

## Imagine

I've always enjoyed thinking. And using my imagination. It's so much easier than reality. When I was a kid my imagination turned ordinary household objects into toys. These were usually items that would not be available to me in stores, either because of cost or appropriateness. For example, my bicycle was my trusty horse when I was in a cowboy mood. The cowboy mood would come upon me when I wished for open spaces where I could be by myself. It's possible the size of our household encouraged my need for solitude. In addition to Mom and Dad and my two brothers, Grandma lived with us. So did Uncle Bert, a man who probably didn't leave his demons on the battlefield when he came home from the war.

Grandma didn't have much imagination. Her mind was rooted in the reality of getting through life with as little fuss as possible. Her room fascinated me when I was six or seven years old. Her bed became a 1946 Mercury Woodie Station Wagon. Something about the footboard or her bedspread must have kicked off this idea in my young brain. I'd sit down at the end of her bed each day and drive it to anywhere I wanted to go.

Later in my boyhood our large galvanized garbage can became my atomic bomb. It was new and shiny and I'd lug it up the steps of our back porch, where I'd hold it on the top of the railing while I stood next to it balancing myself on top of an old washing machine in what I imagined was the bomb bay of the Enola Gay, 31,000 feet over Hiroshima. I had no special dislike of the Japanese. But blowing up an entire city while standing on the railing of our back porch was a feat of the imagination too good to pass up.



Uncle Bert came home from work one evening and caught me just as I tipped the garbage can off the railing. Asked to explain my action, my justification concentrated on the loud bang when the can hit the sidewalk, because I knew he would like that part. In 1952, it was too soon after the war for anyone to object to my game as it commemorated the killing of over 100,000 people in mere seconds. It was a terrible thing to do, yes, but maybe your Uncle Pete or older brother Bill or your father had also been erased from the face of the earth. Violence made more violence easier.

Bert wasn't dealing with any of those issues, however. The big thorn in his side, what continued to roll over and over in his mind at

age 42 while he worked at the newspaper, was this question: Why hadn't he joined the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police when he was a young man? By now, he calculated, he'd qualify for an early retirement and be able to spend his days back home in New York State as landed gentry on a few acres in the Adirondack Mountains. Although his sorrow didn't feel to him like a common malady, Bert's very typical mid-life crisis amounted to "Why didn't I?" "Why couldn't it?" and something like, "Gee, I coulda had a V8."

Bert had kind of a team of life coaches helping him to cope, consisting of Mr. Mathews, an older neighbor who appreciated what my uncle was going through, Bert's brother Uncle Tip, who if nothing else provided some inadvertent comic relief, and our parish priest, Father Nunciato who was so far gone with depression that he simply made my uncle feel better each time they met. The old priest told Bert to get off the fence, leave his atheism behind and embrace Catholicism.

"There is so much blame to throw around," he told Bert. "You need a big enough church to contain all of it."

Bert at first never mentioned his personal agony to those of us around him, fearing any expression of missed opportunities would be interpreted by his family as dissatisfaction with them. But gradually he spoke openly about what he might have missed in life. Mr. Mathews had suggested he not be secretive about it. "The less secrets, the better," he said.

Bert's openness reached a level where when served leftovers at dinner, he might mention Mountie Stations never served leftovers. True or not, I think he made such remarks only when he wanted to be mean to his sister, my mother. More worrisome was the bright red heavy coat he bought as the winter began that year. He wouldn't admit its relevance to his Mountie Wish, as Mom called it, but he did stand straighter when wearing it and pronounce "been" as "bean." Mom began to worry.

It never occurred to me to pretend I was a Canadian Mountie, and if it had I doubt I would have begun to mispronounce my words or say "ay?" all the time. I was at that time fixated on toilet seat lids, specifically the lid I found at the town dump. It made an excellent Knight's shield once I found a way to attach a handle so I could hold it up to protect myself from the stabbing swords of other kids. Mom thought the lid very unsanitary, however, and I had to give it up, at least around the house where she would see me with it.

Most days during that period while I was possessed by Knights and Ladies I kept the shield under the front porch where I could easily slide it without much ado. I lay on the ground one morning retrieving it when I gazed up at the side of the house and for some reason remembered the sailing cap I'd seen on the close-out rack at Woolworth's. Then and there I decided our two story, two-flat house on Hager Street was actually the U.S.S. Enterprise, the version of the aircraft carrier commissioned in 1936 that won 20 battle stars in World War II. Now I would have every reason to use naval terms to spruce up my boring old existence in the home I shared with all my relatives. The kitchen where we normally ate became the Mess Deck. The back porch was the fantail where I imagined watching the water foam away from the stern. The wide front porch was the Bridge, from where I could steer the boat when I played helmsman and took orders from the Captain, John Wayne.

