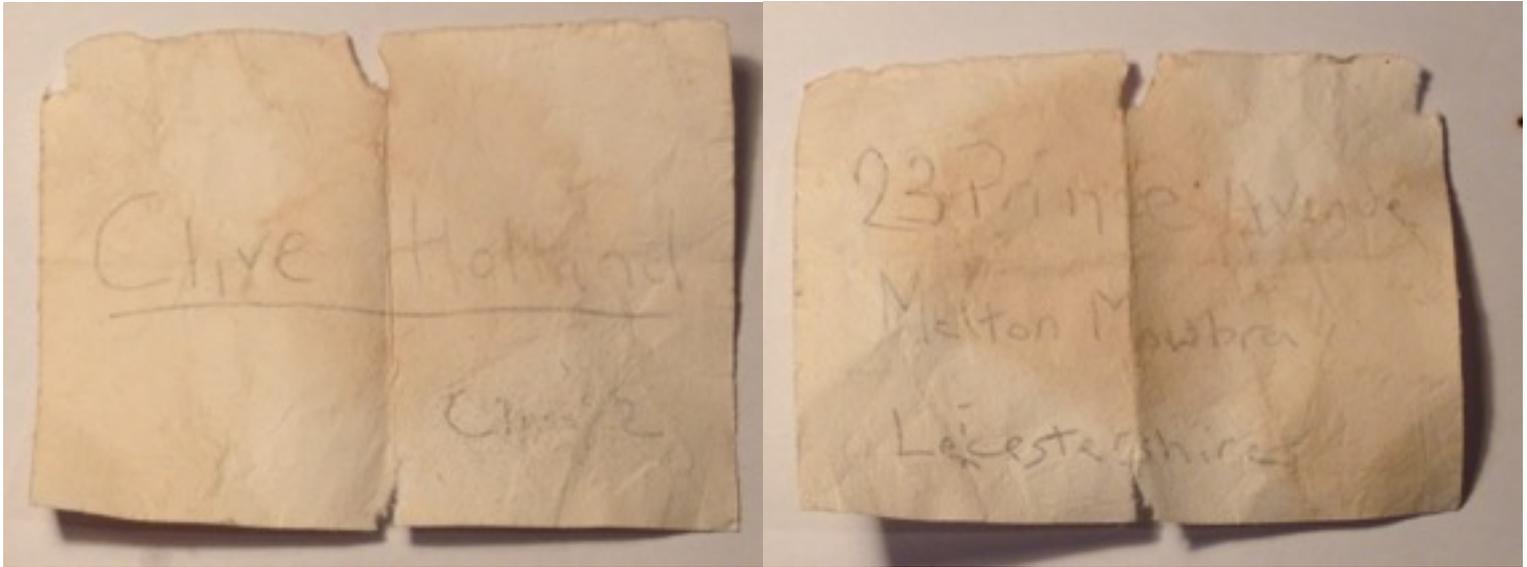


# Appletye

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## The Innocent Summer

by Clive Holland

Eeni, meeni, macca, racca, rare, rye, dommi, nacker, chicca, pacca, lolli, poppa, om, pom, push! Ha, you first.

Up Borough Hill trying to ride a sheep. Catching frogs and newts in Bully's Hole ... throw them back. Riding our bikes. Kicking a ball. Built a swing across the stream ... got wet feet. Me and Stuey ... he was the first to have stitches. We all wanted them after that. Scrumping apples. Dodging trains. Two girls didn't. One lost her life. One her leg. Building dens on rhubarb Island, swimming the pool at the bottom of the weir.

Up the fields. Past Geordies' hut.

Persuading Stuey to wee on an electric fence. Didn't talk to me for a day ... or it might have been a minute.

Summer. The longest in history.

Ding, ding.

"Hold tight please ... do you need a hand with that bag, me duck?"

He was a bus conductor my dad. Knew everyone. My mum worked in a shop.

Stuey and me, every morning, on our bikes. Along the old railway line. Digging bullets out of the ground with a penknife near the Big Wall. Chucking stones at rats in the old air-raid shelter.

Our ball.

Our ball went into Manchester's garden. He came out with a knife. Stuck it through our ball. We put bangers in his dustbin. Lid went miles. We peered through the bushes. Him trying to put the flames out with his watering can.

"I know your dad!"

Sniggering all the way home.

Next morning Stuey and me. On our bikes. An adventure. Through the number four site ... where the Poles lived. Watched them mending a Vespa. Having a bonfire. Old ladies dressed in black. Black headscarves. Even in summer. They came towards us. Stuey and me. On our bikes. Rode like mad. Got away. We cheered.

We were hungry, went home. Mine or his. His was best. Sugar sandwiches. White sliced bread, butter, loads of sugar. Dunked in sweet tea. No wonder my teeth are shit.

