

Special exemption for tricycles

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When you're a very little kid, a lot of things that grownups do seem baffling – but even at the tender age of four, I knew that this time, something was really up. For one thing, there were so many of them down there, milling-around like a city-full of insects under a freshly-turned stump. For another (for once) they weren't all babbling and talking over each other – that whole big group of adults was using the same voice.

I had a great view of the scene from my big fourth-floor wooden porch at the back of the Victorian apartment building I lived in. I didn't even have to use a door to get out there, as soon as that roaring racket woke me up, I just crawled right through my bedroom window – the hard part was dragging a chair over to the railing and clambering up on it, so I could see over.

So many people, all working together on one huge project – not in stages, a few at a time, for many months in a row (which itself achieved impressive-enough results) but all at once on the same day – hundreds of them (to me).

There were huge roiling towers of concrete-dust, and saws and sledgehammers hard at work, wheelbarrows being filled with broken bricks, four and five-foot fence-splinters of rotted weather-greyled wood, and weird cakey globs of shattered asphalt, bigger than a trike's front-wheel. Fences were coming down, driveways were being torn up, the great big garage, eight cars wide, was being attacked as if it were the battlements of a medieval city under siege.

That vast garage was the strategic key, the main structure – the thing which made all of that space into mere utility-zoning – nothing but a place to put a car – and the building fought hard for it's survival.

I don't know how old it really was, but to me it seemed ancient – and I know it was the tough bit of the job, because no other wall or fence or chunk of knee-skinning concrete held up nearly as long – every other outpost fell under the onslaught of a small team – but this one needed everybody to help.

There were huge pick-axes and sledgehammers, chunky six-by-six timbers for use as battering-rams, there was even a caller – like the man with the drum on a roman-ship – to co-ordinate all the oar-slaves effort into one smooth pull.

Again and again, in the silence between the earth-shake clamor, of all those swinging tools and aching arms, he called - "The wall says No!"

And the multitude swung for victory, "Yes!"

There are things about my childhood that are different from almost everyone I know, but there are also things that are very normal. Sometimes I'm not even sure which are which.

One of the best weird things, is that I grew up with my own park, just outside my back door. Not mine only, all the other kids and adults from the communal houses which enclosed it, in the middle of an otherwise unremarkable city block, also used it – but for all that, the space was not only right there, but was for our 'gang' only.

If I'd left something at the public park a block away, I would have expected it to be gone the next day, but if I left something in our yard, big and sometimes crowded as it was, I knew it would still be there. It was a big safe-zone, even if by today's standards, it was nowhere near to being child-proofed. (Hence the horrible cautions, and my long-lasting morbid fear of tetanus).

The yard wasn't just one open plain of rolled-flat grass or anything boring like that. It was actually so big and diverse, that for us kids, it had provinces.

The big tarmac behind the apartments was for bikes and basketball (one hoop was enough, we made up a lot of wildcard-rules versions). It wasn't really that huge a space to ride, and as we kids grew up and all got proper two-wheelers with three speeds and back-pedal brakes, the tarmac shrank to a staging and assembly-point for urban bike voyages. But early-on, when the two wheelers around were really four-wheelers (thanks to the ubiquitous training-wheels) and the big-ass tricycles were still king, that tarmac was so busy it would often resemble a rush-hour traffic-jam.

There was surprisingly little possessiveness for our gang – we all rode each other's kiddie-bikes around without asking and never gave each other trouble about it, but there were certain ground-rules, to keep things civilized.

If you were doing circuits, round and around the pad, you'd go counter-clockwise from the hoop, past the bike-shed, down the driveway (up to the fence which divided it from the street, back along the edge of the big-green, then up to the elms.

If you took a trike, however – particularly the big orange tube-steel one with the long bench-seat along the back, you were absolutely and firmly obligated to be a taxi. Any kid who wanted a ride could flag you down, then, either sitting on the bench (for that one uber-bike) or standing on the footrests over the back-axle and holding on to your shoulders, they would direct you to where they wanted to be dropped-off, and you would head out at top speed.