Playing helmsman turned out to be pretty boring. I stood at the porch railing with an old bicycle tire and turned it as if it was a ship's wheel. Since the ship was an aircraft carrier, my post at the wheel faced off the side of the porch so that our street ran by my left shoulder. I imagined our block on Hager street as the landing deck of the carrier. A casual observer might

think a 1952 Chevy Fleetline Deluxe just passed our house, but to me it was an F4U-5N Corsair fighter landing on the A deck.

A terrific amount of nothing took place regularly on Hager Street during the sleepy summers of the 1950s. I remember reading a lot on the front porch ... on the bridge. I remember getting a long scratch on my arm when I slid off the garage roof after I went up to see if it might be suitable to recommend to the Ground Observer Corps for enemy plane spotting. I was planning to volunteer. I figured if I brought my own observation tower, they'd have to make me a General as soon as I joined.

My mother was aghast at the size of my wound and she rushed me to the doctor. (This was before the doctors bought the hospitals and began sending us to their Emergency Rooms.) Dr. Webb pronounced my big scratch a laceration and gave me a powerful antibiotic. Mom brought me back home and made toasted cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for lunch. I later settled down out on the porch to read from the 7 books I had checked out of the library that week. It was probably the drowsy effect of the medicine, but I've always wondered if what happened next was real or not.

Bert came home early from work. He stepped out on the front porch and grabbed a cheap aluminum lawn chair and pulled it over to the railing. He sat down and balanced the bicycle tire horizontally so that it was supported between the railing and his lap. He stepped on the bottom cross rail with both feet, as if he was using a clutch pedal and brakes. He reached over for Grandma's cane, brought it to him, tapped it on the floor boards and moved it through an H pattern like a stick shift lever. Simultaneously making sounds with his mouth like a motor accelerating, he began a trip to somewhere on his imaginary bus.

"I didn't cast off the lines from the dock," I said.

"This is now a bus," he said. "No lines needed."

"Are you gonna tell the Captain the news?"

"He's no longer in charge. I am," said my uncle.

"We're talking about John Wayne here, Uncle Bert."

"He doesn't scare me."

"OK," I said. "but wouldn't you rather be a ship captain? Or at least be driving a boat rather than a city bus?"

"This isn't the Lincoln Ave bus," he said. "This here's a Greyhound SceniCruiser, my boy. Destination, Yellowstone National Park."

"Why stop there, Uncle Bert?"

"You know it!" he almost shouted. "On to the Yukon Territory. Come with me on the Tatshenshini Route. Last stop: beautiful downtown Whitehorse, the capital of our fair land."

It was at this point I noticed our neighbor Mr. Mathews standing on the sidewalk in front of the house.

"Pull that gol-danged bus over to the curb, Bert. You're speeding in the neighborhood again."

Mr. Mathews walked across the tiny bit of grass and reached up to the railing and grabbed the bicycle tire from my uncle's hands.

"I can't drive without it, Phil," my uncle said to Mr. Mathews.

"Good," said our neighbor. "You know you're not supposed to drive it so fast anyway."

"I kept to the speed limit, Phil."

"I don't think so, Bert. Besides, slipping out of reality and trying to drive your house out of town never solved anyone's problems, buddy."

“Not just out of town, Phil, but to Yellowstone and then the Grand Canyon and then --”

“And Bert, what kind of impression do you think you’re making on your nephew here?”

“He thinks he’s on a boat goin’ to the Southern islands.\* Sailing a reach before a followin’ sea.”

“I’m makin’ for the trades on the outside,” I said, “on the downhill run to Papeete.”

“I’m calling an ambulance for the two of you,” said Phil.

When I awoke, I was in my same chair on our front porch. The cheap lawn chair was up against the railing, but there was no sign of the bicycle tire. I could hear the voices of my uncle and Mr. Mathews coming from the garage, where they often spent time on their days off planning one home improvement project or another.

I never heard Bert mention his Greyhound Scenicruiser again. His references to the Mountie Wish gradually drifted away. I kept my helmsman job on the U.S.S. Enterprise, but John Wayne stopped showing up and eventually was fired. I heard he got work in the movie business.

\* *Lyrics from “Southern Cross,” Crosby, Stills and Nash, 1982.*

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