

Rockets and Spaghetti:

"Hey, I'm flying my best space ship. It's full of pizza and bullets." I turned around and saw Taj, who is about waist tall, flying a concoction of Legos and assorted add-ons. What an idea, what a totally boyish idea. A space ship filled with pizza and bullets. It has something from each of the three essential play groups, the basic building blocks of every little boy's psyche. The basics can be summed up as Adventure, Violence and Food. Every story, fantasy, daydream and nightdream has at least one of these basics in it. The great stories like "Star Wars" or "Harry Potter" have them all, in abundance.

Taj is one of the many characters who have placed themselves firmly in the forefront of my mind during this California sojourn. The second graders in Brian and Marci's excellent class have swept me away. They have helped me return for a while to a world where the imagination is paramount, a world where story is valued and savored. I like it here, it feels comfortable. Makes me want to build a space ship of my own and fill it with rockets and spaghetti.

I was sitting with Kyle the other day, the day of the Inauguration, and the class was working on the idea "If I were the President". It was one of those exercises where the kids talk and write about how they would be, what they would do, as president of the United States. So there we were, Kyle and I, and he's struggling with finishing the sentence, "If I were the President I would....." Some of the other kids were writing what one might expect, about ending war or making jobs but not my buddy Kyle. He wrote "If I were the President I would...drink beer." I offered my little tippling 'president to be' a chance to change his answer. I knew that this would go into his folder and become part of his permanent record. He thought about it for a minute or so, really thought about it. Then he smiled and told me that he was sticking with it. He would indeed, drink beer.

This second grade class at Harmony School in Occidental, California is chock full of such story tellers and adventurers, wonderful small people, full of ideas and baloney. Baloney and ideas, what a great life they have.

I have listened to the four Sirens discuss, at great length, all the permutations of each of their relationships. Each of their relationships, that is, with each other. The day to day changes and the roller coaster ups and downs for these young ladies are breathtaking. I would not survive a day in their club.

The Sirens are Tabitha, Ella, Harmony and Nely. There is not a closer group of friends on the planet. They are currently working on how to love each other without hurting each other. They are mini grown ups, much more so than the boys are. They are emotionally sophisticated and complex. And they have not yet learned how to handle that challenge. They will. They're Sirens. Or they won't and they'll be just like the rest of us.

Did you know that there are children in America who do not know the rules of baseball? It's true. At first I thought I was suffering some strange side effect of a 65 degree day in January. The kind of day that makes Minnesotans and Englishmen fall in love or go mad. That wasn't it at all. Fully half the class had no relationship whatever with baseball. Never have I felt so sixtyish.

We were playing a perfectly fine game of kickball, a game in the form of baseball except that one kicks a rolled ball instead of batting a baseball. I tell you, without exaggeration, that there were children who did not run after a ball was kicked, who did not know how many strikes you get, who failed to touch every base as they rounded them and children who simply watched as the ball rolled by their outfield position into some distant realm. It's as if you were asking them to describe the proper trajectory for a moon flight in early summer. It had simply never occurred to me that an American child would not understand the rudiments of the greatest game ever. Oh well. Maybe this is my problem.

I came into the classroom this morning to see Jaxxon and Strider, those are their real names, reading books while wearing eyeglasses made from the K-Nex building system. The glasses were huge and colorful. They became the most prominent feature of each of the boys' faces. Elton John would eat his heart out for a pair like these. Of course the eyeglasses had no lenses and a horizontal bar ran directly through the middle of their vision but the boys didn't mind at all. They were wearing the coolest frames in all of California.

Vega and Loden are great little men. They should be bookends for a collection of C.S. Lewis or Tolkien stories. They would be perfect on a bookshelf holding together a collection of the best in fantasy literature. Look at either of them and you smile. Look at both of them together and your mind wanders to Middle Earth or Narnia.

These guys should be guarding a magic ring somewhere in time, looking as innocent as you please, and then tearing you to pieces should you dare to transgress. They are both planning surprises for the planet. They will be underestimated in their lives, and that will be our mistake.

Jabali is a whirlwind. I think he must be from Tasmania. His energy is boundless and his private stories are ones we can only guess at. He is the proverbial guy that you want with you when you walk a dark alley. He will not back down and his friends are friends for life. With Jabali on your side you are invincible.

Our second grade class is lucky to have two Aidans. Handsome men, men of dignity and purpose. I think perhaps business or government is where they will thrive. They have completely different approaches to a challenge and each will come to a conclusion that works and makes sense, this Aidan with his quiet dignity and that Aidan with his surprising candor.

Gabe is perhaps the best natured person on the planet. I would sit and watch a game with Gabe any day of any year in any town you choose. Some people make you smile. Some people, by their simple presence, make life a sweeter deal. If Gabe is in the room, the room is better. Anyone who loves to laugh is OK by me. Anyone who loves to make the rest of the world laugh too is top shelf. That's what Gabe is, top shelf.

It is no accident that Jayden bears an uncanny resemblance to the Prince Valiant of my youth. I think he probably dreams adventures, sees adventures and invents adventures every chance he can. I think that he has no choice. I think Jayden may end up fronting a rock band or headlining in the movies. When Jayden is on task and in his world there is no greater force in all of second gradedom. Try to distract him sometime when he's listening to his own drummer. Go ahead, try.

My story can finish only with Denny and Rohan because they are two of the most exceptional young men that I know. Denny is fluent in two languages. Every time I think that I'm bright I see a child like Denny and ask myself, "How good am I in another language?" I always come up short. But what makes Denny special is that it doesn't matter a wit to him that he's smart. He is carefully listening to the music that moves him. My hope is that one day he will tell us what it is that he's hearing. I hope he writes it or sings it or composes it or dances it. It will knock our socks off.

And Rohan, man, is there a braver soul on the planet? Imagine yourself at seven years old going from America to India on a Saturday and beginning second grade the following Monday. If it were me, I would be sitting in the corner crying. I would be so unbrave that my mom would take me home and let me hide. Not Rohan, not our hero from India. It will take time before we understand just how brave a boy can be. I have the feeling the time will be short with this fellow. Watch out for a seventeen year old Governor of California. Mark my words, watch out.

I could go on. There are so many stories and observations to be made about the amazing children who make up this second grade class at Harmony School in Occidental, California. I could tell you how quirky California is. I could tell you that so much goes on out here that is uniquely left coast. I have done it before. I could tell you that life here bears no resemblance to life on the Root River. But that would be disingenuous. All I would be telling you is that Brian and Marci and Harmony School are doing astounding work with the marvelous children who have been entrusted to them.

A Grandpa knows these things. He knows when his granddaughter is thriving. It shows. This grandpa feels lucky that his baby is where she is, that she is in the hands of Marci and Brian and that they're making a place for her that values reading and math and friendship and values and music and science and nature and love and....life.