Taxis had special status – with a passenger on board you could ignore the flow of traffic in order to deliver them most directly – you could also bike across the lawn sections to the far concrete apron on occasion, without getting yelled-at by the sunbathing contingent of grumpy adults without kids. Not that any adults actually signed-off on the taxi-exemption – but still, those limited violations were still a big improvement over the previous *bicycles everywhere* free-for-all which preceded it, (and had, it must be admitted, been pretty hard on the grass).

That big central lawn was probably the most adults-only part of the whole yard – but even then, we'd still use it for 'red-rover' and 'what time is it mister wolf?' – and the home-free for hide-and-go-seek was there too, in the most central open spot, where a single wooden telephone-pole marked the edge of the open lawn and the beginning of a more broken, part-lawn part-garden section.

In the winter, we'd build a crude trampled-snowbank-rink on the big lawn, then devise ways to play hockey on a lumpy, knee-killing kidney of ice with one net (not that hard, after our many one-hoop and wall-bounce games).

We'd also build snow-forts of course – several of them – which even ended up sprouting interconnecting trench-works, when the snow was especially deep and no one had rolled a giant snowman-ball through the area in a while. The forts often lasted for weeks, sometimes months, and we could pile them high with snowball ammo for epic battles of triumphant giggles and snow-down-your-neck squeals.

I spent a lot of happy snowsuit-time out there in the winter – and the fact that I could look off the edge of my porch and check if there was anyone out there to play-with or not before suiting-up, saved me a lot of wasted mukluk-lacing time.

But still, in the summer, the big lawn was mostly for loungers and tanners – the area where you didn't want your ball or Frisbee to end-up, lest it clonk someone whiny in the head and get you into trouble – *the snarky zone*.

We had many great games in our youth - but we never played cowboys and Indians, for us it was voyageurs and Indians. It was always implicitly understood by all that the Indians were the good-guys, *except of course, all the Indians were girls*. How we guys got stuck as the voyageurs every single time completely escapes me, but it was a fixed law, and we still had lots of fun, even with the vague taint of evilness upon us.

Our main territory for this game was the woodlot, a double-wide section of the yard, behind a huge old double-wide Victorian house, the back of which faced the back of my building. I'd lived in that sprawling wide-lined house too – when I was really small. The main tree in our woodlot was a giant chestnut, which bombed us all with many a pea-green miniature sea-mine as we played beneath it (not nearly as much fun as the chestnuts to be found inside those spiky shells). But that wasn't the only big leafy critter back there – there were many smaller trees too, and a fine assortment of hugely overgrown bushes. For us (on our modest scale) it was a forest canopy.

There were branches to tie-off ropes, so we could fly a crude tent-roof easily, or decorate different spots into small forts or outposts with sticks and cardboard (and the inevitable, infinitely-useful magic-markers).

We explored, we fortified, we scouted – but inevitably we would run into those pesky Indians again – and then mostly we died, great big exaggerated Shakespearian deaths. Somehow their arrows seemed to be a lot more effective than our muskets.

Perhaps it was the fact that we took elaborate care to load powder and shot and tamp-properly before each attempt to fire, while they seemed to possess not only infinite quivers, but truly incredible speed and aim.

Not at all often, but occasionally, one of us boys would get a peek inside the Indian's camp – a land of secret rituals, whispers and giggles.

Of course they were at their most solemn when threatening a rare hostage or negotiating a new treaty – a truly intimidating lot, especially since they were all enjoying the maturity-advantage that makes girls humiliatingly tall to boys, just when the boys are at their most nervous anyhow.

Their forbidden world was at the far end of the yards – past the broken garden-section. In effect it was a clearing (lawn) between two very long garden-rows, so that in full bloom, we could (from the edge of our voyageur forest) see glimpses of them back there, through tall flowers and veg, wild-grasses and neatly-trimmed high bushes.

