

## Chew on This: September Readings, “We Belong to Each Other”

*These readings will be the starting points for our discussion at the potluck dinner on Wednesday, September 21 at 6pm in the Social Hall.*

### **This American Life**

#### **Episode 520: No Place Like Home**

#### **Act Three: The Hostess With the Toastess**

— What follows is the transcript of a radio show. If you prefer to listen, you can do that here, just skip ahead to Act Three: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/520/transcript> —

**Ira Glass:** It's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Each week on our program, of course, we choose a theme, bring you different kinds of stories on that theme. Today's program, "There's No Place Like Home," stories of people doing unusual things to create or preserve or hold onto a home for themselves. We've arrived at Act Three of our program. Act Three, The Hostess with the Toast-ess.

John Gravois moved with his wife and daughters a year and a half ago across the country to San Francisco. And he has been very aware of the ways that San Francisco seems different from the rest of the country. Recently, he noticed something new happening around the Bay Area, which turned out to be not what he thought at all. Here's John.

**John Gravois:** A few months ago, I was standing in line at a coffee shop on my way to work. And I couldn't stop staring at this guy behind the counter. He was cutting inch-thick slices of bread, putting them in a toaster, and spreading stuff on them.

But it was the way he did it that caught my attention. He had the solemn intensity of a ping-pong player who keeps his game very close to the table, knees slightly bent, wrist flicking the butter knife back and forth, his eyes suggesting a kind of flow state. In front of him, laid out in a neat row, were a few long Pullman loaves, that boxy Wonder Bread shape, but recognizably handmade and freshly baked.

On the menu, toast stood all on its own as an option at \$3 per slice. So I ordered some. It was good. It tasted like toast, only better.

A couple of weeks later, I stumbled across another place with a self-described toast bar. Then another. This third place I went to was like a temple to hot, sliced bread. It was called The Mill, a

big, light-filled cafe and bakery with exposed rafters and polished concrete floors, like a rustic Apple store, with a small chalkboard listing the day's toast menu.

I asked the manager at one of these places what was going on. Why all the toast? Tip of the hipster spear, he said. And then I realized what this meant. Toast, like the cupcake and the dill pickle before it, had been elevated to the artisanal plane.

I had two reactions to this. First, of course, I rolled my eyes. How silly. How precious. How perfectly San Francisco. Artisanal toast. And second, despite myself, I felt a little thrill of discovery. As a 35-year-old guy with a wife and two kids, I'm usually the last to find out about a trend.

But here I was, apparently standing up on the artisanal toast wave, way before it crashed into Brooklyn, Chicago, and Los Angeles, before the inevitable article in Slate telling people that they're making toast all wrong, before the even more inevitable backlash by angry bloggers.

I decided to go looking for the origins of the fancy toast trend. How does such a thing get started? What determines how far it goes? Maybe I thought it would help me understand the rise of all of the seemingly trivial things that start in San Francisco and then go supernova across the country. And just as I began searching, the backlash arrived.

The local media started running articles with headlines like "\$4 Toast-- Why the Tech Industry is Ruining San Francisco." And almost all of the blaming fingers pointed at The Mill. So I figured, bingo. That's Ground Zero.

[TRAFFIC NOISE]

**John Gravois:** Wow. It's really crowded.

[DOOR OPENS]

But one of the owners there, Josey Baker-- yes, he's a baker, and yes, that's his name-- told me he was not the originator of this craze.

**Josey Baker:** Yeah, I mean, there was one other place here in the city, and they mostly do cinnamon sugar toast.

**John Gravois:** No, Josey wasn't the Chuck Berry of fancy toast. He was more like the Elvis of fancy toast, a guy who caught the trend when it was already on an upswing. The place he first saw it, four

or five years ago, is out in one of San Francisco's windiest, foggiest, farthest-flung areas, the Outer Sunset. Other toast professionals sent me to the same cafe.

It's completely different from any of the other places serving toast. For one thing, it's about 10 times smaller. It's nothing like what I expected. And the story behind it-- the story of the person who started this trend - made the trend itself feel like an embarrassingly tiny thing to focus on.

So I'm going to tell you that story. But first I should tell you the name of the place. It's called The Trouble Coffee and Coconut Club, otherwise known simply as Trouble.