Then out again. Making chewing gum. Wild mint. Handful of corn out the field. Chew for hours. Wild raspberries in the copse. Scrumping. Then home when it was dark. Mum watching anxiously through the window or on the top step.

"Old Cardie's turned up again ... so don't you and Stuart go down there!"

"No mum," but we did.

Next morning, Stuey and me. Down to the Old Barn. Not a barn really. Old RAF building. Dilapidated. No windows, no doors, only had half a roof.

Old bloke. Forty, fifty, a hundred years old for all we knew. His life in an old army kitbag. Made it his home every summer.

We crept up. Hid in the long grass. Spied on him. He knew we were there.

HOW?

Invited us in. Showed us card tricks on an upturned box. I never saw it ... the sleight of hand. Da Dah! Blimey!

He always wore this old cardigan. Woolly. Looked like his granny had knitted it. Tied round the waist with a bit of baler twine. Grubby.

Smelly. Had a few holes in it.

He had a little battered kettle. Fold-up stove. Made strong black tea.  
Boiled an egg in it once. Shared it. A bite each.

Old Cardie. Harmless. A little bit sad. Melancholic. He had a strange  
accent ... eastern European?

Russian spy Stuey said.

Sun came through the broken window. A shadow of a big cross on the  
wall.

“God is with us,” said Old Cardie.

We never saw him. Not even any angels. Just cows. Outside. You could  
hear them ripping up grass. Munching. Then big flops coming out the  
back and splatting on the floor. Green. Slimy.

Three bangers stuck into a juicy one. Light. Run like mad. Thud! Great  
globbs of cow flop flying through the air. Splat. Back of my leg between  
my shorts and floppy down socks. Stuey laughed.

September. Back to school. New blazer. Mum sewing a badge on the  
top pocket. New tie. New Clark’s School shoes. Black. Huge.

“They’ve got to last a year,” said mum, “no footballing in them.”

I had to have an insole. They were still too big. I couldn’t control them.  
I fell down stairs. Tripped up kerbs. To go the other way I had to do a  
three point turn.

They were scuffed by October.

Onward Christian Soldiers. Assembly. The vicar went on about Jesus.  
Then the head.

“Today we’re having a drill. Listen to your teacher and follow the  
instructions. Listen for the bell”, she said.

We were excited.

The morning went by.

No bell.

Dinner time went by.

No bell.

Then after registration in the afternoon. The bell.

We bristled.

The teacher told us to crawl under our desks and cover our heads with  
our arms. She showed us. We stood. Silent. Looking around. Waiting  
for someone to take the lead.

She told us again.

We all crawled under our desks. Arms over our heads.

Silence.

Then Stuey and me started to giggle. The whole class were infected.  
The teacher shouted.

Silence.

I could hear Stuey rustling around in his pocket. A laccy band and a v shaped paper pellet. I watched. He pulled back the laccy and let go.  
The pellet flew under the desk. Hit Hansa Patel on the back of the leg.  
She screeched. Banged her head on the desk. Glowered at Stuey.

We giggled.

The bell rang.

We all came out. Sat. The teacher gave us a small piece of paper.

“I want you, in your best handwriting ... not double but block capitals ... to write on one side, your name and on the other side, your address. And I want you to keep it safe until the end of term.”

“What did you do at school today?” my mum asked.

“Hid under the desk. Then wrote my name and address on a piece of paper and put it in my blazer pocket,” I said.

“Oh,” said mum.

That night. In bed. I could hear mum and dad talking downstairs. The tone of voice said it was important. I crept down. Listened at the living room door. I daren't breathe. I thought I was in trouble. But my dad talked about war. About America. About Russia. Kennedy. Khruzchev. About ... the Cuban Missile Crisis. Then my mum got up to make a cup of tea. I ran. Silently. Up the stairs. Got into bed. Pretended to be asleep.

The next morning. On the radio. The newscaster talked about Kennedy. Kruzchev. The Cuban Missile Crisis. Nuclear war.

It had all been averted. The world could breathe easy.

Mum sighed. Then started to sing,

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy ...”

Something was different.

Something inside me was different.

I didn't know what.

I knew that whatever had happened was important.

I didn't know for years just how important.

I know that Stuey and me had lots more summers on our bikes, up the fields, fishing in streams, trying to ride sheep, dunking sugar sandwiches in sweet tea and coming home in the dark.

But it was never the same.

We never saw Old Cardie again. He stopped coming. Maybe he was dead.

And maybe something inside me was dead too. Maybe hiding under a desk had killed something. Maybe the simple act of writing my name and address on a small piece of paper had put an end to a childish innocence and suddenly I was aware that the world wasn't just a big playground.

That summer with Stuey and me ... the last summer of innocence.