

Understand, Rubberband?

by Christian Crumlish

After we moved uptown we lived close enough to the park that we could go there on our own (with permission) on weekends and during school breaks to visit the zoo or the pond where people floated their mechanical boats, but most of the time we went to the playgrounds. The old junglejims with their rubber jigsaw mats beneath to break your fall had given way to more conceptual installations. Large wooden structures with chain-link bridges, rope swings, tire obstacle courses now stood rooted in deep sand. Each playground was slightly different. Only one had the tire swing. Another had a fortress or a wall of climbing ropes.

The old corrugated-metal manually operated merry-go-rounds were still there. You'd run alongside, holding one of the metal tube handholds and jump aboard once you got it up to speed. Sometimes a kid's older brother would get the whole thing spinning faster than our stubby legs could do on their own. Rarely did anyone fall off and even more rarely did someone throw up. although it happened enough that I can still picture the stuff oozing over the raised metal chevrons. Eventually somebody would come by and throw sawdust on the puke and we'd avoid the sandpit it was rooted in until the pukedust was swept up or just dried up and blew away in the wind.

If a kid fell off the merry-go-round the mother or nanny watching them would run over and, if they were bleeding or inconsolable, take them away. Often enough you'd see the kid up and around again in no time as if nothing happened. Kids who fell in the sand were normally fine - just a little startled.

I think those playgrounds were the first situation I can remember where we mixed freely with every kind of kid. We had no idea where anyone went to school or what their parents did. We usually stuck to ourselves, me and my sister or me and my two brothers. I can only

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remember a few times when I made friends with strangers at the playground. Once or twice we'd see the same people on repeat weekends or a few days in a row during school holidays. But it never lasted.

One time I had a crush on a girl I met in the playground near 86th. We had both watched Sonny & Cher the night before and we both agreed that, when they sang "Signed, sealed, delivered / I'm yours" during the big production number at the end of the show that it had sounded to us like they were singing "Up yours!" instead. This is what passed for flirting for me at that time. Pretty risque stuff. I don't remember her name, but I remember her gruff voice and irreverent attitude, and the way she paid attention to me.

I also remember a kid with vampire teeth and a littel black cape chasing this red faced Chinese-looking boy, saying, in a received Boris Karloff accent "I vant to suck your Oriental." For years afterward Arthur and I could crack each other up by quoting that line and debating whether the little dracula meant "your" or "you're."

Another time this lanky black kid came up to me while I was waiting my turn to swing on the rope from one platform to the other (or fall into the sandpit below trying) and said to me in a very rapid, rehearsed clip:

You don't mess
With the best
'Cause the best
Don't mess

You don't fool
With the cool
'Cause the cool
Don't fool

Understand,
Rubberband?

I did understand. I practiced saying that myself but it never sounded as cool when I did and I could never really figure out an appropriate place for a boasting rap anyway.

* * *

Other times our whole family went to the park together like we used to when we still lived downtown. I liked to wander off and play by myself, losing myself amidst the other kids. I was shy but I found strangers, especially if they were older than me, fascinating. I'd kind of listen in on their conversation and mannerisms, trying to absorb everything that was not available at home, trying to drink in every possibly experience, and grow up as fast as possible.

I was listening to a black kid talk to his friend in the slick urban patter that still sounded exotic and foreign to me. It would take me a while to process what I was hearing and realize I was listening to English, just a much more musical, jaunty, profane version of the language I spoke so timidly.

"The old man got a bloody nose! Look at that old man with the bloody nose!" I heard him saying. He kept repeating it. He was higher up in the junglejim than I was so I guessed he was seeing something far away. A minute or two later my sister was calling me down from my perch.

"Christian, we have to go!"

"Why?"

"Daddy got hurt."

What? It took me a while to sort things out in the blur that followed.

All I knew was that when I got back to the other side of the playground Dad was holding a white handkerchief to his face and it was turning red from the steady flow of blood. I don't think I connected what the other boy'd been saying with my father's predicament until much later.

My mom gathered us together and I assume we must have piled into a taxicab to go to the emergency room, or maybe we hustled up to Mount Sinai. The next scene in my memory is in one of those antiseptic clinic hallways with putrid green paint and horrible lighting.

While we were waiting for my dad to come out my sister told me what had happened.

This guy with a pack of doberman pinschers - the pit bulls of their day - let the dogs off their leashes so they could play in the same fountain where the kids were cooling off from the city's summer heat. This was the baby part of the playground where most of the parents were clustered. My dad's horror of germs (his personal form of brahminism) and his reasonable concern that a dog might snap at a child, even in play, nip and draw blood, made him take notice and decide to intervene.

What he always chose to emphasize later was the prospect of the dogs *defecating* in the fountain water, that feces might pollute the children's environment. This dovetailed exactly with the story he used to tell of the (possibly tripping) Age-of-Aquarius hippies who invaded the playground in Washington Square Park near the miniature Arc de Triomphe - plaster of paris and chicken wire, lath wood and plaster substituting for the Roman and French predecessors. Yes, even in that primeval story of the hippies in the park, it was not bad enough that they slid down the slides and intruded weirdly on the space of innocent children, but he had to insist that the hairy undisciplined people had also been crapping in

the sandbox.

So my father asked or maybe told the guy to take his dogs out of the fountain, and to put them back on leash. They guy refused getting all up in his face about it and after some debate my father turned away, at which point the guy famously "sucker punched" my dad in the side of head, breaking his glasses -still then made of actual glass - driving shards of broken lens into his eyebrow, cutting him pretty bad.

Have you ever noticed how much the head bleeds? I had. I remember that it looked to me as though he were crying blood, weeping a torrent.

* * *

His eye was fine it turned out. The stitches - a butterfly rather - healed quickly, but he was unmanned. He would later tell me that the shame of this unanswered assault, the humiliation in front of his children, the sense of violation, the feeling of victimization he despised in others - he blamed every victim, most of all himself - this shame paralyzed him for years afterward.

