

SMALL MYSTERIES OF LIFE

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Iona and Peter Opie, in their pioneering book *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, point out that '...it is in the nature of children to be attracted by the mysterious'.

For children starting school the playground is a world filled with mystery and wonder, where the rules are made by teachers and other, bigger children. The excitement which comes from playing a new game, finding a new friend, or just watching something interesting can be quickly replaced by the thrill of fear, as one of the big kids whispers a dire warning in your ear, points out a bad omen or predicts something terrible that will happen to you if you don't do as you're told.

One of these moments has remained with me into adulthood. It has to do with 'Bear Day'. I began my education into the mysteries of the playground at a Ballarat primary school in the 1950s, and I remember the day when one of the big boys came up to me and asked me innocently, 'Do you know what day it is today?' Of course I didn't, and so he told me. 'IT'S BEAR DAY! If you step on a crack the bears will get you!' To compound the danger, he also told me that Lyons Street, which I had to cross on my way home, was named that way because on Bear Day there were also lions waiting around the corner to jump out at me. I don't remember what happened after that, but I do remember the instant chill of fear his words produced in me, and the terror I felt as I slowly peeked around the brick fence at the corner of Lyons Street, to see if the lions were still lurking there.

Another scary obstacle on my daily walk to and from school was the 'Witch's House', an old weatherboard house with an overgrown garden, and a particularly smelly bush growing in a tangle through the front fence. The awful smell of the bush convinced the neighbourhood children that we were correct in believing a witch lived there - normal people had nice-smelling flowers and plants in their gardens. If ever there was anyone out in the front garden, I'd wait until they weren't looking and run across to the next house and safety.

One of the less alarming mysteries occurred not in the schoolyard, but in the nearby Arcade. We were forbidden to leave the school grounds at lunch time but the lure was too strong, and sometimes my friend and I would sneak out, cross the road and run half a block to the lolly shop in the Arcade. Like most small children we loved lollies, but that was not why we risked punishment by sneaking away from school. The real attraction was the man behind the counter. He could pull his thumb off, and put it back on again! We would arrive breathless at the shop, and stand looking up at him over a counter filled with the most delectable sweets. We always bought something - a token payment for the show we were about to see.

After paying for the sweets, we'd nervously ask, 'Can you please pull your thumb off?' He'd put his two big hands together so we could just see the top of his thumb, and then suddenly he'd pull them apart, and his thumb would just slide off! He'd move it around a bit and then put it back on again. We were always disappointed when he put it back on, because we knew the show was over. I still haven't figured out how he did it.

Among the children, anyone who had an exceptional or unusual skill was greatly admired. We were in awe of the older children who were really good at games - the girl who could get right through a game of Sevens without dropping the ball, the nimble ones who could 'run in' without fouling the rope in Double Dutch skipping, the boy who could do dangerous tricks on the monkey-bars, like hanging from one leg or walking upright across the top. You were particularly fortunate if you were born 'double-jointed', because you could bend your thumb back to touch your wrist, or make your elbow bend the wrong way, or do other strange and wonderful tricks with your body which no-one but another double-jointed person could do. It was like being a member of an exclusive club, and members were always on show. 'Look what she can do!' became a familiar cry as children presented the mysteries of their friends' joints and limbs for all to see.

Not so exclusive was the ability to tell what kind of a temper someone had. The trick was to pull a hair from the head, hold it tightly between the thumbnail and the index finger and draw it through quickly. If the hair curled up, the person had a temper. The tighter the curl, the worse the temper. If it curled really tight, its owner usually reacted by stomping off yelling, 'I have NOT got a bad temper!' Proof indeed that it really worked.

As we grew older, we learned of other mysteries, like how to cure warts. Our favourite method was to use the juice from the milk thistle. We'd break the stem of the plant and spread the milky white liquid over our warts. Lo and behold, the warts would disappear! Sometimes they took a while to go, but they always went.

Of course, as we moved up through the grades our understanding grew with us, and the things which had seemed mysterious or magical lost some of their charm, but that didn't stop us from trying them out on the younger children. Not Bear Day, though. I never did tell anyone else about Bear Day.

Ref. Opie, Iona & Peter, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Paladin, U.K., 1977, p230f

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