Trouble's really popular. It always seems to have a line going out the door. And because the shop is the size of a single car garage, it's cramped and crowded with artifacts and wall hangings, like a very personal museum.

**Waiter:** I got two toasts on the bar.

**John Gravois:** On the menu are four main items. Coffee, cinnamon toast, coconuts, and shots of grapefruit juice named after Yoko Ono.

**Waiter:** One toast for David.

**John Gravois:** The founder of Trouble is Giulietta Carrelli. And every one of those menu items has a defined significance to her, as does her never changing wardrobe. She's always in a sleeveless crop top, ripped jeans, and a head scarf. She's covered in tattoos, including her cheeks, which are tattooed with freckles and always flushed, like a biker Pippi Longstocking.

And yes, she confirms it. She says it took a long time for the rest of San Francisco to copy her toast idea. Trouble is the kind of place where you might walk in and feel excluded, like 'I guess I'm not hipster enough for all this.' That's kind of the way I felt at first.

But then Giulietta told me something that made Trouble and the purpose of it snap into focus. Trouble isn't just the name of Giulietta's coffee shop. Trouble is her word for a psychotic episode, the kind she's had since she was 16, growing up in Cleveland. Her official diagnosis is schizoaffective disorder, but she only learned that recently. And back when the episodes first started, in high school, she had no idea what was wrong with her.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** I started having these things where I thought people were putting LSD in my beer. I was hallucinating. And so when things would get weird, I just thought that's what was

happening, that people put acid or that I drank mushroom tea. And I was hanging out with people who partied pretty hard, so I thought that's what was happening.

I would try to be in class-- let's say it's an English class or something-- but I was outside of my body watching myself be in the class. And that's what happens to me a lot. And all the voices were very, very, very loud. And like if you could hear people crumbling the paper, and it was just so uncomfortable. This is where I was just yesterday, sitting outside, not being able to even go to Trouble. I was in that state of mind yesterday.

**John Gravois:** During an episode, sometimes she hears voices or gets the sense that she doesn't actually exist. Also, eating is difficult. She can't stand the sound of her own chewing. After ruling out her LSD theory, she thought maybe she was just having lots of nervous breakdowns. Then came the theory that she was bipolar. She was even medicated for bipolar disorder.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** Then I just thought this is me. And everything's my fault. I just destroy relationships. I can't hold an apartment. I can't hold a job. I'm nice enough. I try my best. This is just who I am. So that's how I went about.

**John Gravois:** She somehow managed to put herself through college, three different colleges, in different corners of the country, by booking shows for underground bands and working at record stores and coffee shops. But Giulietta's illness was a kind of time bomb that eventually leveled any structure in her life. Roommates kicked her out. Romances fell apart. Her bosses either fired her or quietly stopped scheduling her for shifts.

A lot of the time, she was pretty much homeless. She slept in her car, on lots of couches. For a little while, she slept in a tree. By the time she hit 30, she had lived in nine different cities.

She first came here, to the Bay Area, as a student at Berkeley. And she remembers this one episode, a long, delusional walk through San Francisco, during which she called the police to let them know a tree had fallen on top of her, which it hadn't. And finally Giulietta found herself at China Beach, in the northwest part of town. On the sun deck was an elderly man sitting on a towel, wearing a Speedo, sunbathing on a cloudy day that suggested anything but. This would be the beginning of the beginning for Giulietta and for Trouble Coffee - the moment she met Glen.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** Little, little man. Really petite. White hair. His socks always matched his sweater, no matter what. I was always amazed by that. But he was mostly in a Speedo, tanning. No tanning lotion, like no SPF for Glen.

**John Gravois:** Glen, whose real name is Gunther Neustadt, was a Holocaust survivor who escaped Germany as a boy. Anybody who went to China Beach regularly back then will tell you he was a fixture there. But more than Glen that first day, Giulietta was struck by a pair of Russian men, climbing out of the ocean after a swim. I should mention here that almost year round, the water at China Beach is cold enough to make you hypothermic after a few minutes.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** These strong men, just coming out of the ocean. And I was so weak. I was the walking dead. I wanted to be that strong. And they came up onto that sun deck, and they were so alive.

