

Fifth grade was memorable for a number of reasons. I was ten at the time, and as far as I could tell, life was getting serious. This belief mainly grew out of the transition from Lower School (Kindergarten – 4th grade) to Upper School (5th grade – 8th grade). See, graduating into the Upper School meant more than a new administrator's office to be disciplined in; it came with lots of freedom. There was no more standing in line in the hallway; you could choose your own seat and table at lunch; you could run for Student Council; you got a locker; and most liberating, your own laptop. However, the best parts of fifth grade were the moments when ten-year-old boys were simply that...ten-year-old boys. As we yearned to become teenagers, our curiosity, imagination, and general nature combined with the wish to mature to create an extraordinary period of play, havoc, and lots of fun. The ten-year-old spirit was best expressed in two settings during fifth grade, Homeroom and my neighborhood.

Every day, twenty-one of my classmates and I huddled into one classroom for a fifteen minute period called "Homeroom." The purpose of Homeroom was to relax, eat a snack, and quietly chat with friends. Whoever thought cramping twenty-two ten-year-old boys in one classroom and expecting them to entertain themselves for any amount of time had obviously never observed a Homeroom session at the Town School for Boys. These fifteen minutes were far from leisurely. It was essentially recess but inside a 20 x 25 room. I'll start with the Homeroom snack. For three years, I was class president. Besides attending Student Council once a week, all the position really entailed was grabbing snack for my Homeroom. Although the job was boring, it certainly had its perks. Chief among them was being the first one to actually get the snack. As I walked from the cafeteria up to my Homeroom I could pick the largest bagel, the shiniest apple, or the juiciest strawberries. This unauthorized privilege was most useful on fruit snack or Goldfish days, as I grabbed multiple bags of "the good stuff" and stashed them in my locker or sweatshirt pocket for later. Once I reached Homeroom I took a deep breath and slowly opened the classroom door, meeting wild laughter and shouts. The prepubescent howls echoed in the hallway for several seconds before I could shut the door, which then alerted all the kids that Walker, the-snack-bearing-god had arrived. In the rare occurrences that I entered silently, it was never long before the "SNACK!" battle cry punctured everyone's eardrums. I ditched the plastic crate on the nearest table as quickly as I could and dashed away, usually seconds before the mob closed in for the kill.

While everyone else grabbed a snack I sat back and let Homeroom take control of me. Often I found myself in paper airplane competitions where some friends and I tried to craft the fastest and sleekest paper airplane ever. Then, we flew the planes across the room, aiming for the wide-open windows and the eventual street outside. One day we managed to get six airplanes stuck in a tree right outside our second story classroom. We got in trouble and had to poke the airplanes out of the tree with big sticks after school. Alistair Berven once flew an airplane out the window, through the empty winter tree branches, and all the way across the street where it then lodged itself in our teacher's car wheel. We were in awe of both the paper airplane and Alistair, and for the next few weeks, every airplane we crafted copied the exact design Alistair had folded that fateful day. The plane must have flown around 200 feet, a record none of us ever came close to.

Airplanes were not the only pieces of paper flying around during Homeroom though. Paper balls and spit wads soared through the classroom at deadly speeds on a regular basis. Kids predicted their Little League placement for the coming spring based on how fast they could whip a paper ball through the air, preferably at another kid's face. Getting hit with one of paper balls never really hurt, but it always provoked a reaction. Much of our time in Homeroom was spent

avoiding being hurt while simultaneously hurting other kids. A favorite weapon of choice was the eraser, small enough to be unseen as it raced towards its target, but a perfect size for gripping and leaving a mark on your victim. It made a distinctive slapping sound on the wall when the thrower missed, a sound which you were extremely happy to hear when in major battle. Rubber bands and the occasional muffin* also were popular in firefight conflicts, although nothing beat the classic table topping when it came to sneak attacks. If one side happened to capture a kid from the enemy side during the battle, they were usually then placed in a “spinney chair” with wheels and then repeatedly shoved into the wall until either the chair broke or the prisoner threatened to vomit. No matter how fiercely our battles raged though, a teacher extinguished the skirmishes within one or two minutes of their outbreak.

Homerooms weren’t all chaos though. In fact, many days consisted of searching for new desktop pictures for our laptops or showing other kids fun new video games to play during class. One day David Stack came to Homeroom with a real treat, *Godfather* the video game; he took it from his older brother that morning. So, for fifteen minutes more than twenty kids all crowded around one table to watch David race around in 1940’s cars and shoot civilians with tommy guns. It was the first M (Mature) rated video game any of us had ever seen, and we occupied our time commenting on how realistic the blood looked while also begging David to play, if only for ten seconds. I think every kid in that room went home that day praying that their parents wouldn’t find out that they witnessed massive virtual death.