I thought our turf had some pretty good facilities – we had the hose-pipe and a huge patch of fresh mint, which we chewed-on quite often. At the far border of our forest, we also had the nice bench under the small stand of elms which sat at the three-way junction between tarmac, forest and tanning green – a great place for strategy meetings and grand councils.

But the girls had infrastructure too. I'm not sure how they would have prioritized their amenities, but all of us guys were by far the most scared of their cauldron.

Yes, they had a real-live huge round black cast-iron cauldron – and it was absolutely always in use. But I don't want to give you the idea that we were too superstitious – we were perfectly capable of pretending that spells had effected us, but the only reason we were afraid of that cauldron was because of how it would smell – starting from a couple of weeks into spring, and lasting right up until it froze again the next winter.

A big squirt of that stuff splashed on you, would make you feel barfy for a week.

They used a lot of different ingredients for their foul brew, but the big one was sumach leaves. In fact, I guess you could say that theirs was a sumach-based culture, since they used the flexible green twigs that they stripped the leaves from, to make bows, arrows and many braided decorations – and those ultra-stinky leaves wound up in many foul concoctions – not just the cauldron.

They also had a huge variety of interesting species of plants in 'their' gardens. Herbs and flowers and even the infamous traffic-cone-orange "poison berries" which they used, to paint grim characters on their totem (wooden hydro) pole, hidden from view just behind the garage, (and so, the holiest of holies).

Tactically, their best asset was a hole in the one section of fence that was left in the entire commons, which ran from that one surviving garage, to the very edge of the yard. Counting that, they had three 'gates' from which to charge. They could sneak in staggered-formation along the line of house-backs, using each porch and stair as cover, they could scamper through the narrow grassy path between the garden rows, or they could secretly assemble en-masse behind the garage, then swing round and charge screaming and ululating, right through the big green – terrifying, if not exactly subtle.

Whatever their secret, those girls got us guys, every single time – and we voyageurs, men of honour (futile or not) always went back for more of it, the very next day.

Along with the many large and often season-long epic games, there were smaller, more introspective kinds of play. When a nice mud-patch developed near the elms, we made sure to keep it watered, so we could dig and shape some cool hills, ramps and jumps for our matchbox cars. Crashing them, rolling them, submerging them and mucking them up like they'd been at a rainy rally-event all day long was almost like making your own little car-chase movie.

Hey, there is a reason that some treasured toys become so rare and collectible – wrecking things is fun. We even had a craze of making murky little pier-side underwater dioramas in big glass jars full of tinted water, with old cars, stray tires, sticks for the pier-pilings, the odd wall-section of building bricks to suggest sunken ruins, and the occasional fluorescent dinosaur, just for a little spice.

Now and then, if we were really careful, we could even get a diving-bell going - but establishing the perfect buoyancy was patience-work, so most of them were static.

If cars in mud (and hurled from roofs and trees) were like model movie-effects, another game we played was very like cel animation, or perhaps movable collage.

We took comic-books that we liked, with really cool poses of the heroes, and we'd cut the best full-character drawings out, and make them fight. Sometimes it was agonizing trying to decide which side of the page to use, when there was a good drawing on each and they overlapped fatally, but it was only years later that I gave much thought to the idea of keeping the comic itself intact. *Back then it was source, not destination.*

Wasteful perhaps, but playing 'guys' was really fun. Mind you, if anyone happens to have a copy of the old Batman comic where he fights the red-baron, let me know – that Joe Kubert was a friggin' genius. *I cut from the best.*

School is definitely one of those topics that for me, requires a lot of explanation – education is a part of the 'very different' section of my life, but without going too deep, I do want to mention one particular lesson that happened in that backyard, because it stands out.

At the time, there were two very small schools inside the one commune. One of the schools was started by our parents, and staffed by them and a very kind and intelligent Montessori teacher. The other was started by the son of the commune's matriarch and

staffed by him, his undeniable wide-ranging genius, and his ultimately psychotic ego.

For an all-too-brief period, the two projects were very nicely merged – this lesson happened then.