So I started asking Glen about these men. And he told me that people swam there regularly, all these people. And I was like, 'this is what I want to do.' But anyways, I didn't last in San Francisco. I went on to all my little stints.

**John Gravois:** First to South Carolina, then Georgia, where she hit upon the first in a series of coping mechanisms that she still uses-- coconuts. For some reason, coconuts are the one food that doesn't feel like poison when Giulietta is in an episode. And the chewing sound isn't as bad. And not to sound like an infomercial for coconuts, they're really nutritious. Giulietta says you can survive on them, provided you have a source of Vitamin C, hence the grapefruit juice on Trouble's menu.

Another great thing about coconuts, people talk to you when you're holding one. Giulietta has studies to prove it, studies she performed herself, standing on a sidewalk, noting down how many strangers engage with her when she's holding a sandwich versus when she was holding a coconut. It wasn't even close.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** All of a sudden, I found something that would keep me alive. It didn't bother me chewing. I felt great. And people talked to me. I was like, 'this is working.'

**John Gravois:** Still, she was barely sleeping and self-medicating a lot with pills, mostly Vicodin and whiskey. She was away from San Francisco for four or five years.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** Then one day, I was at a party, and I thought about that old man and those old Russian men at China Beach. And the next day, because my roommate was pretty much done with me, I rented a car and went straight to China Beach.

**John Gravois:** And then when you got there?

**Giulietta Carrelli:** Glen was there. And he told me that it took me a long time to come back. He was like, ‘where have you been?’ So actually, this is Glen's corner.

**John Gravois:** Giulietta took me to China Beach, to the spot on the sun deck where she started hanging out with Glen after she came back. Talking with him every day, the routine of it, was the next thing she found that really helped her. At the end of every visit, he'd say the same thing. ‘See you tomorrow.’

Soon she started joining the other swimmers at China Beach. She swims every day now at about the same time. When she's having an episode, the cold water can shock her out of hallucinating.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** It's - oh man, I'm cold. [SHIVERING]

**John Gravois:** Giulietta got the idea for Trouble in 2005. But it wasn't so much an idea as a whirlwind of coconuts and strangers meeting each other and cinnamon toast, all swirling around in her mind. She was working in a coffee shop at the time, always button-holing customers and coworkers about her plans.

She did the same with Glen, who brought the idea down to earth, telling her point blank to open a checking account, go to City Hall, and ask them about starting a small business. And her boss at the coffee shop found her sleeping there once or twice, and rather than say you're fired, he said, I think it's time for you to open your own place.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** Then he told me, he was like, just get some cups, brew some coffee. When you run out of cups, close the door and go get more cups.

**John Gravois:** [LAUGHS]

**Giulietta Carrelli:** And that was my business advice.

**John Gravois:** With barely any money, she landed a five-year lease in the Outer Sunset, in a former doggy day spa that seemed to have been a front for some kind of crystal meth operation. So here was a shop that sells coconuts and toast in a crummy part of town that nobody went to, run by a person with a significant mental illness.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** But I never, ever, ever thought that it was going to fail. Everything that works for me, I put in one little spot. And I thought, ‘well, if it works for me, it'll work for other people.’

**John Gravois:** She put coconuts on the menu because of the times she'd relied on them for easy sustenance. And because they did help her strike up conversations.

**John Gravois:** What about toast?

**Giulietta Carrelli:** My mom used to make me toast. And so when I was first opening up Trouble, I wanted to feel safe. Toast was that for me. And I also knew it was going to be that for a lot of people. Nobody can be mad at toast. I mean, it's toast. It's cinnamon toast. Everybody's stoked.

**John Gravois:** In 2012, so just two years ago, Giulietta finally got the definitive diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder and medication that genuinely helps keep the episodes at bay. She stopped drinking and taking drugs a long time ago. But the major way she's managed to cope with her episodes when they happen is by creating a network of people and turning herself into a local institution, which is what she's been doing, bit by bit, ever since she came back to San Francisco from New York. At first, it was just the people she saw in her daily bike route to and from China Beach.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** And I would talk to the city workers who were building things. So just in case I wasn't doing well, they would remember me. They saw me every day. And sometimes I would ask them if they could help me get somewhere.

