

## Urban Delights and the Geography of the Heart

Ray Guy has written so frequently and so winningly of ‘outharbour delights,’ and so disparagingly of the only ‘urban delight’ he can identify—“hangin out at de mall”—that he has brainwashed half the people in Newfoundland into believing that those of us raised in the city were emotionally crippled and culturally deprived by our blighted infancies. Nothing could be further from the truth. As the youngest of a large St. John’s family, I found growing up in this dear, dirty city as eventful and amusing as it was in That Far Greater Bay, just a little different.

The house I grew up in on Bonaventure Avenue was a large semi-detached, bought by my grandmother next door to her own house. To tour the house, it is necessary to go in the back door as this was the usual route for children. The rear porch was large, and stuffed to overflowing with bins for vegetables, a freezer, a barrel of apples, overcoats and boots, baseball bats, skis, hockey sticks (both ice and field), a rotary telephone squeezed onto a space on a wall, a dart board squeezed onto another, dog dishes, rabbit food, and anything else that had no permanent home. Off the porch was a washroom—the bath had been removed long before my time and in its place was a large bin of old clothes intended for the missions but frequently claimed by members of the household. Admittance to this washroom was uncertain as it was often used as a photographic studio, for dying hair, costuming for Hallowe’en or Christmas pageants, or anything else that required privacy and plumbing. The porch was also the entrance to the kitchen.

In the 1950s, one didn’t decorate or design a kitchen, it merely happened. This particular kitchen, part of a two-storey linney, had a large table and chairs, but what they looked like I have no idea. There was an electric fridge and stove, and a mark on the floor where the old wood stove had been; there was a long, high window with a shelf, on

which you could sometimes find a bowl with a goldfish or two; there were cupboards of various sizes; a place on the three steps to the rest of the house where empty milk bottles were stored; and an endless stream of visitors, most of whom ate at least some of the hundreds of meals that were prepared there each week.

Spaghetti, pea soup, shepherd's pie, macaroni and cheese, lamb curry, roast beef, kippers, baked cod, steamed salmon with egg sauce, gingerbread, porridge, steak and kidney pie, beef stew, grilled halibut, bangers and mash, bread pudding, and dozens of other dishes, were produced and consumed by the ton in that kitchen. Three times a week, bread was made, seven loaves each time using half a stone of flour. My father would import and freeze loaves of pumpernickel sent by his sister in Montreal but he absolutely refused to eat bread from the local bakeries. We small ones thought all things bought were by their nature superior, but our friends, who had the gloomy task of eating Mammy's or Our Own sliced white every day, lined up to get homemade bread and molasses in our kitchen.

The milkman delivered eight quarts a day, double on Saturday; the man from the brewery delivered four to six cases of beer each week; innumerable groceries arrived in cardboard cartons from Kane's or Murphy's; and Lawlor's still delivered dripping pink paper packages of meat by horse and cart. Coal, too, came on a cart and sometimes a horse brought a load of manure for the garden. Father always fetched the fish himself, on his way home from work, as this was not a chore any sane man would trust to another.

It was almost impossible to pass quickly through a room filled with such food and such activity. By day, the household help ruled the kitchen, and on weekends Father was likely to be experimenting with soda bread or dissecting game, but at night the older girls took control. The older girls, who were mostly at the university, held impromptu parties and midnight feasts with poker games and dancing to a portable record player. Friends arrived and left by the back door and there was a system of signals involving quart, pint and half-pint milk bottles in the kitchen window, to warn if adults were on the

prowl. Nighttime food was a little exotic—pizzas made from packets, pigs-in-blankets which were really just sausages wrapped in pastry, or fancy oblates with sauces. If you were small and in favour, or likely to rat on them, you might get a bite or two, although there were almost always dishes to be washed in payment. If you came down in your pajamas at one in the morning any night of the week, you were likely to see someone who is now a prominent judge or politician or actor, or some African from the University, perched on the kitchen counter, smoking cigarettes, sipping something possibly alcoholic, and eating whatever was at hand.

