

Travellers' Tales from Possible: Part Three

The Children's House

(as told to Starhawk)

June 3, 2004

Our story so far: Alice Stickly, a hardbitten science writer for the New York Times, has fallen into an alternate reality on her way to cover a biotech conference in San Francisco. Desperate to get back to her highly competitive job, her ailing mother, and her fiancé, she is searching for the mysterious Wizards' Collective. Her journey takes her to the children's house in the Wetlands Block.

Mercedes, my charming hostess and guide, had to go home and pound some comfrey with a pestle, or whatever one does to make tinctures. To my own surprise, I felt a small twinge of mixed regret and panic watching her walk away. She seemed to somehow represent such security as I had in this odd place. Tad and Lilly, those two smiling children, offered to guide me to the children's house. We set off down another long pathway that wound between more gardens, but this one had a bicycle/skateboard/rollerblade path down the center, where kids on various sets of wheels hurtled by in headlong abandon. The path curved and meandered, and in the bends were charming little gardens of tough but child-friendly plants: lamb's ears to stroke, dandelions to blow, snapdragons to snap, and honeysuckle to suck. There were small ponds where groups of toddlers squatted, watching fish flit between the roots of water lilies, and there were swings and slides and merry-go-rounds shaped like animals and birds and faery boats, and climbing structures like giant spiderwebs--all in all, it was a children's paradise, and indeed, I seemed to be the only adult on it, which gave me a rather insecure feeling.

"This is the kid's track," Tad told me. "It goes all the way from downtown out to the edge of the city, on the Bay. There's one in every direction."

"Only kids are allowed, or grownups if they're with a kid," Lilly said, "so we can ride our bikes all over the city, without worrying about cars and stuff."

"What about, uh--" I didn't know how to broach the subject of kidnapers, child molesters, pornography rings, and the odd psychotic who plagued children in my world. Even thinking about such things seemed to taint the atmosphere, and I must admit I felt no nostalgia for the nastier side of life in my world. "Problems? Safety?"

Lilly pointed at a house down the block that had a big sunflower painted on the door. "Every block has a Kid's House" she said. "You can always run in there if you need a grownup for something--if you fall or get hurt or get scared."

Down the block stood a giant sculpture, depicting a woman with her arms stretched wide.

"Who are the culture heroes?" I asked. "The statues?"

"They are famous childcare workers," Tad said.

"Oh. What did they do that was so heroic? Save kids from a burning building? Repel an attack of muggers?"

Tad shrugged. "No. They were just people that kids liked a lot."

"Where I come from, we have statues of generals and statesmen, important people," I said. "Not babysitters."

Lilly made a face. "Eww. How weird!"

"Why would you want a statue of someone who killed a lot of people?" Tad asked. "I think it's better to remember people who were nice to kids."

At this point, I was getting tired, and grumpy. "How much farther is it?" I asked.

"About a mile," Tad said.

"A mile! My feet hurt!" I longed for a civilized place, where I could hail a taxi, make my daily contribution to global warming, and buy a pack of cigarettes. It seemed rather petty of me, to miss my poisonous comforts in the face of all this shining peace and health, but I am who I am: a dark stain on any rainbow. In fact, the radiant health all around me felt a bit oppressive. I couldn't live up to it.

"Let's get bikes," Lilly suggested. A thought appeared to strike her, and she turned to me anxiously. "Can you ride a bike?"

"Twenty years ago I could. They say you never forget."

I had vaguely happy memories of summer vacations on Cape Cod, wheeling along in the sea air, but I hadn't been on one of the contraptions in at least twenty years. We ducked into one of the houses with a sunflower painted on it. In the back yard stood a rack of white-painted bicycles. A group of kids were shooting baskets against the house, which must have created a hell of a racket indoors. At a picnic table, a young woman was supervising a group of toddlers who were fingerpainting all over each other, it seemed, as much as on the papers before them. She smiled at us.

"We're taking bikes," Tad called, and she nodded.

"The white ones are borrower bikes," Lilly said "Anyone can use them, and when you're done, you just leave them off."

"And who takes care of them?" I asked.

"The kids on each street maintain whatever ones are at their house," Tad said. "It's how we all learn bike mechanics."

I picked a large bike from the rack, and looked at it a bit dubiously. It was a decent ten-speed, not a clunker. But it had indeed been years since I'd ridden, and I wasn't too sure about the project. But I mounted, and it didn't buck or kick. Lilly and Tad followed me out, and back to the street.