**John Gravois:** Huh. What do you say?

**Giulietta Carrelli:** I tell them: 'I can't see very well right now. My mind is racing. I'm supposed to make it to work. I'm late. Can you help me?' I've knocked on people's doors.

**John Gravois:** You just knock on their door and say--

**Giulietta Carrelli:** 'Excuse me. I don't know where I'm going. Can you help me?'

**John Gravois:** This is why she wears the same outfit every day - the crop tops and the head scarves. It's why she's covered herself with tattoos - so people will recognize her. And it's why she takes the same routes, day in and day out, around San Francisco - so she can be recognized. When people interact with her, say hello on the street or call her name, it can do the same thing that cold water does when she swims - knock her back into herself. It can mean the difference between her getting home or wandering lost around the city. And it's one of the reasons why she created Trouble.

**Giulietta Carrelli:** There's just so many people connected through this network of Trouble Coffee. I may just be a little tiny place, but it's pretty well-known, because I need to be well-known. I mean, I was just walking to my house before you guys got here. And it was this man with his son, and he goes, 'hey, you're Trouble, right?' And I just went, 'I sure am.'

**John Gravois:** Fancy toast isn't what Trouble's about. It's just the weird chunk of the spaceship that broke off and landed in the rest of the world's front lawn. But in a way, it makes perfect sense that the trend started with Giulietta. Most of us dedicate the bulk of our attention to a handful of relationships – with a significant other, children, parents, a few close friends. Social scientists call these strong ties.

But for Giulietta, those kinds of strong ties have a way of buckling under the weight of her illness. So she's adapted by forming as many relationships, as many weak ties, as she possibly can. And webs of weak ties are how ideas spread, ideas like, in this case, toast.



## The House of Belonging by David Whyte

I awoke  
this morning  
in the gold light  
turning this way  
and that

thinking for  
a moment  
it was one  
day  
like any other.

But  
the veil had gone  
from my  
darkened heart  
and  
I thought

it must have been the quiet  
candlelight  
that filled my room,

it must have been  
the first  
easy rhythm  
with which I breathed  
myself to sleep,

it must have been  
the prayer I said  
speaking to the otherness  
of the night.

And  
I thought  
this is the good day  
you could  
meet your love,

this is the black day  
someone close  
to you could die.

This is the day  
you realise  
how easily the thread  
is broken  
between this world  
and the next

and I found myself  
sitting up  
in the quiet pathway  
of light,  
the tawny  
close grained cedar  
burning round  
me like fire

and all the angels of this  
housely heaven  
ascending  
through the first  
roof of light  
the sun has made.

This is the bright home  
in which I live,  
this is where  
I ask  
my friends  
to come,  
this is where I want  
to love all the things  
it has taken me so long  
to learn to love.

This is the temple  
of my adult aloneness  
and I belong  
to that aloneness  
as I belong to my life.

There is no house  
like the house of belonging.



# Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge

Written by Mem Fox

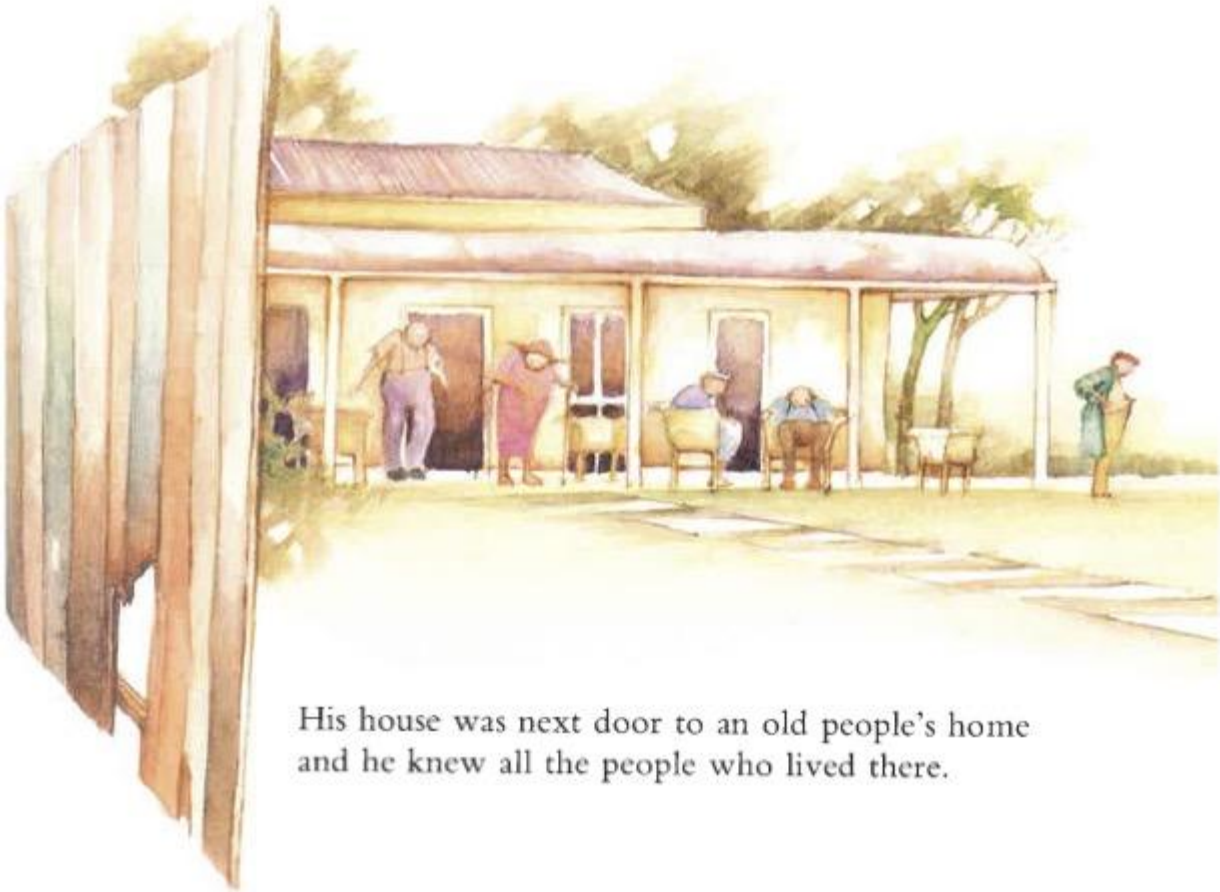
Illustrated by Julie Vivas

A CRANKY NELL BOOK

**KM** Kane/Miller Book Publishers  
Brooklyn, New York & La Jolla, California



There was once a small boy called  
Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge and what's  
more he wasn't very old either.



His house was next door to an old people's home  
and he knew all the people who lived there.



He liked Mrs Jordan who played the organ.

He listened to Mr Hosking who told him scary stories.



He played with Mr Tippett who was crazy about cricket.