Off the kitchen were the stairs to the cellar. The cellar was very useful as it was unfinished, unattractive, and suitable for dirty projects. Part of it was a workshop for Father, and another bit was a coal room called the Glory Hole with a little chute out to the laneway that a small child could wriggle through. There were racks for lumber and cans of paint, a corner for the furnace, and a large sink. There were also shelves for cases of tinned food, sacks of sugar, bags of flour, anything to feed the ravenous hoards. The cellar was where my brothers shaved off their eyebrows and built model airplanes, where my sisters made plaster of Paris figures and bunged up the plumbing for half the neighbourhood, where we youngsters washed after falling in the sewerage at Kelly's Brook, where you hid out when one sibling was threatening to beat you to a pulp or when another was actually doing it. It was also where 'the help' temporarily stashed the things she stole from upstairs. In the cellar, you could make a mess and know that it would be at least twenty-four hours before anybody found out.

Upstairs, in the main part of the house, was a long hallway suitable for hockey. Off the hallway was a front porch, a dining room and a living room. There were large doors that could separate these two rooms, suitable for staging plays—the nativity at Christmas, shadow surgery at Hallowe'en, puppet shows for National Book Week, and various other dramas depending on the time of year and the inclination of the organizers.

Up over the stairs was a broad landing with a huge dresser for laundry, and off that was the only real bathroom—large enough for Father to shave, for Mother to bathe and for one of us kids to pee, all at the same time—and father’s office. The office was known as the Lockup, as it was always locked unless Father was in it. Little wonder, you might think.

If you belted up the stairs and swung round the newel post in your stocking feet, a superhuman leap would carry you over a few more stairs to land you first outside the Aged P’s bedroom, and then outside their living room. This living room was off-limits without invitation or permission, though you could stand in the doorway and deliver messages, ask questions, or whine to be invited in. The furniture here was less shabby than downstairs, there was usually a fire in the grate, and it was where the radio-gramophone could be found. It was here, in the evenings, that we listened to Hopalong Cassidy and The Shadow, and where we played the old seventy-eights of “I’ve got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts” and “There’s a Peony Bush There in my Garden,” which we were convinced had been recorded by Uncle Louis before he became a respectable doctor.

Next stop the sewing room. This was a small room over the front door, so the window led out onto the veranda roof, making it one of our fire-escape routes. There was a flagpole jutting out from the roof, so someone was lucky enough to be allowed to climb out several times a year to attach the Union Jack, and at Christmas time a small spruce tree with lights went there as well. When Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip drove up Bonaventure Avenue in 1951, I was allowed to sit on the roof in my sister’s lap and wave a small flag, for which the soon-to-be-crowned queen rewarded me with a tin of toffee. The sewing room was used for sewing, but it was also at times my younger brother’s bedroom, and it was where I was confined when I had measles and wasn’t allowed to read or have a light.

Round another corner and up over one more sets of stairs, past the long poles of laundry hanging in the stairwell from the top floor, and the window with the first of two ladders down onto the roof of the bathroom, again for fire, and up over the last few stairs to a dingy hallway notable only for the one-plank bookshelf that ran all the way round it over the tops of the doors. You had to have a chair to get a book down but, in retrospect, it was probably the best place to store our communally owned books, since there was a complicated set of rules regarding entrance to the various bedrooms on the top floor.

First came the big bedroom, which in a wealthy household would have been called the nursery. This is where the four youngest of us slept. Next came Number One Son's bedroom, with an adjoining lumber room where the costumes were stored along with the boxes of old war-bandages, suitcases, discarded hats, and what have you. This bedroom was guarded jealously because the bed was snug up against the chimney. It was not only the warmest spot in the house, but you could also hear everything that was going on in the living room below. Next came a room whose occupant depended on which of the three middle sisters were away at school and which were home.

An architect will perhaps expect that the house should end here, but of course it didn't and it was many years before I realized that contrary to the usual laws of nature, our house was bigger on the top floor than it was on the bottom. The tour continues, past the loudspeaker used to play Bach for our wake-up call in the morning, to Number Two Son's room, then Number One Daughter's room, and on to Number Two Daughter's. The wall in the cupboard outside this room was special—it was softish, and a bit bendy, and if you pushed a pencil into it firmly enough, before long you could poke a rolled up comic book through to the girl who lived next door in number 42.