After one terrible moment of vertigo, I found my balance. We rode out into the wider pavement in the middle of the lane. My skills came back to me, and my muscles were strong from the many hours I'd spent at the gym on the exercise bike. And I had to admit it was pleasant, gliding along past gardens and artworks and small groups of children playing happily together--that is, when I wasn't gasping in fear as small forms on rollerblades darted in front of me. I almost felt like a kid again, myself. Maybe if...no, when, I got back home I'd talk Jason into renting bikes in Central Park some Sunday. Although I had to admit it seemed unlikely--I couldn't picture him on the back of a bicycle. Mercedes, now, I could picture her wheeling down the pathway, looking back and smiling, her long hair flowing out in the wind. For the first time I began to feel a slight sense of regret when I thought about getting home. I pushed it firmly away. Idyllic utopias were for weak, passive, dreamy sort of people. I had important things to do--not the least being that biotech conference I was supposed to be at tomorrow.

In almost no time at all, the pathway ended at a large, circular playground with a carousel in the middle. Tad and Lilly took me over to a big house painted in bright colors, with a mural on the garage door depicting what appeared to be a happy African village in the midst of a dance festival. I would have given a lot for just one mural showing a group of sullen-faced delinquents about to mug some hapless pedestrian, or anything other than this relentless cheer, but I was stuck here. I followed the kids in. A tall, smiling young man with very dark skin and a flashing smile was surrounded by a pack of kids, tugging at his shirt, slapping him on the back, asking him ten questions at once. He extricated himself and greeted me. "I'm Dialo," he said. "I'm the head childcarer here. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for the Wizards," I said. "I'm trying to get back to reality--my reality, the real reality, that is. I was told they could help me."

"Ah, another Slipper. What a shame, you just missed them," he said. "But since you're here, do you want to look around?"

The bottom floor of the house was devoted to children, full of toys, games and books, and devoid of anything sharp or inflammable. There was a toddler's room full of big blocks and dolls and stuffed animals, and rooms for older children full of art supplies. The back yard had play equipment, a garden, and a treehouse.

"This is the very first kids' house," Dialo said with pride. "It set the pattern for them all. Once, before reality split, this was a housing project so dangerous that kids couldn't go outside to play. Some of the grandmothers started talking one day, about how they

hated to keep the kids cooped up all the time, watching TV, never being able to roam free like they used to do when they were kids. They started asking, 'What would it take for the city to be safe for kids to run around and play and ride their bikes?' So they organized the people on their street. Some of them volunteered their homes to be to be safe houses for kids. Others kept an eye on the street, watching out for bad folks or just for kids who needed a grownup to set them straight on something. They got their street together, and then organized the next block, and the next, until they had safe path from out here down to the downtown public library.

"Then they started to think about the childcare thing. There were a lot of single mothers on the street, who were paying half their salary in childcare. They got this idea, and decided to pool their money and rent a big house where kids could go any time of day or night. They got a couple of the women who on the verge of homelessness to live there and paid them something just to be there, to bake cookies when kids came in after school, to watch the little ones. That way the kids on the street always had a place to go. If they had trouble at home, or if their parents had to work late, they never had to be alone. There were always other kids to play with, and a shoulder to cry on if they needed it."

"Sounds good," I said. I was beginning to feel restless. I'm not fond of children, as I've said, and packs of them were swarming about my feet, looking up at me curiously, and interrupting Dialo with demands for attention. My friends who do have kids seemed to spend all their time arranging for them to be driven to various lessons and play dates, and all their conversational time obsessing about which school to send them to, bo-o-oring!

"It was such a successful model that it spread throughout the city," he went on. "In the old days, when we were still part of your reality, we used to have two tiers of kids--the upper middle class kids whose lives got more and more structured and scheduled, and then the poor kids, who got plopped in front of a TV. And none of them got to run around freely and play outside, like kids should. But now, all our kids run together, all of them have safe places to go to, any kid who has trouble at home has someone to listen and offer help."

"This is all very admirable," I said. "I'd love to write an article about it, if I had any hope of publishing it. But I really need to find those Wizards."

"Oh, right. The Wizards. Well, from here they were heading down to the Bioremediation Sites," Dialo said. "Tad and Lilly know their way across the Wetlands. They can take you there."

I thanked him, and with a sense of relief, bid goodbye to the children, and headed out again.

To Be Continued

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