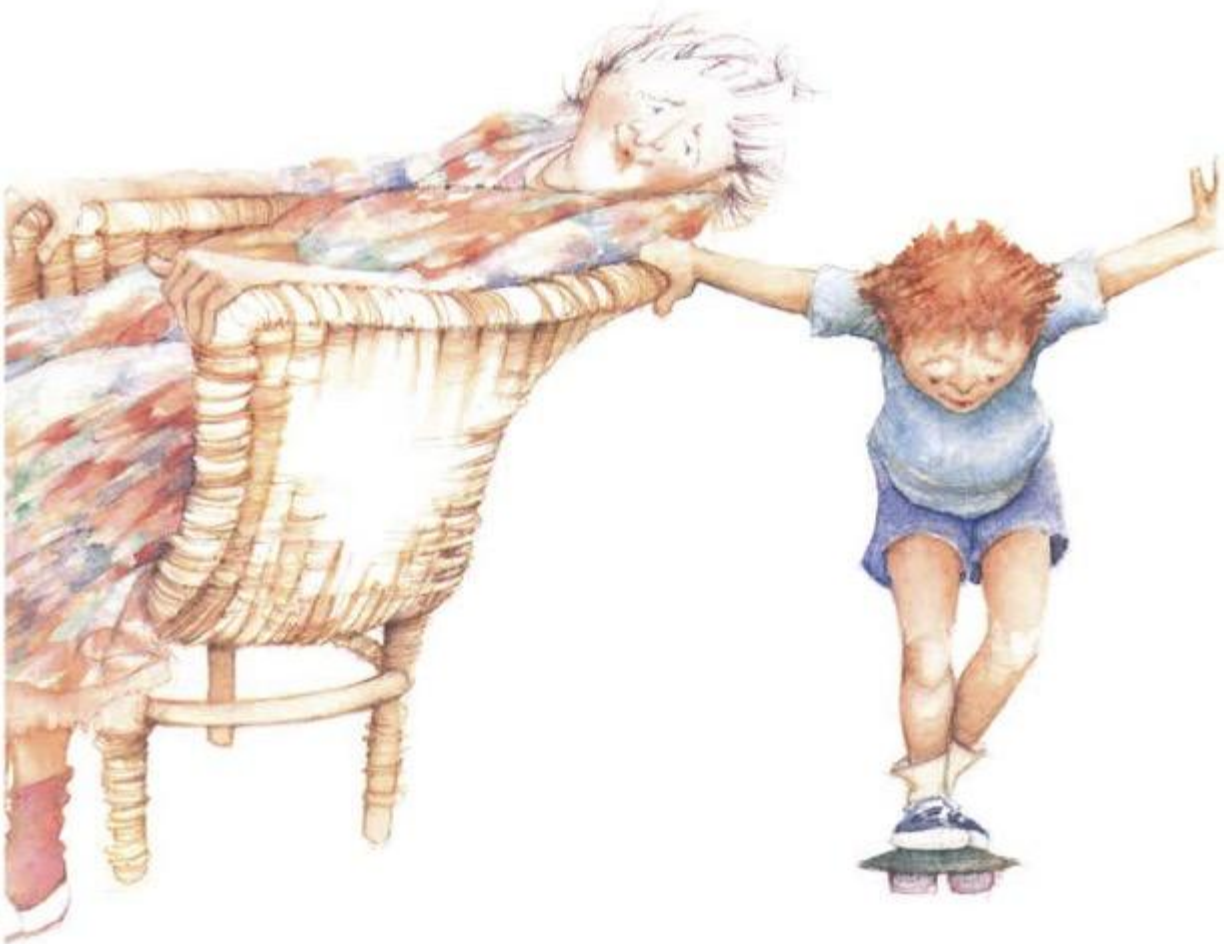
He ran errands for Miss Mitchell who walked with a wooden stick.

He admired Mr Drysdale who had a voice like a giant.

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But his favourite person of all was Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt  
Cooper because she had four names just as he did.  
He called her Miss Nancy and told her all his secrets.







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One day Wilfrid Gordon heard his mother and father talking about Miss Nancy.



“Poor old thing,” said his mother.  
“Why is she a poor old thing?” asked Wilfrid Gordon.  
“Because she’s lost her memory,” said his father.  
“It isn’t surprising,” said his mother. “After all,  
she is ninety-six.”  
“What’s a memory?” asked Wilfrid Gordon. He was  
always asking questions.  
“It is something you remember,” said his father.



But Wilfrid Gordon wanted to know more, so he called on Mrs Jordan who played the organ.  
“What’s a memory?” he asked.  
“Something warm, my child, something warm.”

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He called on Mr Hosking who told him scary stories.

“What’s a memory?” he asked.

“Something from long ago, me lad, something from long ago.”