The fact is, once Father bought the other side of our semi-detached, he inevitably began to cannibalize it, and we lived in all of number 44, and bits of number 42. Father's perfectly rational fear of fire led him to put false tintype walls in some places that would allow an adult to go into a closet and, using nothing but a turned shoulder, burst through

into the other house in the event of a conflagration. It was only when the last remaining room on the top floor of number 42 was taken over that we young ones realized that we had an escape route into another land. The comic hole expended into a hand hole, and then into a hole big enough for a child to climb through. Our chum in the rental unit on the other side kept quiet about our discovery, and since her parents were Americans and lived on nothing but gin cocktails and potato chips it was some time before we were found out.

Outside the house were other buildings and, of course, quite a big garden as Father had not surprisingly taken over much of the property that went with number 46 as well as that which belonged to number 42 and 44. There was a bicycle shed under the house which we used as a club house. There was a greenhouse with a Coleman oil heater and automatic windows that opened and closed according to the temperature, and a garden shed used for keeping gardening tools and rabbits and of little further interest except that jumping off the roof was one of the tests used to keep a certain Black Protestant child out of the club house. In the garden we had a small baseball diamond with third base conveniently next to the greenhouse, a tall swing that terrified even adults, two apple trees, numerous maples, from one of which hung a trapeze, some ancient lilacs, and several laburnums which supplied the poisonous seeds for yet another club house test.

Our world was not all beer and skittles. We had enemies, known collectively as the Eyes. These children came from a family even bigger than our own. The father was often in jail, the mother frequently sported a shiner, and the children were the only ones I knew who were as attached to their parents and to one another as we were. They were poor, thin, fierce, light fingered and usually lousy. We were occasionally lousy ourselves, but when we got infested we had our hair doused in kerosene and were sent to play in the open air for an afternoon, while they had their heads shaved, girls as well as boys. Our garden, full of rhubarb and bicycles and fun, was like an armed fort in the

middle of a savage wilderness; we were the cowboys and they were the Indians. The only truce came on Christmas Day, when they would come to the door, hatless and sockless as often as not, to 'look at the tree.' Looking at the tree was what begging was called in St. John's at Christmas time. Normally the Eyes did not beg—they stole. But at Christmas time, they came to the front door instead of over the back fence, they were welcomed in to stare awkwardly at the tree for a few minutes, and then led into the kitchen to eat leftover turkey and pudding. I was always worried that my mother would decide to give them our presents, being that way inclined, but I think she knew that if she patronized the Eyes, we'd get a rock through every window in the house before the New Year.

Although one sister tried unsuccessfully to tame a few of the tiniest Eyes, they were the only children for miles who were not really welcome in our house. Anyone else could and did come, for visits, for meals, for sleepovers, even for quite long periods of time—weeks and months—depending on the circumstances. We rarely ever got over the doorsteps of the respectable, tidy, boring houses of our friends. The Black Protestant boy could sometimes have us in his basement if we came and went from the back and kept excruciatingly quiet. There wasn't much fun in it, except for the novelty. The truth was, the action was at our house, and we and everybody else knew it.

There weren't very many children on our side of Bonaventure Avenue—most of the big old houses were full of elderly widows, retired military men, and professional people who never sat on their doorsteps or climbed on their roofs to fetch baseballs or put out flags or Christmas trees. Across the street there were no houses at all. Instead there was Belvedere Orphanage. The orphans, who were mostly not orphans at all, were kept to themselves. There was barbed wire and a dog because of the cows, and it simply wasn't worth the risk to creep into their playground to slide on the rink in winter or take a ride on the round-about in summer. If there were girls there that one of us knew, they were occasionally allowed to visit us for supper or Sunday dinner, but they were a

depressed and a depressing collection of kids, especially when their heads were shaved, and we didn't mix too much with them.

