Opening extract from

Flour Babies

Written by

Anne Fine

Published by

Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

Mr Cartright swung his legs to and fro under the desk, and raised his voice over the waves of bad-tempered muttering.

'Don't worry if you feel you can't give this your full attention now, 4C,' he said to his new class. 'I'll be delighted to go over it again in your break-time.'

Some of them visibly made a bit of an effort. A few pens were pulled out of a few mouths. One or two of the boys swivelled their heads back from the riveting sight of the janitor painting large white numbers on the dustbins. But, on the whole, the improvement was pitiful. Half of them looked as if they'd left their brains at home. The other half looked as if they didn't have any.

This year's 4C. What a shower! Mr Cartright knew most of them well enough already – the Sads and the Bads, the ones who had been despaired of most loudly and often in the staffroom over the last couple of years. Anyone halfway normal (these were called the Lads) had been bagged, as usual, by Mr King or Mr Henderson. And Dr Feltham always snaffled up the Boffins. So far, no one had ever fetched up in 4C by accident.

The only boy new to the school – what was his name, Martin Simon? – was sitting reading quietly at the back. Mr Cartright cheered up a bit. That was a start, then. One of them could read. He must have had worse classes in his time.

'Buck up,' he told them. 'This shouldn't take all day. I'll run through the choices one last time, and then you'll have to vote. You can carry on eating your voting paper, George Spalder, but I'm not giving you another. Now pay attention, everyone.'

Shifting his vast bottom round, he tapped the blackboard on which, five minutes earlier, he'd chalked up the options Dr Feltham had given 4C for their contribution to the school Science Fair,

textiles
nutrition
domestic economy
child development
consumer studies

reciting them aloud again, for those who had trouble with reading.

A swell of grumbling rose over the fidgets and whispers and shuffling feet, and the creak of chairs being tipped back dangerously on two of their four legs.

'It isn't fair, sir.'

'Boring!'

'You can't call that lot Science. It's not right.'

'I don't even know what half of them *mean*.'

To oblige Russ Mould, Mr Cartright read them off again, this time translating as he went along.

sewing
food
housekeeping

babies and so forth
thrift

Russ Mould was as baffled as ever.

'Frift? What's frift?'

Mr Cartright chose to ignore him.

'For God's sake, 4C,' he said. 'Pull yourselves together. I know most of you have the boredom thresholds of brain-damaged gnats, but surely one of these topics must interest you more than the others. Whichever it is, copy it down on the paper. And do try to get the letters more or less in the right order, Russ Mould, so I can read it. I'm coming round now to collect them.'

Another mutinous wave rose up to greet him.

'Stupid!'

'Just trying to pick on us . . .'

'Sewing! Housekeeping!'

'Excuse me. We're Table 14 in the Science Fair. Come and look at our nice sewed-on buttons.'

'Dead interesting. Oh, yes!'

'I bet you've never seen a sewed-on button before.'

'What's the point in doing things if *anyone* can do them?'

'Frift!'

It was Sajid Mahmoud who voiced the general complaint in the most coherent fashion.

'It isn't fair. They're not *real* Science, are they? None of them. Why can't we do the exploding custard tins?'

Instantly, it was as if the whole lot of them had been let out of a cage.

'Yes! They were great!'

'Dead brilliant.'

'Hooper's brother nearly burned his hand off.'

'Chop lost an eyebrow.'

'Grew back different.'

Rick Tullis was leaning so far over his desk, it was likely to topple over.

'Or making soap, sir!'

'Yes! The soap factory!'

'Fuller ate his lump for a dare.'

'Sick *eight times*.'

'We had a good laugh.'

'Should have seen his face. Pale as a maggot!'

At this, Philip Brewster unleashed a fresh hue and cry round the room.

'Yes! Maggots!'

'Maggot farm!'

'Yes! Why can't we do the maggot farm?'

'There was one last year. And the year before.'

'My mum wouldn't even *look* at it. She said it was disgusting.'

'That bully Fletcher was put in charge of running it.'

'He practically had the maggots *trained* by the last day!'

Mr Cartright shook his head. It saddened him to have to dampen enthusiasm in any educational sphere. But facts are facts, especially in a school.

