



EQUAL RIGHTS (A short story by Bernhard Ashley)

"Can't you read?" The man was looking at me.

"Only two children at a time allowed in this shop", he read out, loudly.

I looked across at the two kids in the corner. They were pretending to pick Penny Chews while they stupidly stared at the girls on the magazines. O K., I made three, but I wasn't there for the same reason as them. Couldn't he recognise business when he saw it? "I'm not buying." I said. "I've come about the job." He frowned at me, in between watching the boys in the corner. "What job?" he said.

"Reliable paper boy wanted", I told him. "Enquire within.' It's in the window. I'm enquiring within."

"Hurry up, you two," he shouted. And then he frowned at me again as if I was something from outer space.

"But you're not a boy," he said. "'Reliable paper *boy* required', that says. If I'd meant 'boy or girl' I'd have put it on, wouldn't I? Or 'paper *person*'."

"Oh," I said, disappointed. "Only I'm *reliable*, that's all. I get up early with my dad, I'm never off school, and I can tell the difference between the *Sun* and the *Beano*."

The paper man was looking at me, hard. "Where d'you live?" he asked.

"Round the corner."

"Could you start at seven?"

"Six, if you like."

"Rain or shine, winter and summer?"

"No problem." I stared at him, and he stared at me. He looked as if he was deciding whether or not to give women the vote.

"All right," he said, "I'll give you a chance. Start Monday. Seven o'clock. Four pounds a week, plus Christmas tips. Two weeks' holiday without pay . . ."

Now that he'd made up his mind he smiled at me over-doing it.

"Is that what the boys get?" I asked. "Four pounds a week?"

He started unwrapping a packet of fags. "I don't see how that concerns you. The money suits or it doesn't. Four pounds is what I said, and four pounds is what I meant. Take it or leave it." I walked back to the door. "I'll leave it, then." I said, "seeing the boys get five pounds, *and* a week's holiday with pay." I knew all this because Jason used to do it.

"Thanks anyway, I'll tell my dad what you said . . ."

"Please yourself."

I slammed out of the shop. I was mad, I can tell you. Cheap labour, he was after.

The trouble was, I really needed a bit of money coming in, saving for those shoes and things I wanted. There was no way I'd get them otherwise. But I wasn't going to be treated any different from the boys. I wouldn't have a shorter round or lighter papers, would I? Everything'd be the same, except the money.

I walked the long way home, thinking. It was nowhere near Guy Fawkes, and Carol Singing was even further away. So that really only left car washing – and they leave the rain to wash the cars round our way.

Hearing this baby cry gave me the idea. Without thinking about it I knocked at the door where the bawling was coming from. The lady opened it and stared at me like you stare at salesmen, when you're cross for being brought to the door. "'Baby-play' calling", I said – making up the name from somewhere.

The lady said, "Eh?" and she looked behind me to see who was pulling my strings.

"'Baby-play'," I said. "We come and play with your baby in your own home. Keep it happy. Or walk it out – not going across main roads."

She opened the door a bit wider. The baby crying got louder.

"How much?" she asked.

That really surprised me. I'd felt sorry about calling from the first lift of the knocker, and here she was taking me seriously.

"I don't know," I said. "Whatever you think . . ."

"Well . . ." She looked at me to see if I was to be trusted. Then I was glad I had the school jumper on, so she knew I could be traced. "You push Bobby down the shops and get Mr Dawson's magazines, and I'll give you twenty pence. Take your time, mind . . ."

"All right," I said. "Thank you very much."

She got this little push-chair out, and the baby came as good as gold – put its foot in the wheel a couple of times and nearly twisted its head off trying to see who I was, but I kept up the talking, and I stopped while it stared at a cat, so there wasn't any fuss.

When I got to the paper shop, I took Bobby in with me. "Afternoon," I said, "We've come down for Mr Dawson's papers, haven't we, Bobby?"

You should have seen the man's face.

"Mr Dawson's?" he asked, burning his finger on a match.

"Number twenty-nine?"

"Yes, please."

"Are you ...?" he nodded at Bobby and then at me as if he was making some link between us.

"That's right," I said.

He fumbled at a pile behind him and lifted out the magazines. He laid them on the counter.

"Dawson", it said on the top. I looked at the titles to see what Mr Dawson enjoyed reading.

Worker's Rights was one of them. And *Trade Union Times* was the other. They had pictures on their fronts. One had two men pulling together on a rope. The other had a woman bus driver waving out of her little window. They told you the sort of man Mr Dawson was – one of those trade union people you get on television kicking up a fuss over wages, or getting cross when women are treated different to men. Just the sort of bloke I could do with on my side, I thought.

The man was still fiddling about with his pile of magazines.

"Oh, look," he said, with a grin. "I've got last month's *Pop Today* left over. You can have it if you like, with my compliments ..."

"Thanks a lot," I said. Now I saw the link in his mind. He thought I was Mr Dawson's daughter. He thought there'd be all sorts of trouble now, over me being offered lower wages than the boys.

"And about that job. Stupid of me, I'd got it wrong. What did I say – *four* pounds a week?"

"I think so," I said. "It sounded like a four."

"How daft can you get? It was those kids in the corner. Took my attention off. Of course it's *five*, you realise that. Have you spoken to your dad yet?"

"No, not yet."

He stopped leaning so hard on the counter. "Are you still interested?"

"Yes. Thank you very much."

He came round the front and shook hands with me. "Monday at seven," he said. "Don't be late ...". But you could tell he was only saying it, pretending to be the big boss.

"Right." I turned the push-chair round. "Say ta-ta to the man, Bobby," I said.

Bobby just stared, like at the cat.

The paper man leaned over. "Dear little chap," he said.

"Yeah, smashing. But Bobby's a girl, not a chap, aren't you, Bobby? At least, that's what Mrs Dawson just told me."

I went out of the shop, while my new boss made this funny gurgling sound, and knocked a pile of papers on the floor. He'd found out too late that I wasn't Mr Dawson's daughter.

I ran and laughed and zig-zagged Bobby along the pavement.

"Good for us! Equal rights, eh, Bobby? Equal rights!"

But Bobby's mind was all on the ride. She couldn't care less what I was shouting. All she wanted was someone to push her fast, to feel the wind on her face. Boy or girl, it was all the same to her.