



The Collectors

What's your impression of the general condition of our streets these days? I'm thinking specifically of how much garbage we see lying around. If somebody had asked me about this, I think I would have answered that I felt our streets are pretty dirty, and that it is common to see discarded paper etc. tossed here and there.

But something I noticed yesterday caused me to think about this a bit more carefully, and I have come to realize that my impression is almost certainly totally incorrect, and that our streets are probably in very good condition indeed, at least when compared with how it was when I was a child.

The thing I noticed was nothing dramatic, just that when I was riding my bike along through the town, I happened to see a guy toss aside an empty cigarette packet. If I see young kids throw garbage, I sometimes chide them gently about it, but this was an old guy, so there was no purpose at all in getting involved.

It did though, give me one of those little flashbacks we sometimes get, to a time nearly fifty years ago. I would have been about six or seven years old, living with my family in a city in Canada. We lived in a normal kind of neighbourhood, in one of a row of joined apartments, and there was an elementary school and a park directly in front of our home. The area was completely safe, and my brother and I (he is just over two years younger than I) were allowed to play outside by ourselves. My mother had set rules about how far we could wander. It was a simple system; we could go anywhere in the immediate area of small streets, but were not to cross the main roads that bounded the neighbourhood. This left us plenty of room, so we didn't feel any handicap, I'm sure.

The guy tossing aside his package reminded me of those days because for a time back then, my brother and I were crazy about collecting the little cards that were once commonly inserted into cigarette packages. At this distance, I can no longer remember anything at all about the content of the cards, just that there were such things. At that time, my parents were both smokers (they later quit completely), so perhaps that is where we learned about the cards. In any case, collect them we did. And where did we get them?

We headed off to those main streets I mentioned, the ones that acted as our travel limit. And once there, we walked along the roadside hunting through all the papers and packages that were strewn there, looking for our treasure.

When I think about this now, it seems such a disgusting thing to do! Grubbing around amid broken bottles and trash, playing next to a stream of speeding cars and trucks, all in the days before unleaded gasolines ... I'm somewhat amazed that I'm still here to tell the story! (I have no idea if my mother had any idea about where we got the cards we brought home ... perhaps she assumed we picked them up in the park ...)

But what an immense amount of garbage there was on those streets! Can you imagine such a scene now - papers and packages scattered in drifts along the main roads? And children digging through it all?

We've come a long way, babies!

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