'May I invade your privacy for a moment, Sajid, to ask if you happened to pass the Physics exam at the end of last term?'

Sajid scowled horribly.

'No, I didn't, sir.'

'And you, Rick. Did you pass Chemistry?'

Rick Tullis laughed. And so did everyone who'd been in last year's Chemistry class along with Rick Tullis.

Mr Cartright turned to Philip, who was still bright-eyed at the thought of running the Maggot Farm.

'Philip? Any luck with Biology?'

Philip's expression soured.

'I didn't even bother to come in and take it, sir. No point.'

Mr Cartright sighed.

'Well, there you have it in a nutshell, I'm afraid, 4C. No one is here by accident.'

At the back, suddenly, the new boy, Martin Simon, spoke up for the first time.

'I think I might be, sir.'

But Mr Cartright, in full flow, ignored the interruption.

'And therein lies the explanation of why, sadly, this class can't do the Exploding Custard Tins. In the absence of total confidence in your skills and commitment, Dr Feltham has entrusted us only with nice, safe and easy topics. Exploding Custard Tins have been reserved for those who passed Physics at the end of last year.'

His eye roved over eighteen sullen faces and one rather intrigued one.

'Did *anyone* here pass Physics?'

The new boy raised his hand. Otherwise, no one stirred. And since Martin Simon was pretty well out of everyone's line of sight, in the back row, Mr Cartright chose not to let his one waving arm detract from the dramatics of the occasion.

'Anyone pass Chemistry?'

Again, Martin Simon's hand shot up in the air, to be totally ignored by Mr Cartright. Otherwise, nothing much happened.

'Goodbye, Soap Factory,' Mr Cartright said. 'How was our record in Biology? Anyone have any luck there?'

Martin Simon's arm waved, a lone reed over the silt of the rest of 4C's academic hopes. For the third time, Mr Cartright pretended not to see it.

'So,' he said flatly. 'No Maggot Farm for us.'

He spread his huge chalky hands.

'You can't say you weren't warned,' he told them. 'I fetch my coffee from the staffroom. I have ears. Mr Spencer, Mr Harris, Mr Dupasque, Miss Arnott. They all said it, more than once. *"I've warned them over and over,"* they all said. *"If they don't work, they'll end up in 4C."* And here you are.'

'You can't help it if you're stupid,' George Spalder argued.

'If you were stupid enough to be in 4C, you'd be on a life-support system,' said Mr Cartright tartly.

'So what are we doing here?'

Mr Cartright turned biblical.

'You're reaping as ye sowed. And, speaking of sewing, will you please get on and vote. What's it to be? Textiles, nutrition, domestic economy, child development or consumer studies?'

'I'm not voting for none of them,' said Gwyn Phillips. 'They're all stupid.'

Having a sneaking sympathy for this point of view, Mr Cartright said nothing. But when George Spalder added,

'Girls' things, that's what they are!' he felt obliged to put 4C right.

'Don't kid yourselves. While you lot are sitting here grumbling, girls all over the country are making soap,

farming maggots and exploding custard tins. They're studying Chemistry, Biology and Physics. To the Victor the Spoils now. And they passed exams.'

Then, tiring suddenly of the whole boiling, he started striding up and down the rows of desks, chivvying them into voting. 'Get *on* with it, Robin Foster. Hurry up, Rick. What difference is it going to make to you? According to Miss Arnott, you hardly ever come to school anyway. Thank you, Tariq. Everyone look at Tariq. He is an example to you all. He chose. He wrote it down, not *neatly* exactly, but clear enough to read. And now he's dropped his voting slip in my tub. Thank you, Tariq. *Thank* you. And thank you, Henry. No need to *flick* it in. Thank you, Russ. Thank you. Thank you, Martin, and I hope you'll be very happy wi –'

Mr Cartright broke off. For it was clear the new boy wasn't even listening. As Mr Cartright's shadow fell across his desk, he'd simply pulled the forefinger of his right hand out of that ear for a moment, picked up his neatly written vote, and dropped it in the plastic tub. At no point had he so much as glanced up from his book.