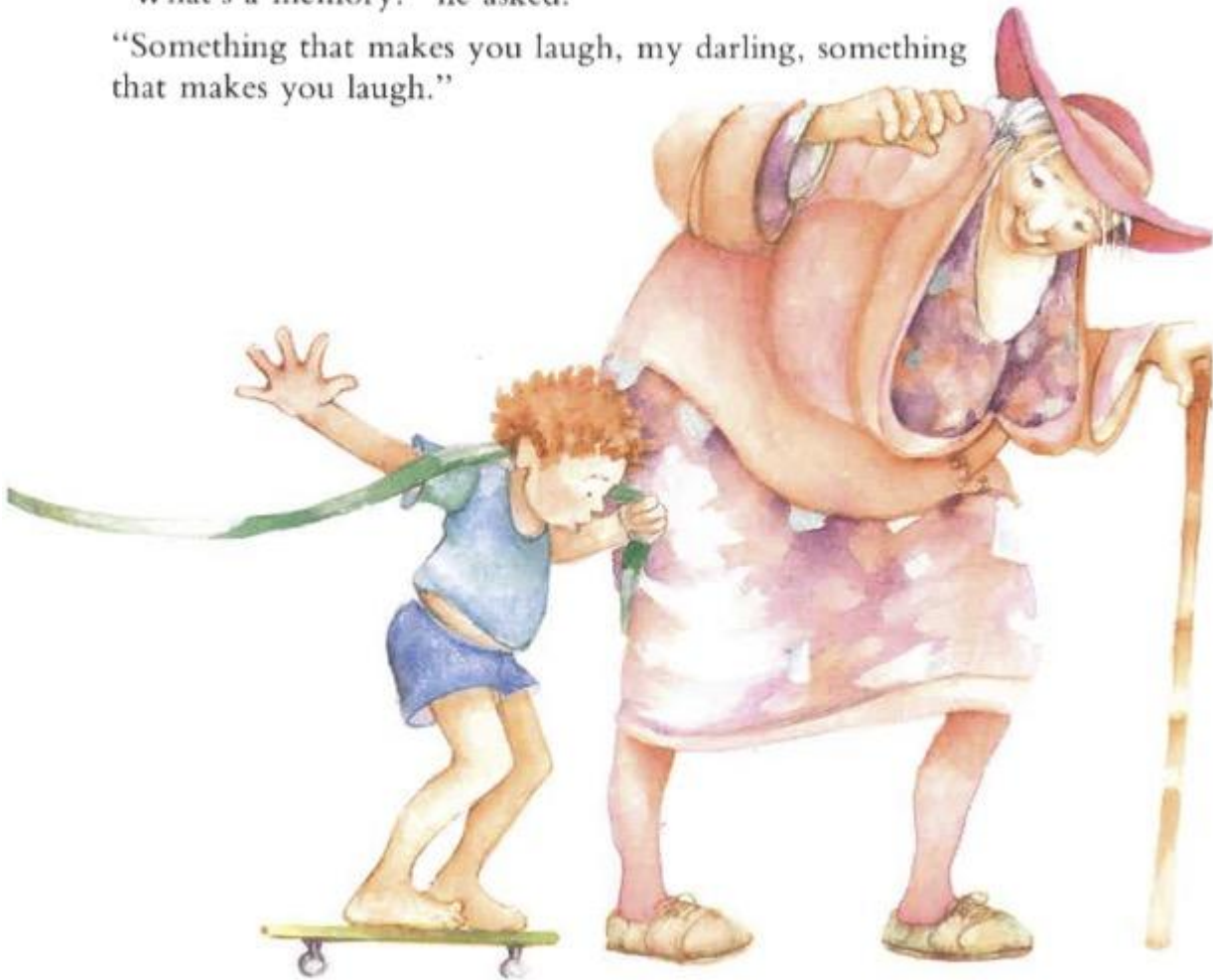


He called on Mr Tippett who was crazy about cricket.  
“What’s a memory?” he asked.

“Something that makes you cry, my boy, something  
that makes you cry.”

He called on Miss Mitchell who walked with a wooden stick.  
“What’s a memory?” he asked.

“Something that makes you laugh, my darling, something  
that makes you laugh.”



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He called on Mr Drysdale who had a voice like a giant.  
“What’s a memory?” he asked.  
“Something as precious as gold, young man,  
something as precious as gold.”

So Wilfrid Gordon went home again to look for memories  
for Miss Nancy because she had lost her own.