We did, however, spend time with the children who lived at the Belvedere farm. They were an exceedingly cheerful and religious lot, and would drop to their knees in the fields when the Angelus bell rang. They didn't in the least mind living next to the graveyard and could tell all sorts of stories about funerals and dead nuns. They had a horse as well as cows, and were in many ways as isolated as if they lived far off in the Freshwater Valley or out in the Goulds. They seemed to have even less to do with the orphans than we did. Perhaps the nuns thought it was not good to give their little charges too close a look at normal life since they were unlikely ever to have such a thing.

Down behind Fleming Street, near the Eyes' house, was the Newfoundland Brewery, and we loved the smell of the mash. The hops were brought in enormous trucks and transferred into the plant by means of a giant vacuum, a process you could smell all over the neighbourhood. It was a glorious day for us children when they switched from brin sacks to plastic bags. Plastic was still a rare commodity then and these were heavy, transparent sacks the size of present day garbage bags. The men would slice them open at the top and pour the contents into a hopper attached to a hose, and then, unlike the brin sacks, the bags were discarded. The plastic bags were water-tight and almost indestructible, and suddenly every housewife in the east end had to have half a dozen for storing clothes. Some even used them to sew slip cover for the slip covers in their immaculate, never-used parlours. After the first heady days of our just grabbing as many of the things as we could and making off with them, the men at the brewery instituted a line-up system, where each child was given one bag and then had to go back to the end of the line and wait again. These bags, rinsed out with Father's garden hose and hung to dry, were worth anything from five cents to twenty-five cents, depending on how badly the housewife wanted one and how much she knew about availability.



The brewery was also, of course, a source of rats, and we would often see them squashed in the streets. It was said that one of the Eyes was bitten in his bed, but none of us believed there existed a rat so tough that it would dare try such a thing. People in the row houses on Fleming Street were extremely careful about keeping basement doors closed and when the rats were particularly bad the brewery would send around a case of beer to each household on the block to stop the complaints. There was little complaint about the smell—the beer had to compete with the smell of fish from the harbour when the White Fleet came in. Truth to tell, I loved the smell of both.

Less aromatic was the smell that occasionally wafted up to us from the Old Track. It never reached as far as Bonaventure Avenue, although it frequently threatened to. Below the Old Track was Kelly's Brook, known to us as the Sewer River. There was a path down to the little valley, now replaced by steps, and the brook was open to the air at that time. Some days, it was full—absolutely full—of raw sewage. You could see malodorous lumps and bits of paper floating by and catching on the rocks, and you had to be very careful in choosing your stepping stones as a miscalculation could be disastrous. Occasionally the Portuguese fishermen would go down to Kelly's Brook to wash their clothes and Mother would send us to chase them away, fearful that they would catch something really deadly. Occasionally she even had us fill a barrel in the yard so they could rinse the clothes they had unfortunately dipped in the river. Sometimes we would get a pencil and paper and have the men draw pictures of their families and of what they did on their ships. One of the cousins and one of the middle sisters could always manage a little Portuguese and they would join us if they were around, but I think they were really sent by our mother to keep an eye on us. Mother never liked to forbid us to do anything, but it must have been difficult at times.

I suppose life was boring occasionally, but I can't recall that it was. The easiest way for us small kids to stay busy was to rent ourselves out as slaves to the older girls. This was done by the week, payable up front, and once a deal was made, it had to be

endured. The best person to slave for was the laziest sister, because within a day or so she would get tired of giving orders and would pay you just to go away. The worst person to slave for was Number Two Daughter. She wouldn't pick up a dollar from the floor if she could get someone else to do it for her, and fifty times a day her voice would project through the house: "Slave! Run over to the store and get me some cigarettes" "Slave! Run out to the front and see if Paddy is there yet" "Slave! Run down to the cellar and fetch me two tins of tomato soup" Slave! You had to be really desperate for money to slave for her. Number One Son hardly ever hired a slave, and if he did, look out! He only paid if he was planning to do something really painful or humiliating to you, such as pulling out all your loose teeth in front of his friends, or holding you off the back verandah by your ankles so your underpants showed.

