# How Kites Figure in Things

By
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Boyhood in Indonesia: “You know the rainy season is over because the phone stops working. *‘It’s the kites*,’ said the repairman who’d come to investigate the silence on my phone. *‘Their strings have cut the lines.’”* --Matthew Moore, *Sun-Herald Indonesia*

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As a child of the forties in a working-class East Texas town, play was any simple activity accompanied by boundless imagination. Boredom stimulated invention, and games could be created out of the thinnest of air. Most pastimes were off hand, but props sometimes lent a special dimension to the entertainment form. It might be a can to kick, a slingshot, a retired sock filled with marbles, or a hoop to push. My hoop was an old bicycle rim I herded along with a bent welding rod that my uncle gave me. Most of my marbles were won in games of chance or conquests in the sport of agates. Boys of that age and station required almost nothing to create a pastime, and these simple things helped pass the time between knickers and business suits.

A boy could make a day of kicking an empty beer can up a tar street until the tin deformed; then sentencing it to refuse in the ditch. There it would lie until retrieved by Old Man Overalls, the raggedy fellow who patrolled the roadsides for such bounty. He carried a hand-burnished stick for which to probe the heavy grass, and a burlap sack cinched by a short rope to a belt he wore on the outside of his overalls. He clinked as he walked like he was the lead-goat wearing the bell. Many days I would walk along with him for several blocks past our house. We didn't exchange conversation other than the times I would point him to a can, to which he would just reply "Bingo." I never heard anyone say his name. "Old Man Overalls" pretty much served as both a moniker and a portrait. The front of his overalls was as black as tar, for it was also his wiping rag. He gave each can a swipe across his bib before crimping it shut and dropping it into the sack. I suppose he thought buffed cans served to distinguish his trove above others. He must have believed that the shine fetched him a better price at Applebaum's Iron and Metal.


Like "Kick the Can" and Applebaum's, Old Man Overalls just disappeared one day. Folks supposed he had left this world. No one ever said for sure, and I seemed to be one of the few who cared enough to ask around. I missed him. I would have given almost anything to have his probe stick for my own. But if he was buried proper, I'm sure the stick was by his side.

I had a slingshot. A Y-shaped piece of bois d'arc limb with bark removed and sanded smooth. Massaged slick. I used my mom's Noxema as a finisher because it oiled good and had a neat smell. Noxema smelled sort of like my Vick's inhaler—a staple that was always in my pocket. I taught my friends my Vicks secret. When it began to lose strength, the vapors could be recharged by passing the tube over a candle flame. Good as new for a while longer.

My slingshot was a copy of one I had before. On one of the summers I spent in Arkansas, my grandfather made the original one. I studied his every move. First that Y stick, then two straps of inner tube rubber with a shoe tongue for the ammo cradle. It was amazingly accurate, especially when using smooth round shot. I carefully selected my rocks from the creek bottom, searching out the ones that had tumbled into nearly perfect spheres. An alternative, but not near as awesome, were acorns. Acorns were good for practice but not much else. They whizzed when shot through the air like the flutter of stirred quail. My

prize, though, was a race of ball bearings from an automobile wheel. Grandpa showed me how to pound the race with a hammer and chisel to free up the balls. I kept them slick and shiny, refusing to shoot one until the right occasion presented itself. They were that precious. So precious in fact, that I never used even one of them.

My grandfather fashioned that first slingshot with hands of love, but passed it to me with a host of rules. *Never point or pull back on a human or any other breathing animal except for poisonous snakes. Never aim at a window or a passing car. Don't knock the blooms off my fruit trees. If I shot a bottle, the glass must be collected and buried somewhere safely.* Since snakes weren't presenting themselves in large numbers, Grandpa's rules almost took every target out of play except for paper squares with crayon circles, and Granny Stell's empty vegetable cans. The cans could be used over and over, and there was instant gratification associated with the *plink* sound that validated a solid hit. But limiting myself to can upon can became boring. I soon began hunting wasps. I didn't ask for permission. I figured wasps were kin to snakes, with their venom thing and all. But the wasps liked to cluster in the orchard around Grandpa's peaches. A real sharpshooter ought to be able to knock a wasp off of a peach without even skinning the Elberta's hide. But I found that practice too daunting after popping several peaches to the ground and having to eat the evidence.

