper, who runs the corner shop: from the alleyway littered with bottles; from the men weeing against the wall; from the cats tearing at eyes and tails. Irvine Road is going down in the world. *Best not look now, young lady!* Go straight ahead towards the trees and cut through Lobbs

Wood. An isosceles triangle has two sides the same length; the wood is an isosceles triangle and I cut across the bottom where the wood is shorter on one side. The dog walkers stay on the other side, where the grass is longer and the cow parsley gathers in clumps. Dog walkers are always looking for clumps. Clumps can hide a multitude of sins.

Twenty-one minutes (↓)

At the top of the road cross the wide avenue; watch for dawdling cars: an elderly gentleman in his Ford Cortina. Off to pick up his prescription at the chemist, no doubt – he waves – why do old people wave so much when they should be driving? Turn right and you're on Maltravers Drive. The road is widening and the houses turning all leafy and ivy; red creeper around the windows and wisteria up the walls. Nothing too bare and open, nothing too much on show. Is that a woman at the window? I can't tell. Her curtains are drawn. Only the postman and gasman, or someone with a very particular reason, would dare to ring the bell.

The pavement slabs are wide here, wide enough to let dog walkers by. Dog walkers are a suspicious breed; they stand around between the trees looking shifty, making a right old mess beneath the leaves. 'Doesn't bear thinking about,' says Mrs Braithwaite to Miss Cull, the music teacher. 'The amount of dog doo-da in that little wood.' Miss Cull looks anxious – someone might overhear them – ladies don't talk about dog doo-da, especially not at lunchtime.

I spy Mrs Braithwaite on her bicycle turning down the road. She comes home at lunchtime to feed her birds – 'Budgies make an awful din, and Percy and Henry are chatty little gentlemen. Around twelve o'clock they begin to duel. If I leave

them until the end of the day, they'll have pecked one another's eyes out.' Henry and Percy don't seem very polite to me, but Mrs Braithwaite is an odd sort of person; she speaks in quaint ways. She sees me and waves, in that stiff cardboardy way, like the Queen. I look busy and check my watch. I've no time for Mrs Braithwaite.

Seventeen minutes (↓↓)

Giddy up! Imagine you're a Roman in your chariot whipping on your horse: Ben-Hur racing down Maltravers Drive, tutting at the bend in the road. And Roman infantry like marching down roads dead straight – bends take up valuable time – and if you're a Roman you've a got a lot of things on your To-Do List: Take Over Britain; Build Some Forts.

Now head towards the library, which you could easily mistake for a church with its tall spire; and so it was once, very prim and proper, full of ladies in hats and bonnets and men peering through their monocles. *There's a church, there's a steeple, look inside and see all the people*; but we don't have time, and a library's not a place for standing around and talking. The plaque outside says '1895': six years before Queen Victoria went underground to join her beloved Albert, her royal prince, the one she blew all her kisses to. Without Albert at her side, the Queen was all bereft. She went out riding alone, which the royal court didn't like very much. She tried walking, but her skirts were too long for the mud because the Queen was terribly short. Walking is not a good look for stout queens, so she took a walk around Windsor Castle in the morning before everyone else was up. Walking makes your bones grow, and the poor old Queen was trying to grow an inch or two; but still ... thoughts of Albert were weighing her down. She looked mournfully down at the

grand lake, at the leaves stuck to the royal avenue. Poor Queen: you should never look down at the ground unless you're worried about stepping in a thing or two. It's not dignified.

Twelve minutes (↓)

I've reached Fitzalan Road, named after the Fitzalan family who came over from France and bought up everything they could see. *Greedy swines!* Arundel Castle is theirs, which you can't see from here, but it's four miles down the road: a two-hour walk if you get the map out and find your way along the river. Mr Harding, my geography teacher, would know. He's always waxing lyrical about the lovely banks of the River Arun. Old people like walking because *it's good for the joints, much better than running*, and you can go at a snail's pace while pointing at the trees and flowers like the man on the telly. Mr Harding would have us all out on a nature walk if he could, pointing and waving our arms about and frightening off all God's creatures, just like David Bellamy.

