

## **More Than Just a Bakery by Russell Sacks**

There were two bakeries on the way to school, The Red Chimney and the Fijian.

Both baked bread, delicious buns and, strangely, also sold "hard boiled eggs" to customers lucky enough to come by just after dawn. The eggs were, in fact, not boiled at all, they were baked. They were placed in troughs of sawdust and shoved deep into the oven at the end of the day's bake. The residual heat cooked the eggs slowly, turning the whites a delicious caramel colour. Sometimes a vendor would set up a stall and sell cups of strong, freshly brewed coffee to go with the fresh buns.

Waifs and strays buzzed around both bakeries, like flies or wasps.

Every school day, Erika and I met in the street for our walk to school. She was my neighbour and my classmate. I loved having her as a friend and revelled in her company and our leisurely strolls to school. Chatting with her warmed my heart. Even the silences were golden. Her calm, soothing voice inspired me. I felt no need to respond.

Our daily choice of bakery was never the subject of deep discussion. It was guided more by the number of pennies in our pockets than any complex gastronomic considerations. The Red Chimney sold roasted pistachio nuts. The Fijian offered roasted chestnuts. Chestnuts were more expensive than pistachios. Both bakeries displayed the brown eggs, but we could never afford those.

At either bakery, we would hand over our coins, receive a bun and as many nuts as we could hold in the cup of our small palms. To these rustic bakers, paper bags were an extravagant luxury.

We nibbled our way towards school, two contented, garrulous squirrels. If it was a pistachio day, they would last until we reached the mulberry tree. If we had chosen chestnuts, we shoved them into our pockets and enjoyed their warmth until we got to the mulberry tree. There, under its spreading branches we sat and peeled their leathery skins to reach their warm, aromatic hearts, gifts from the gods.

Under our tree, I sought Erika's views on the myriads of thoughts that cluttered and confused my childish head. She was only months older than I, but had an intuitive grasp of the world around her and an uncanny understanding of the complexities of life.

Without her lessons under the mulberry tree, I too, might have ended as a waif or a stray.

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Written in 2024 by Russell Sacks

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