If you weren't in school or in slavery, there were all sorts of things to do in the neighbourhood. One boy was a born bureaucrat and he organized sports all summer. This wasn't just street hockey and baseball, but also the 100 yard dash, broad jump, high jump and so on. He kept records from year to year, and called his organization the CHC, which stood for the Catholic Hobby Club—the purpose of the Catholic part being to keep the only Black Protestant in the area out, as he was miles taller than any of us and would win regardless of how clumsy he was. With him out of the running, the organizer won everything and it was no surprise to us when he went off and won the Rhodes scholarship.

If there were no sports, there were a variety of other diversions. You could go down to the corner of Fleming Street and Hayward Avenue, to the dog pound, and watch them gas the strays. The dogcatcher backed his truck up to a hole in the wall so that the tailpipe went through, and then he just left the engine running while he went to a nearby tavern to drink beer. It was eerie to hear all the barking and snarling on the other side of the wall slow down and finally die out altogether. Sometimes a few of the animals would escape again and that made for real excitement. Then you could go to Mrs. Cackle's or

Mrs. Cluck's for cake—Mother preferred that we do our scrounging from Mrs. Cackle because although Mrs. Cluck was 100 years old and made better cake, she had tuberculosis in the house. I was a pet of Mrs. Cluck's and I used to worry about what I'd do if she gave me tea in a cracked cup, for that was certain death. She never did give me tea--it was always raspberry syrup in a glass. On a slow day, you could then telephone Mrs. Cackle and ask her to laugh like a witch for your friends. She was most obliging in this matter. Then you could go farther afield, down to Winterton to collect conkers from Mr. Bob's gardener, who was under orders to save them for the children, or down to the Newfoundland Museum to hear Mr. Leo English speak in Beothuk, or up to Mount St. Francis to hear the monk's mynah bird call "How many bottles of milk do you want?" in exactly the same voice as the Sunshine Dairy man. We had a hundred such diversions, and were always discovering new ones.

These excursions away from the house weren't without their perils. Not only did you have to dodge the Eyes with their pockets full of rocks, there were also at least four child molesters in the neighbourhood. Most likely there were many more than four, but four was all I knew about. We didn't think of the child molesters as criminals—they were just natural hazards, like the stepping stones in the Sewer River or the rats around the Brewery, to be avoided if possible and endured if necessary.

If the neighbourhood had its share of perverts, it also had its full quota of freaks and oddballs. Besides the Black Protestant boy, there was a woman with elephantiasis who ran a boarding house, someone known as "the street walking lady," who wore a pirate hat and muttered to herself, and Silly Willy, who is immortalized in Brian Hennessey's book *Waking Up in the City of*. One of my brothers, Number Two, had to be counted among the oddballs—he was simple and looked quite scary to someone who didn't know him, although I myself thought he was a sweetheart. Another boy, Jimmy, was similarly damaged, but he was an acknowledged hero—he'd tried to rescue my cousin from a fire and suffered a seizure when the firemen stopped him. It turned out that

there was nobody in the house after all, but we kids admired Jimmy tremendously after that.

There were also stores and businesses on every block—in fact, the nearby streets positively seethed with enterprise, and it was impossible not to be drawn into it. There were formal stores such as Downton's and Dunn's and Little Downton's and Clancy's and Bindon's, not to mention the Irish cobblers over on Barnes Road, but there were also unofficial ones such as the woman who sold exercise books and pencils out of her kitchen doorway, the Mercy nuns who sold fudge in the gym after school, the man on Belvedere Street who had a forge in his back yard, the cleaners, the gardeners, the bootleggers, the door to door vegetable men and women from Torbay, us kids flogging hop bags from the brewery, and the Eyes selling you back everything they'd stolen from you that week.

Today, the 'urban delights' are different but they are still there. St John's was a great place to grow up, but it's also a great place to grow old. I'm not knocking the outharbours, but there's only one harbour in my heart and that's the one located at the bottom of Prescott Street. Ray Guy doesn't know what he's missing. And I'm not telling him.