One day I went to the barn to post a paper target on a bale of hay. Out of nowhere I saw it, moving around in jerky motions in and out of Granny Stell's egg crib. It was a rat as large as a kitten, its tail looking like a length of rasp file. *Breathing animal? Yes. Poisonous? No.* But then I conjured me a rule that seemed to fit. *Rats carry rabies I think, and rabies will kill people.* Before I could weigh that against the rulebook's fine print, the perfectly round, exceptionally honed river rock was on its way. The rat made a noise—a gruff sort of squeal, then tumbled out of the egg nest onto the barn floor. It thrashed about, and then lay on its back with all four legs outstretched. I had hit it in the eye, a perfect shot. It was a gleeful moment. I thought if I looked around on the floor, I might find that wonderfully true little rock to rinse off and use again. I dropped to my knees and began moving clumps of straw about. It was there I found more trouble than I wished. Tucked between two bales of hay was a wad of baling twine and horsehair, and inside were three writhing baby rats. They were pink and wrinkly, and their eyes were not yet open.

I felt a heavy boot in the center of my back. I turned my head around far enough to see the Paul Bunyan frame of my grandfather. Not a word spoken. His outstretched hand was message enough. I laid the slingshot across his palm. He beckoned with his hand again. I fished my tobacco sack of shot from my shirt pocket and placed it beside the slingshot.

"Take the little ones and make a nest in that lard bucket," he said, as he walked toward the house. I had hoped for more of a lecture from him so I could plead the rabies defense.

I gathered up the babies and put them in the bucket with the original nest and some fresh straw. I was lost as to the next step. That night at the dinner table, Grandpa handed me a bottle of eyewash.

“Take the dropper out and clean it thoroughly. Then take doses of Stell’s butterfat cream and feed those younguns until they get past innocence and can fend for themselves. You owe them that and you must see the chore through.”

I did see it through. The baby rats loved the butterfat cream and grew fast. I moved them to a peach flat that I concealed among the hay bales. The shallow sides of the flat allowed them to move around more freely, but they were always waiting for my visits with the eyedropper. I no longer worried about snakes, because by now they were half the size of a squirrel. They had stiff black hair, and their once-pink skin had turned a mottled gray. I named them Hoppy, Roy, and Gene after my favorite cowboys. But I couldn’t always tell which rat was who.

As they grew, their diet improved to soda crackers or cornbread in a butterfat mush. One morning I went to feed them the day’s allotment and one was missing. The next day a second one disappeared. Two days later the last one was gone. I went back twice a day to make sure they didn’t come back for food. I never saw them again.

There was an old hat rack in the entry beside the front door of the farmhouse. On it hung Grandpa’s two hats, the straw one for the fields and the felt one for Alex Methodist Church on Sunday. On another arm of the rack was his pair of Sunday suspenders. On the remaining hook rested the slingshot. I had to pass by it every day.

I made countless other slingshots in my youth, but that one nagged at me. Now sixty years later, I figure it is still hanging on that hat rack, even though Grandpa is gone now and the farm has changed hands many times. Such was the strict determination of my grandfather.

My dad was a pilot, a renowned one who flew with the Flying Tigers over *The Hump* in the Himalayas. He flew for China National Air, the supply wing of Chennault’s AVG group in support of the Burma Road. I fancied myself being just like him someday. I admired his soldier-of-fortune charisma, his gold wings with the sunburst, and his floppy aviator hat.

At an early age I transferred that flying envy into a self-study of kite making. At first I copied the basic pattern from store-bought paper kites, but experimented with different wing shapes and various styles of tails. My kites easily outperformed the toy ones.

My experimentation went beyond the kites themselves. I sent passengers along on my flights, lashing them to the cross spars in a medicine-bottle passenger cabin. I wondered

what a beetle might think when looking at earth from that distance above the ground. What tales would he tell his beetle friends and family? The insects were an extension of me, and I could almost feel the sensation of their flights. I protected them. No insect I ever sent aloft succumbed to hostile G-forces or a loss of oxygen, and the amber of the medicine bottle diffused the UV rays from a much closer sun. My pilots all returned safely, and some flew again and again.

With my allowance I purchased extra coils of string, tying them together to make record lengths. I sometimes flew my kites so high that I could lose sight of them entirely. The height of a kite was only limited by the eventual drag of the belly weight of the cord. By now I figured I was among the world's most knowledgeable kite designers and engineers. But I had much to learn.

After the war, my father's flying fame led him to more opportunities abroad. He contracted with several foreign governments as a flight instructor for their emerging air operations. One such mission took us to Bandung, Indonesia. We settled into an American residential compound at the edge of a large native village. Our compound was encircled with a high wall, and at first, we felt very isolated. A tutor came each day and presented lesson plans from a US-based correspondence school. Only the children from our compound attended, some ten in all. Two of them were Dutch, and the rest Americans. We represented different grades, but the tutor managed to construct the courses in keeping with learning levels. The education was quite good.