The River Arun runs from the harbour in Littlehampton to the town of Arundel, famous for its castle, which sits smugly at the top of the hill. Smugly: looking down on other people, looking very pleased with yourself. The Fitzalans were smug; they married their daughter off to the Norfolks, who were up and coming just at the right time and built their castle with a lake, where swans now sit looking very pleased with themselves. If you're a swan and you have a lake named after you – Swanbourne Lake – you'd be pleased.

Six minutes (↓)

A walk is following a line about. You just have to decide which line to follow: the criss-cross lines of the pavement slabs, or the edge of the road where the pavement meets the gutter. Sometimes it's hard to see for leaves. The edge of the road is a sky turned sideways, the horizon lying low and flat, sometimes covered in puddles. I follow that line and start to count: the houses, the streetlamps, the grassy verge cut up into parts. Roads go more quickly when you begin to count; grey squares gone in a flash.

The Romans drew lists; they called their lists an itinerarium. Top of their To-Do List was (i) conquer Britain, then (ii) cut down trees (iii) to make straight roads through the fields and woods and hedgerows. Here's the police station, which was once on a hill – or a slope if you're being technical – and the slope is made of concrete. One summer the police decided to pour concrete over the car park to stop any roughs and toughs climbing over the fence at the back, but the concrete dried too quickly and all they caught were snails. Melissa Marshall says her dad was out all week trying to pick them off.

Melissa's dad is a detective and he's called out whenever there's trouble. Usually that means The Spotted Cow. On weekends, the Cow is filled with trouble, and everyone knows to stay away. The trouble starts in the morning, and by the afternoon they're all red and bleary and stumbling across the road to The Chocolate Box. Poor Mr Travis has to close up shop to stop them coming in and swiping at his chocolate. 'Avoid the centre of town on a Saturday,' says Melissa's dad. 'Stay away from the trouble.' It's true that if you linger too long around the police station, you start to feel like a criminal, so move on!

Three minutes (↓)

⇒ onto the Green Lady, the lane that runs between school and town. At night, a lady in a green dress bearing a lantern runs up and down. ‘Looking for late children,’ says Mrs Braithwaite, ‘strays and wanderers and lost souls. Now single file, please, and no argy-bargy!’ There’s a hole in the Green Lady, underneath the wire fence. If you’re careful, you can crawl through; you might lose a bit of dignity, but you’ll spare a minute or two. At the bottom of the lane is the Green Lady House. It’s grand, grander than anywhere else in our town: still and white and calm. The nuns next door have their eye on it: but nuns need privacy, a high wall, and the Green Lady House has only a wooden gate that clicks open and closed when the wind blows through. I lean against the gate and wait: the front window shifts and lifts; the curtains move slightly left and right; a lady in a green dress lifts a white hankie and gently waves. Her mouth is a funny shape – it hangs loose like a saggy balloon – now it moves. ‘Why don’t you come in for lunch?’ ‘Tomorrow,’ I say. ‘Tomorrow I’ll come for lunch.’ The lady at the window has a sweet and gentle face.

One minute (↓)

Back at school, the whistle blows, and Mrs Braithwaite starts stomping. I can see her over the fence, her whistle hanging from her mouth. She doesn’t need to blow it that long, until she goes red in the face. Lunchtime is over and there’ll be nothing more until dinnertime. Mrs Braithwaite looks smug and pleased, like a budgerigar pecking furiously at her seeds. Budgies are awfully greedy; they don’t know when to stop and often die from over-eating. The whistle blows; Mrs Braithwaite looks as though she’s

about to expire; her face is so red and puffy. Did you know, ‘budgerigar’ means ‘songbird with curvy lines’ in Latin – *Melopsittacus undulatus*. Quite a mouthful. I’ll practise spelling it later on my way home. Now I tread across the fields to the classroom and close my ears to the sound of the bell and Mrs Braithwaite squawking.



Walking takes you back in time: to the child who stands apart on the edge of the field, walking in circles around her peers; towards the school that is no longer there, because the Council has torn it down and left a smashed and derelict building. You walk in circles around that old route, up and down the lane, and wonder why it took you so long to get there and back; and what it was that filled your head.