Mr Cartright was mystified. Gently, he prised Martin Simon's fingers out of his ears, and asked him:

'What are you doing?'

Now the boy was equally confused.

'Reading, sir.'

'Reading? Reading what?'

'Baudelaire.'

Mr Cartright's eyes widened.

'Baudelaire?'

He glanced round the room, hoping for one mad moment that none of his other pupils had heard the

exchange. Fat chance of that. They were all sitting, ears on stalks.

'In French or English?' Mr Cartright asked, thinking to diffuse the tension with a joke.

Young Martin Simon flushed.

Mr Cartright swivelled the book round on the desk.

'French!'

'Sorry,' said Martin Simon automatically.

Mr Cartright sighed.

'So am I, lad. So am I.'

There was a pause. Then Mr Cartright said:

'Well? What are you waiting for? Pack your book bag. Off you go.'

Martin Simon looked up in astonishment.

'Go *where*, sir?'

'Anywhere. I should think a lad like you could take your pick. You could try Mr King's class. Or Mr Henderson's. I bet either of them would be happy to have you.'

'But *why*?'

Mr Cartright settled his huge rear end companionably on Martin Simon's desk. For an intelligent lad, he thought, he wasn't acting too bright.

'Look at it this way,' he told him. 'You can't stay here. For one thing, you can read. You'll be right out of place here from that alone. Then there's the other problem. You read French.'

He waved a hand airily round the room, to draw in the others who were sitting there staring.

'I expect there'll be quite a lot of language in this classroom,' he explained. 'I, for one, have a temper. Then there's the colourful patois of our local housing scheme to be contended with. And Tariq here, I'm told,

swears in three separate sub-continental dialects. But no one speaks French.'

He shifted on the desk.

'No,' he said. 'I'm afraid you'll have to go.'

A thought struck him.

'With all those science exams you passed, you could even try Dr Feltham. He might have you.'

At last Martin Simon seemed to grasp the point. Rising to his feet, he started shovelling the few possessions he'd unpacked back into his book bag.

Mr Cartright caught the rather regretful expression on the boy's face.

'I'm sorry about it too, lad,' he said. 'But, believe me, it's for the best. You wouldn't fit in here. There's been some mistake.'

Martin Simon nodded.

'Ask at the office,' Mr Cartright advised, walking him to the door. 'Tell them they've got it all wrong, and you can't come back here. I won't have you. You don't belong.'

He saw him off on the long trek down the green corridor.

'Goodbye, lad,' he called out wistfully after him. 'Good luck!'

He swung the door closed and turned to face the rest with iron determination.

'Right!' he said. 'Put that scarf away, Sajid. Are you eating, Luis Pereira? Spit it out in the bin. Look how much time we've wasted. I warn you, I'm getting this finished before the bell rings.'

With any other class, he might have managed it. But what with two of the tellers he chose not being all that good at counting, and the constant delays as people

criticized each way of tallying ('You can't count Rick's vote, sir! He's never here!'), there wasn't time to do it properly. Even before the third recount was complete, Robin Foster and Wayne Driscoll were eyeing him with their imaginary stop-watches raised, and lips pursed round their non-existent whistles.

It was almost Time . . .

Mr Cartright slid his vast bulk off the desk on to his feet. Not for nothing was he called Old Carthorse behind his back.

'Hush up!' he bellowed, cutting directly through all the layers of noise at once. 'That's it! I've had enough! The bell's about to ring, and we're wrapping this up one way or another. I warn you, 4C, the very next boy responsible for any noise in this room – *any noise at all* – will have to dip his hand in this tub and take out a voting slip, and whatever it says on that goes.'

The silence was instant and total. High fliers they might not be, but every one of them was bright enough not to fancy the idea of being blamed by all the rest for three solid weeks of work on some project cruelly designed by Dr Feltham to bring out the latent interest of things like sewing or cooking or housekeeping.

It seemed no one dared breathe. Mr Cartright could even hear the warble of a songbird outside on the guttering.

Then, without warning, the spell broke.

The other side of the classroom door suddenly suffered the most tremendous thud. The door knob rattled and the panels shook.

In walked a clumsy young giant.

A roar of approval greeted the newcomer's entrance.