Other homeroom activities were catching up on/copying homework†, gossiping about Ryan Kase’s pretty older sister Lauren, boasting about some athletic achievement or simple smack talking. Insults concerning other kids’ mothers or intelligence were most common. Sometimes we hid muffins in the classroom and dared others to find them, the muffins usually never to be discovered until months later (it should be noted that they looked the same), practice writing with our weak hand, or draw on the whiteboard. Once, we projected a picture of Calvin and Hobbes onto the board and then traced them with markers. We refused to let the teacher erase the drawing for a week, so for several days math notes and problems were crammed into the corners of the board and around the bodies of Calvin and Hobbes. Homeroom was an invaluable period in the school day for us kids. Those few minutes of socializing passed by quickly, but they reinvigorated us with a small boost of kid energy that got us through the day. But once the school day ended, kid heaven began: playdates.

It usually didn’t matter where you had your playdate, as long as you were with your friend. However, most of my friends wanted to have playdates at my house because of the neighborhood I lived in. My neighborhood was popular for one simple reason: it had lots of stuff to do in it. Two playgrounds, a basketball court, tennis courts, and a baseball field were all several blocks away, and because the neighborhood was safe, my parents let us walk to these destinations by ourselves. Often, the ability to go somewhere without parents was reason enough to go for a walk, and my friends and I usually ended up walking to the park every single playdate just because we could. The first couple of times we ventured out by ourselves were both magical and electrifying. The experience compared to learning how to ride a bike, as nerves and a thirst for freedom duked it out in an epic battle that left your stomach fluttering. No matter the

* The muffins that our school made were absolutely terrible. No one ever figured out what kind of muffin they were; we just knew they were inedible because of how hard they were. Jack Klein and Aaron Reuben were the only kids who liked them, the rest of the muffins were donated to Homeroom battles when they were the day’s snack.

† This was a favorite option for my best-friend Sedge Gates.

weather, there was a sense that wind ran through our hair as we trekked a quarter mile to our destination. Frightened by the “stranger danger” talks at school, my friends and I avoided being seen by cars whenever possible, effectively turning a harmless walk into an adrenaline packed war game where we were deep behind enemy lines and tried to reach the safe zone.

During our walks my friends and I occasionally made several stops, the favorite of which was the empty lot. One block away from my house was a big empty lot situated on a hill overlooking the rest of the street. The first step in harnessing the fun of the lot was ascending its massive dirt hill. The ascent usually filled our shoes with dirt clumps and pebbles, as we scattered to the top before any of the neighbors saw us. At the crest of the hill was a small pit that we had dug as a lookout post and a little behind the hill’s peak was another, larger, hole, better known as “the main base.” After summiting the hill, I always turned around and took in an impressive view of San Francisco, that on clear days allowed me to see Ocean Beach four miles away. Then, the war began. If this theme of military games has not been made clear by now, just know that ten-year-old boys love turning every game into a matter of life or death; so, many times fun manifested itself in make-believe wars. Unless it was the special occasion of a birthday party or big slumber party, most playdates only involved one or two of your friends, there usually was no enemy to battle. So we contented ourselves by chucking dirt clods down onto the street below, cheering as they shattered into a million pieces on our invisible enemies. Once we ran out of dirt clods or got tired, we stumbled down from the lookout post to our main base, where we laid back against the dirt walls and discussed the meaning of life.

“You don’t think Ms. Janiak is actually a girl do ya? I mean she has a better mustache than my dad and well...her name is Janiak. That’s not very girly.”

“Dude, I swear on my mother’s grave I can dunk on a Nerf hoop. Seriously I’ll show you the next time you come over to my house. Or you can ask Aaron, he’s seen me do it.”

“Neil, I’m telling you Santa has got to be real. My parents said last Christmas that under no circumstances would I be getting a *Gameboy*, and whadda know I got one, with a big curly red bow from the big man himself. My parents never woulda given me one, but Santa did.”

When back at my house we continued to play outside, trying to teach ourselves how to skateboard, playing “Home Run Derby” with whiffle balls, or driving in my toy electric Cadillac Escalade down the driveway at maximum speed until we crashed into the basketball hoop at the bottom of the slope. My parents must have nursed hundreds of scraped elbows and bumps on heads due to kids flying out of the Escalade, but we kept on racing down the driveway because, frankly, it was just a lot of fun.

That’s what being a kid is all about—having fun. Along the way you learn, cry, and grow, but most important, you do a lot of laughing. Childhood is a very special time in your life, and as my own is waning, I use this paper and Final Project as a way to celebrate it. I miss being a kid...I miss Homeroom and playdates and everything about childhood. And I’m sure everyone reading this can agree with that. I know there is no way to go back to being a kid, but through this project, I can pretend. Although growing up is “cool” and “exciting,” at the end of the day, I wish I were still ten.