Each day I noticed children from the native village would come to the walls and watch us. The walls were concrete, and its top edge was laden with broken glass bottles with sharp protruding shards. The natives would lay heavy straw mats over the glass so they could sit on the edge. If we ventured their way, they would scramble like ants. Over time, we were able to get closer. We would wave at each other and exchange words which neither understood. But the Americans quickly learned enough of their language to get by.

One day a group of Indonesian boys came to our gate and we let them in. They each carried a beautiful kite, the likes of which I could have never imagined. The paper was translucent, and adorned with hand painted images depicting their culture. There were jungle scenes, animals, and geometric patterns. Their favorites were images of fish and birds. Other paintings were representations of their Hindu religion. My tutor taught me that kites held an important history in Indonesian culture. Centuries before, they were first introduced as a method for getting fishing lines further out into the bay waters where the larger fish were found. The fishing line would be tethered to the kite string and the dancing of the kite moved the bait around in the water.

The American kids stood in awe as the boys flew the kites. The kites were dancers—able to move rapidly at any angle, darting, dipping and diving. No American kite could have matched them. Some had streamers that seemed more for décor than stability. Some of the really agile kites had no tails to encumber them. They were the racers, the acrobats. The other kids in our compound were eventually bored with the activity, but I was

hooked and came to watch them fly every afternoon. In time and with unbelievable patience, they taught me how to build the kites using rice paper and bamboo spars. They laughed at my artwork at first, but they seemed to recognize the western cowboy scenes I painted. Eventually they acknowledged my kite with the simple word *Janggan,* their name for the professional. I was humbly honored.

On one native holiday I joined them in a neighboring field. It was my first time to witness *Layang-Layang,* or kite fighting. It is as the name implies, a king-of-the-hill kind of contest to see who is left flying at the end.

The first twenty feet of the kite string is common twine that has been coated with a glaze of powdered glass. The kite-maker first pulverizes glass bottles—amber beer bottles are prized—then mixes it with a sticky paste called *Ka*, which is a mash made from sun-dried fish. The odor is unpleasant but the effects are lethal. That coated twine, when sawed across a competitor's kite string, simply cuts it from the sky. Once cut, the kite is finders-keepers for the hordes of kids that chase it.

The tutor also told me that the sport is not without mishap. Some children die every year because their frenzied kite chasing takes them with abandon into dangrous situations. Many children are struck by cars and others suffer falls from trees and rooftops that result in death or serious injury. But the ritual never changes.

In the many kite contests I participated in, there was often one recurring champion. A skinny boy, about fifteen, had a kite that was painted with the gaping mouth of a fanged dragon. The glass on his string was coarser than others, almost like kosher salt, yet was still able to tightly adhere to the twine. In addition, he was masterful at diving into the opponents string, bending the twine under pressure. With a long sweep of his arm, lines were slashed and kite after kite drifted back to the earth. I called him Chennault. He grinned, seemingly pleased to have an Anglo name.

I taught Chennault about my insect air-travelers, but he wasn't interested in the idea of kite passengers. He begged me for the medicine bottles though, even traded me a kite for one. It's where he would keep his glass crystals from then on.

My father's assignment in Indonesia came to an abrupt halt as Communist activity in the country escalated. It was no longer safe to remain there. We closed up the house and our belongings were packed and shipped. My friend Chennault, our house servants, and other pilot families gathered to see us off at the airfield. We were flying to Jakarta where I would board a merchant freighter

that was also a “school ship” for the return to the United States. My father would remain behind for a couple of months to close out his business.

I sat alone on the left side of the fuselage, sad for the moment that I must leave this place. I could see a grinning Chennault through the airplane window, and knew I would miss him. I would always remember something he told me, paraphrased in my own best Indonesian translation. He explained how kites figured in things:

*“The kite is the spirit of the inner life. It spends its earthly tenure tethered to the reality below. It is the extension of its handler, controlled for now, and doing its master’s will. It remains so until its tether is loosed by unforeseen act or by the simple end of term. It then freely floats away, its gentle drift having no sure destination. If the host’s life was one of ill it may rest in high branches forever out of reach. If goodness was his lot, the kite will be reclaimed by chasers to fly again.”*

I thought about it more when I arrived home. My friend Chennault’s belief about kites having a spirit’s afterlife helped me understand what might have become of Old Man Overalls. At least *somebody* was sure picking up those cans.

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