'Hi, nit-face!'

'Last one in class gets maimed!'

'Sime! Saved a place for you!'

'Found us at last, have you, you great fishcake!'

'Get a *brain*, Simon Martin!'

Simon Martin . . . Martin Simon . . . Of course.

Mr Cartright heaved himself back into his usual position on the desk. So there was the explanation. Simple enough. Mere clerical error.

Martin Simon . . . Simon Martin . . .

He let the flurry of excitement ride for a few moments longer.

'Where've you *been*, Sime?'

'Got stuck, din't I?' declared the newcomer proudly. 'In Dr Feltham's class.'

'Dr Feltham's!'

Another roar of laughter, and even Mr Cartright had to smile, trying to picture this huge, strapping and unthinking lad marooned amongst Dr Feltham's boffins.

'*Tole* him I din't *blong*. But would he listen? Not him. Not till that other ear'ole finally came along and rescued me. And even then –'

To cut off what was clearly all set to develop into a prolonged riff of resentment, Mr Cartright held the plastic tub of votes out towards his brand new pupil.

'Pick one,' he said.

Simon Martin's look of deep disgruntlement turned into one of even deeper suspicion.

'Wossit for?'

'Just pick one.' Mr Cartright sharpened the tone to an order. 'Now.'

Simon Martin reached in and picked the one that happened to be written most neatly.

'What does it say?'

The lad stared at it for a few moments. His massive caterpillar eyebrows crumpled in confusion as he struggled with Martin Simon's perfect handwriting. Then:

'Chile . . . chile . . . chile dev-lop-ment,' he read aloud stumblingly.

'Development.'

Mr Cartright managed to slide in the correction a split second before the explosion.

'That's *babies*, isn't it?'

'We're not doing *babies*, sir!'

'That *is* girls' stuff. It is!'

'I shan't be coming in at all now! Not till it's all over, anyhow.'

'I'm blaming you, Sime!'

'You can't call it *science*. It's just a great big *cheat*!'

'Pick again, Sime!'

Hastily, Mr Cartright upended the tub over the waste bin. The remaining votes floated down to join whatever it was Luis Pereira had spat in earlier.

Mr Cartright flicked through the pages of Dr Feltham's vast Science Fair memorandum. Oh, what a ghastly way to start the term! Why couldn't the man arrange things the way every other school did, and leave the great tribute to the wonders of science until the last couple of weeks before the holidays, when classes like 4C could be left peaceably slacking? That was the trouble with enthusiasts, of course. They never allowed for other people's weaknesses.

Finding the right page at last, Mr Cartright raised his voice like someone announcing the winner of an Oscar, and declared solemnly:

'And the experiment Dr Feltham has chosen for this topic is –'

He glanced round. He hadn't even said it yet, and already a sea of disgusted faces was staring back at him.

'Flour babies!'

Now scorn was supplanted by confusion.

'Sir?'

'Is that *flour* babies or *flower* babies?'

'They both sound weird to me.'

'What *are* they?'

'Whatever they are, they don't sound much like proper *Science*.'

Secretly, that was what Mr Cartright thought. He glanced at the list again. Could it be a mistake? Another clerical error?

No. There it was, clear as paint.

Flour babies.

Right.

Mr Cartright slapped Dr Feltham's memorandum down on the desk. Whatever they were, there was no time to read about them now. Already, Wayne Driscoll's cheeks were puffed to bursting, and he was waving his imaginary stopwatch about wildly.

And, sure enough, the bell rang.

Just one more short ritual to get through, and the lesson would be over. Who would be first today?

Bill Simmons.

'Excuse me, Bill Simmons. I don't remember anyone telling you this lesson was over. Back in your seat, please.'

'But, sir! Sir! The bell's rung.'

'That bell's for me, Bill. It is not for you.'

His heart wasn't in it, though. No, not today. In fact, to get rid of them just that little bit sooner, he even stooped to pretending he hadn't seen Russ Mould's bottom hovering an insolent ten inches clear of the chair, ready to make the big getaway.

'All right, 4C. Off you go.'

They hurled themselves at the door in a disorderly rabble, leaving him wondering.

Flour babies . . . What on earth?