China was effectively closed to the west in the early seventies – Nixon scored his one lasting coup, just for managing to talk to them. But for all the distance, there were some exchanges. The one we met was a young microbiology student from Beijing, who was studying at the university of Toronto. She agreed to teach us kids some Chinese in exchange for tutorials in English from the mad genius.

It wasn't expensive to get kitted-out in those days – for four dollars at the Sun-Wa bookstore, we each got a nice little rigid paper box containing a little black ink-stick with sharp gold Chinese characters on the side, a couple of brushes and the classic ink-stone, with a flat part above, for actually grinding your ink-stick in tight circles and darkening whatever water you were using, and a deep sloping groove for a reservoir.

It's still not expensive, and if you're feeling bored with writing or drawing with pens and pencils, I highly recommend trying it. Not only because it's pretty cool to make your own ink – but also because the brush, when wetted, held and used correctly, can do incredible things, far beyond any pen's (and most other brushes) capability. From razor-sharpness to fat black blob and back, with perfect control of the variation (given enough practise). Still the ultimate inking-tool – despite thousands of years of upstart technologies competing, each sure they would sweep it aside with flash.

This particular lesson was out on the tanning-lawn, with a dozen identical low-down (kneel-at) work-tables scattered over the soft uncut grass, and big sheets of newsprint stacked in front of each of us, for us to practise our characters.

We worked on numbers and simple words a little while, as she went from table to table making gentle comments in a voice so soft it was almost inaudible. Then we all took a break so she could teach us some songs that Chinese kids our age liked to sing.

I can still do a little ditty about a rabbit sailing the crescent moon as a boat with a tree for a mast, and something else a lot shorter and sillier about a frog, though I fear I've mangled-them in memory badly-enough to be laughable to a Mandarin-speaker now.

Her voice was lovely – only when singing, did she open-up all the way. She broke each of the Chinese words up into syllables, and we worked on the trickier sounds especially hard. The newness, her lovely kindness, and the summer light and puffy breeze of that

day added up to one of the finest single days of education I ever had in my life.

Stuff changes. Maybe it was one too many taxi-rides across the tanning zone, or even a simpler vendetta, from one too many childish shrieks on an early sleep-in morning. Whatever triggered the evil plan, someone decided that the woodlot had to go – it was 'wasted' space, that, "could be getting a whole lot more sunlight and dropping a lot less crap to rake-up, if all the bushes and trees were torn right out."

We kids were horrified – there was no way – that woodlot was sacred turf for all of us. Right at the centre of all of our most mythical and wonderful games.

Immediately, we began a campaign. We drew up posters by hand, we planned a big combination rally and party for our supporters and opponents alike. We were sure that if we could just show all the grownups how passionately we felt about our forest, we'd win them all over to our side.

And when I say party, I mean, we pulled-out all the stops. That overgrown lot was transformed into the country of Slovelia (*only one of a great-many identities that it had for us kids, but you have to keep your branding simple, when you'd dealing-with dull-headed adults*). Some of the girls got to work on creating a whole slew of 'traditional' arts and crafts for Slovelia. I wrote a few songs to be sung with the accompaniment of an odd-tuned ukulele, we even had the garden-committee volunteer to put that year's entire vegetable crop into a spectacular salad – *that would really show them*.

And on the day, even well into that evening, thanks to some scattered Christmas lights in little clumps throughout our Slovelian village, we were sure we'd won the fight. Even the grouchiest of the adults came and ate our salad (dollar a plate, thank you very much) enjoyed our handicrafts and songs, and seemed charmed by our solidarity and eagerness to impress them.

But the woodlot came out the next weekend anyhow, right on schedule – *for more lawn*.

I could tell you exactly where that great big yard was, you could go and look and try to imagine it, but without that looming chestnut, the dense scrub, the stand of old-man elms with their fragile dignity, cross-traffic tricycle-taxis and two dozen laughing kids in close-proximity, it's just a big dead empty space.

Might as well use it for parking cars – *which they do*.