

Skate Park

by Carrie Mesrobian

I go to the skate park to relax. I bring my nephews and their friends, and while they drop off the ramps and grind the rails and furiously attempt *to ollie, nose-manual frontside pop-shove-it casper slide, impossible-out* on their sticker-plastered skateboards, I crochet, sip soda, listen to public radio on my headphones. I leave my daughter Matilda at home with my husband and let my mind wander, with the sun on my face, free of housework, yard work, phone calls, clutter. As far as kid duties go, it's a good gig.

Today we're going to the skate park over by St. Anthony Park, a few neighborhoods away from ours. In the car I've got my nephew Sid and his friend Joey. They're both nine years old, fourth graders, and both sport shaggy blond hair and narrow, thin bodies. As usual, Sid carries his glossy eight-ball helmet. His mother--my sister--insists that he wear it. Both boys are wearing long t-shirts and pants that drag over their skate shoes, which also drag and scrape against the asphalt.



Both boys endlessly catalogue and compare the skate shoes everyone else wears. They bicker back and forth like an old couple: *Do they sell Etnies at the Hot Spot? Or Zumiez? Do they sell stickers there? Geoff Rowley decks? Would Rodney Mullen go to Zumiez or the Hot Spot? Definitely the Hot Spot. Zumiez is a chain store in the mall.*

Rodney Mullen is Sid's hero. He can do a 540 shove-it, double kickflip, a nose manual impossible-out, a nose manual darkslide, double caspers and varial heelflips. He is known as the king of freestyle skating and his favorite place to skate is atop picnic tables. Rodney Mullen can flip a skateboard under his feet and land on it, teetering on the deck's edge. In 1980, when I was in first grade, Rodney Mullen turned pro and skated for legendary skateboard maker Powell Peralta. In 1980, Sid's parents were in fourth grade.

"St. Anthony's is better than New Brighton," Joey tells me with the sharp-eyed certainty about everything skate-related he and Sid share.

Whatever. Here we are. The boys burst out of the car and run ahead of me.

Since I'm not Sid's parent, I don't feel obliged to watch every skateboard trick. Besides, Sid is now too cool to ever ask me; he is quite conscious of the older boys who are sometimes hanging around, the ones who aren't made to wear helmets, the ones with tattoos and pierced ears and heavy hooded black sweatshirts.

The Black Hooders. That's what I privately call them. Last week at the New Brighton skate park, I saw

one of them tamping a pack of cigarettes against his palm, which should have outraged me. The signs at all the skate parks we visit clearly state, "No smoking, drinking, drug use, profanity"--your basic list of swimming pool rules. But I can remember being fourteen years old and slapping a new pack of cigarettes against my own palm, an act filled with pleasure and anticipation. I remember having watched a girl named Kalli do the very same ritual before opening a pack and I imitated her because she was sharp and savvy in other deviant ways. Still, I wish those Black Hooder boys would not smoke in front of younger kids.

I lean back on the park bench and sigh. I listen to a cooking show on public radio while keeping a lazy eye out for my charges. The St. Anthony skate park is right behind a police station. I take comfort in that, figuring if the Black Hooders show obvious signs of delinquency or if someone hurts himself, I've got backup.

Today, I see no Black Hooders. Which is good, in a way, because watching my nephew navigate around this kind of kid fills me with an uneasy nostalgia. When I was just a few years older than Sid, I was a boy-crazy fiend for the Black Hooder type. Their quiet, unimpressed manner was such a challenge. I was desperate to make them notice me, to get the attention of boys who barely looked up even to dismiss me. Not all of them were skaters, but they were all on the fringe of acceptable behavior. They smoked Camels and drank Jack Daniels and bought and sold pot and swiped their moms' cars and played in bands with stolen amps and guitars. They wore their hair shaggy over their faces, and long in the back. The kids today would call that style a mullet. I've always loved boys with long, shaggy hair.

Shaggy hair like Sid's and Joey's.

Who are now scrounging up change for the soda machine. I step to attention and hand over some dimes from my coin purse. I ask them how it's going.

"Didn't you see that manual I did?" Sid asks. "From off the piano?"

"Uh, no, I missed it," I say, feeling like a fraud. "Could you do it again?"

I take off my headphones and pay attention now. I watch both boys drop in from the biggest ramp and perform various kinds of twists and flips into the middle, shorter ramp, which I guess is the "piano." As they wipe out and their boards fly from under their feet, I start surveying the rest of the group.

There is one older boy who is shirtless and covered with tattoos. He's lanky but with whips of muscle everywhere. He smiles at Sid and Joey and asks them if they are all right when they fall down. Okay, Tattooed Shirtless is nice. Then there's a taller kid with a strange body shape who waved to me when I made eye contact. I'm not sure if the taller kid is a boy or a girl--the body shape is unrecognizable under the baggy clothing. The face is clean and smooth, but the hair is short. But then again ... are those boobs under that shirt? Or is it just a slightly chubby boy? From the standpoint of pity, Gender Confused earns my approval immediately, because he/she has obvious vulnerabilities. Plus, Gender Confused is alone; Tattooed Shirtless has a buddy talking to him from the sidelines.

Thus begins my rally for Gender Confused. I think of how scary and painful it is to be teased and ostracized. As a female, I can relate to being embarrassed and ashamed of my body. I imagine skateboarding as the savior of Gender Confused, a rebel activity in which he/she seeks solace from a cruel, conformist world.

I locate Sid and Joey in the middle of a clutch of boys their age, none of whom look the skateboarder part. These younger boys have short haircuts and jock clothes and look like they'll be frequenting sports bars in another fifteen years. One of them is yelling snottily and the rest are giggling like fiends, showing a lot of pink gums, hollering. Sid and Joey stand by them, grinning and talking. Instantly, I am annoyed.

