

## Misspent youth? (1489 words)

The back road was generally quiet from traffic and pedestrians. An ideal place for kids to cause harmless trouble. Childish pranks.

We found a wooden post on the side of the road that had been knocked over at some stage. We put it back up, resting it between rocks so that it looked intact.

I rode my bike a little way up the road, and then faced towards the resting post. About a hundred metres away. We were waiting for a car to come down the hill where we could stage the prank.

'There is a car coming' said Brian excitedly, 'get ready.'

As the approaching car, a taxi, rounded the bend and came into view of the scene, I slowly started riding towards the post, picking up speed, knowing the driver could see me as I rolled down the hill.

The driver saw me ride smack bang into the post and knock it over. I fell off my bike and lay on the side of the road next to the fallen post. It looked like a serious accident.

The taxi stopped and the driver got out. I stood up, screamed in pain, and then staggered towards the grassy bank where Brian was hiding. I collapsed and rolled down the bank, groaning loudly.

We remained hidden safely in the long grass, laughing softly to ourselves.

The next minute we could see three adult heads peering down the slope, looking anxiously for the fallen kid. We had attracted a small crowd as two other cars had stopped to see what was going on.

The taxi driver called out, asking if I was all right. When we did not answer, the driver started to twig and called on us to get up. We stayed put, looking for an escape route through the nearby bush.

As he started walking down the grassy slope towards us, we started to bolt, and he yelled out:

'you little b\*\*\*\*\*s, wait until I get hold of you'.

We ran like heck after that and did not look back until we were safely out of the way. We snuck back later when it was all over and the search party had gone, and safely retrieved the bike. We left the fallen post as a silent marker to our childish prank.

Luckily, we were not caught that time, and our appetite for other pranks remained undiminished.

Like the sagas surrounding the cypress pine tree around the corner and several streets away from our house. It was a gigantic tree, and you could climb it and sit on a vegetative platform way above the street below. It had a great view of the neighbourhood and we used it as a base from which we planned expeditions into the bush nearby.

Across the road from our tree was a new house that had a tin roof and a cranky fellow who lived there who was not all that keen on us climbing the tree and using it as a base. We disagreed and hit upon the idea of picking the "conkers" (large seeds the size of a walnut) from the tree and sling shotting them onto his tin roof. They made a great sound and guaranteed his irate response.

After propelling a few of these missiles on his roof, he would come out into the street, look up and the tree, and tell us what he thought. It was usually stuff like:

'you little b\*\*\*\*\*s, I'll come and get you'.

We would wait quietly until he gave up and went inside, and then we would sling another lot on his roof. He would tear outside, yell some comments, wait, and wait, and then go back inside.

We learnt not to push things too far, so that after a third sortie of conkers we would quickly climb down the tree and head into the adjacent bush. On our way back home later, we would see this fellow parading around and muttering dark comments to a tree that was empty of climbing kids.

It made me realise to this day how annoying tin roofs could be.

After we matured from sling shots, I made a gun propelled by crackers. The gun was a crude thing, a piece of pipe attached to a homemade wooden handle. The idea was to load it with a cracker and stuff it full of small stones as shot. We never got test it properly because of the saga of the bees.

One fine spring afternoon after school a group of us were roaming around with my makeshift gun and we came upon a building project at the end of the street involving the construction of a block of flats, a line of builder's cars and utes parked outside, and a street tree laden with a beehive buzzing with hundreds of bees. The beehive was a wonder to a group of kids who had not seen a hive this close before.

As we stood there admiring this marvel of nature, one of the builders called out:

'hey, you kids, leave that hive alone'.

Well. Up until that point we had no intention of doing anything to the beehive, but it gave one of the kids in our group, an aspiring idiot, a bright idea.

He snatched my homemade gun and hurled it full pelt at the beehive.

My last memory of that place was a flash as I saw the gun hit the beehive, it collapsed, and many bees flew out looking for retribution. I also heard an angry cry from one or more of the builders, and I turned and started running fast. I suspected the bees would swarm the builders' vehicles and it may have been some time before they could safely use them.

I did not look back, and I reckon I broke a school cross country record that day as I ran into the bush and across to the nearby suburb. After about half an hour of running I quietly returned home and never went back that way until well after the flats were built.

And I did not retrieve the makeshift gun, as it would have been covered in honey and the curses of angry bees and builders. Best to leave sleeping makeshift guns lie I thought.

As a young teenager I had a morning paper round to supplement my pocket money. It involved getting up at five am six days a week to hand deliver newspapers to peoples' letterboxes, and I was home in time for breakfast at seven am and would then to head off to school or sport on a Saturday. It was hard but character forming work and payed less than five dollars a week. I would spend most of it on sugary treats like milkshakes and chocolate, which our dentist was really pleased about.

One day, at dawn, my mate Brian and I were loaded up with our respective newspapers at an intersection close to the street where we both lived. There was no traffic, and it was very quiet, but there was a strong smell of gas in the area. It seemed to be coming from a crack in the road.

Brian thought it would be prudent to test whether gas was flammable. After all, it should not have been leaking. He lit a match and placed it near the crack as an experiment. We were not sure what to expect.

Initially a small flame popped up from the road. This was interesting, like a science experiment using a Bunsen burner.

The small flame grew higher and then raced across the crack in the road in a most alarming manner. Our instinct was to bolt as we had work to do, but as we retreated, we looked back in the growing morning light, and I realised the flame was getting higher and perhaps we had a civic duty to attempt to put it out.

I turned my bike around and rode down the hill towards the flame, coming to sudden stop right next to the flame. In the process some of my newspapers had fallen onto the road and across the flame. I quickly realised I had a solution and used all my big thick Saturday newspapers to smother the flames, spreading the papers across the road in a line. It did the job and put the flame out, but unfortunately some of my papers were singed.

I delivered the papers and expected complaints about some of them being partially burnt. Apparently, there were complaints to the Newsagent, our employer, but he could not believe the reports and dismissed the complaints.

I never heard any more about it, and from that day forward I had a healthier regard for the dangers of natural gas. It needs to have an odour and you should keep naked flames away from it.

And there were very few pranks from that day forward. A sobering experience.