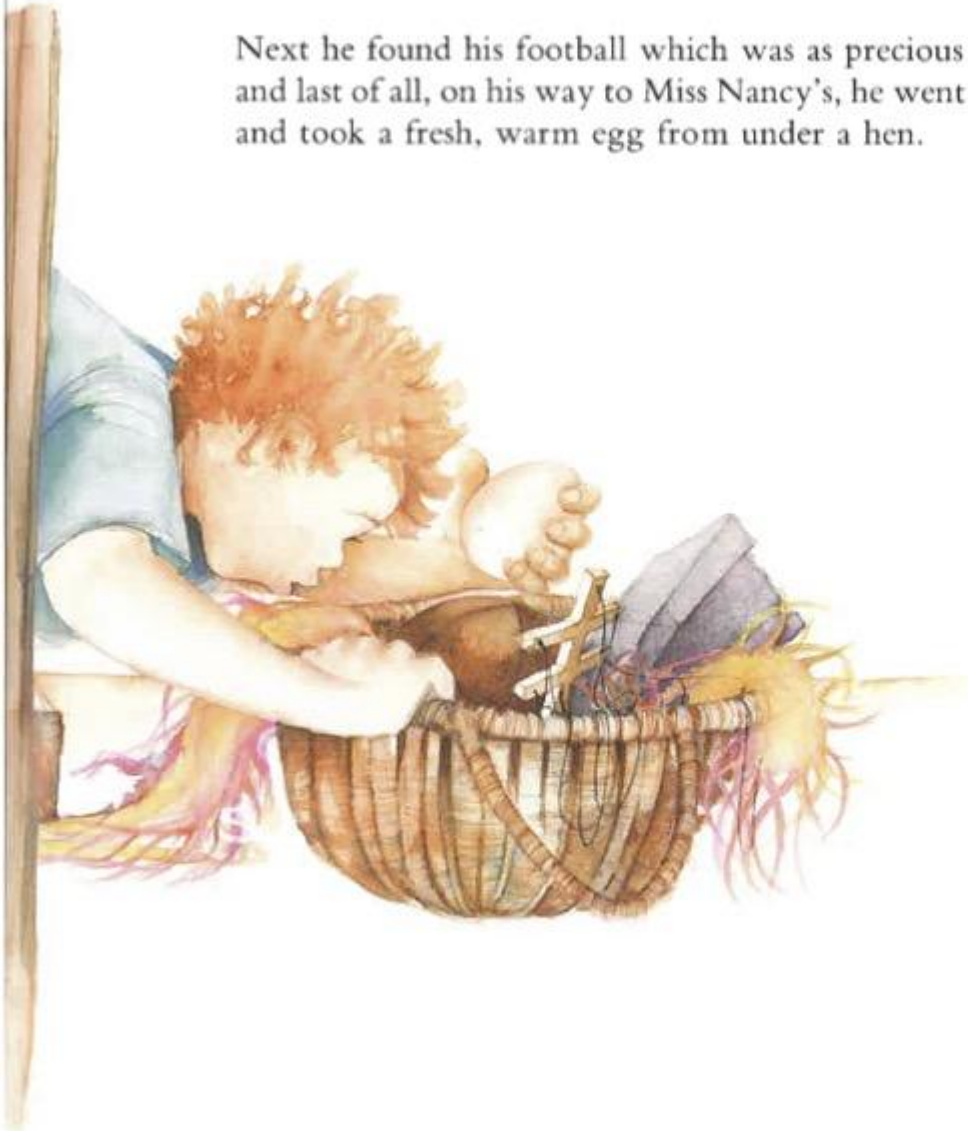
He looked for the shoe-box of shells he had found long ago last summer, and put them gently in a basket.

He found the puppet on strings which always made everyone laugh and he put that in the basket too.

He remembered with sadness the medal which his grandfather had given him and he placed it gently next to the shells.



Next he found his football which was as precious as gold,  
and last of all, on his way to Miss Nancy's, he went into the hen house  
and took a fresh, warm egg from under a hen.



Then Wilfrid Gordon called on Miss Nancy  
and gave her each thing one by one.





“What a dear, strange child to bring me all these wonderful things,” thought Miss Nancy. Then she started to remember.

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She held the warm egg and told  
Wilfrid Gordon about the tiny speckled blue eggs  
she had once found in a bird's nest in her aunt's garden.

She put a shell to her ear and remembered  
going to the beach by tram long ago  
and how hot she had felt in her button-up boots.



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She touched the medal and talked sadly  
of the big brother she had loved  
who had gone to the war and never returned.



She smiled at the puppet on strings and  
remembered the one she had shown to her sister,  
and how she had laughed with a mouth full of porridge.





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She bounced the football to Wilfrid Gordon  
and remembered the day she had met him  
and all the secrets they had told.



And the two of them smiled and smiled  
because Miss Nancy's memory had been found again  
by a small boy, who wasn't very old either.