This is the boy who was The Enemy for me as a young girl. He's the Anti-Black Hooder, the Class Clown Boy who tormented other kids by heckling, by seeking too much attention, by noticing too much detail. Class Clown Boy yelled mean jokes and snapped bra straps. The Class Clown boy ran with a pack of human laugh tracks, stalking those with unusual plumage. Thanks to my adult status, though, I'm no longer fearful of the Class Clown. Conventional, respectful of authority and status quo, the Clown is only as powerful as his cackling cohort. If they mouth off to me, I can stand up, hands on hips, and deliver a shrill smackdown. Instant Adult! (A move that could send Sid into orbit with embarrassment.)

So now I am sure the hateful Class Clown and his friends are mocking Gender Confused and this worries me. I am concerned for Gender Confused and wondering if there's anything I could do or say that might let him/her know I am not an asshole like the Class Clowns. When s/he skates past me, I wave. I get a nod and a hello back. Okay, good.

Still, I am bothered by Sid and Joey's apparent alliance with the Class Clowns. I resolve to underscore to them the evils that beset the paths of the Cackling Cohort. Perhaps Tattooed Shirtless will set a better example for everyone at the skate park before my pent-up indignation makes me do something dramatic.

I am puffed up with self-righteous annoyance by the time Sid and Joey, sweaty and ruddy-faced, come to tell me they want to go.

As I pull out of the parking lot, Sid and Joey tell me that another kid offered them some pot.

"WHAT?!!" I hit the brakes. "Pot? Who?"

They give me a pitch-perfect description of Gender Confused.

"You mean the one that you couldn't tell was a boy or a girl?" I say.

"Uh huh," Sid says. Then he and Joey giggle.

I am shocked at Gender Confused's betrayal. I waved at that kid! I felt bad for him! Or her! Goddammit!

"How do you know it was pot?" I ask.

"Because he..." Joey stammers, "...I mean, she..."

"It!" Sid tosses in helpfully, which makes Joey collapse in laughter.

" 'It' asked us if we wanted a hit," Joey says.

A hit? While they snicker about pronouns in the backseat, I frantically review all my cumulative marijuana knowledge. Yeah, sometimes we called it taking a hit. Then I wonder if it wasn't some new other drug. I want to ask the boys more detailed questions--Was it a pipe or was it like a cigarette? What did it smell like?--but I don't know if that is an appropriate Drug-Free America line of questioning.

The car is stifling. The seat upholstery is scratchy and I can feel sweat dripping down my back into my butt crack. I am a thirty-one-year-old mom driving around two fourth grade boys who have just been offered marijuana by a gender-confused teenager and I'm not sure what to say.

I rush through my thin knowledge of child development, a semester of educational psychology. Um, are fourth graders still using either/or thinking? Are they in an authority-testing phase? Should I bolster their self-esteem in an effort to keep them immune from drug abuse? Do I attempt to foster empathy by explaining Gender Confused's possible rationale for getting high, his unfortunate situation in an oppressive, binary-gendered world? Where are they on Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

Uh, maybe not.

Do I tell them the reality, that skateboarders don't tend to grow up to be Sunday school teachers? I sigh. I know which route I'm going to take. I'm not sure it's right.

"So, what did you do?" I ask, trying to seem cool.

They tell me how they and some other kids--the Class Clown brats--said no to the offer. The Class Clowns, in turns out, were actually making fun of Gender Confused because of the pot-smoking, not the indiscernible gender.

Great. The fucking Class Clowns are the heroes.

I tell the boys the next time we go to the skate park to let me know if someone offers them drugs.

"Why?" Sid asks. "Are you going to say something?"

"I won't embarrass you," I say. "I'll just tell them that if they have any brains, they won't smoke pot right behind the cop shop."

It's the light-hearted route, my usual schtick. This is my role in Sid's life: Wisecracking Aunt Who Occasionally Swears.

I know that no matter my ap-proach, at age nine, Sid and Joey are independent souls. At age fourteen, they will be independent souls who might experiment with cigarettes, drugs, or booze. I realize, against the evidence supplied by *Frontline* documentaries and lurid news reports, that I honestly believe that this experimentation is natural, even desirable. I recall cracking beers behind the grocery store before high school football games. I see myself illegally buying cigarettes from Dirty Ed's Superette. I remember coughing and choking on pot smoke in my friend Becky's car one winter night before a school dance. I see those events as plot points in the story of my life. Some people I know who smoked pot turned out to be losers. Some of them are now in middle management at big corporations. I am unable to manufacture an alarmist, mother-hen reaction.

As I cruise past at thirty miles per hour, I see people in their driveways washing cars, in their yards mowing grass, standing on the sidewalk chatting with neighbors. It's a beautiful day, and I am one of those neighbor-people, going to home to wash, mow, chat. But I also want to stick my head out the car window and holler.

I feel sorry for Gender-Confused!

I would probably smoke pot, too, if I were him or her!

I think Tattooed Shirtless has a hot body!

Furthermore, those little giggling fuckers who probably are A students and star athletes? If my daughter brings one home, I might be slightly disappointed! Hoo Rah for the outcasts and for flirting with disaster!

And, yes, as a matter of fact, I am somebody's mother!

Sid, Joey--and my own baby, Matilda: You might be extremely good and law-abiding or you might be much cleverer than your parents and I were. The former will keep you safer, and the latter is the only way you won't get caught. Chances are that you won't be either/or.

Though I am in charge of you, I remember what it feels like to be young. I still haven't figured out how to mix those two together.

Did you know that sometimes I still dream about that first cigarette I had every morning before school, the last few puffs I had before the last few stoplights and then the school parking lot, where I had to stealthily crush it out on my heel, then toss it out the window?

Damn. I remember. And even then I knew better. We all know better.

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