



Rosalind Kaplan

## You've Got To Be Taught

Four p.m. on a too-warm December day, sky already darkening to cobalt, crescent moon already visible. I walk my two dogs, passing a short block on Kent Road where eight or ten of the neighborhood's little kids, from four to ten years old, are in the street. A few, the ones with helmets on, race their bikes or veer back and forth across the blacktop on their child-size kick scooters. Others take turns tossing a basketball into the communal net placed halfway down the street. I hear high-pitched laughter and something that could either be a happy screech or a frightened scream. I needn't worry, though. Three moms and two dads are out on the street with their offspring, keeping an ear trained for approaching cars, admonishing the bike riders to slow down, scanning for impending injuries.

An image from my childhood instantly floods my brain: Lane Court, the cul-de-sac on which I lived until age eleven, filled with neighborhood kids running from one end of the street to the other, playing kick-the-can. Dusk beginning to fall, a breeze chilly against my hot skin. I know that as soon as I see a yellow glow from the streetlights, I'll need to return to my house, the robin's-egg-blue one, one house from the entrance to the cul-de-sac. All the wood-shingled, split-

level homes in this North Jersey development are the same; it's only the paint colors that distinguish one from another.

There are no adults in my childhood scene. It's the mid-sixties, and "benign neglect" is the name of the parenting game. From the time I was four or five, I remember running wild through the neighborhood, playing street games for hours, climbing trees in one of the yards, or searching for four-leaf clovers in the unkempt strip of grass next to the sidewalk. I was always with my brother and some of the dozen or so other kids who lived on or near Lane Court. Jan and Terry, twin girls the same age as I was, lived close to the dead end, in a white house with black shutters. The Ruderman boys were across the street from me, and several other children lived around the corner.

I don't think about my childhood a whole lot these days. If I do, what usually arises is time with my family, which wasn't all that happy. I see no use for revisiting sibling rivalry or the parental slights that occurred more than half a century ago; I've already done that in therapy. Now only my brother and I are left, and he's apologized several times for the time he tried to kill me by hooking up his electric train transformer to my bed and at least once for trying to flush my favorite dress down the toilet.

Still, watching all these kids in my current neighborhood playing together, like a big extended family, sends my mind back to Lane Court before I can censor my thoughts. The long days outdoors, the seeming simplicity of child's play—the cherished part of my life on Lane Court.

My own children, now grown, missed out on street play; there were way too many cars on our street for it to be safe. Any unsupervised outdoor time was within a fenced or hedged yard or on our long, flat driveway, the site of spontaneous basketball or street hockey games. Unlike my parents, we always knew where our children were. Some parent or another could glance out the window periodically to assure that they were safe.

I don't think that the laissez-faire parenting I received was a bad thing, at least not in that era. Cars rarely entered the cul-de-sac, and if they did, they traveled exceedingly slowly. Kidnapping, pedophilia, terrorism, shootings—none of these seemed applicable to our suburban life at the time. Admittedly, that benign neglect was what allowed my brother to plot my demise and try to carry it out, but it was also what allowed the hours during which the two of us pretended we were surgeons or zookeepers or astronauts, uninhibited by parental direction. Nobody stopped us from sliding down the laundry chute. We heard no objections to the surgeries we performed on our stuffed animals, using a butter knife and safety scissors.

We played hard, indoors and out. Running in the street with the neighborhood kids, there were often minor injuries, but without adults nearby, we learned to soothe ourselves and to get

our own Band-Aids. Conflict and even aggression sometimes arose, but we usually worked it out. If not, we forgot about it by the next day. The outdoor play time was mostly happy.

There were exceptions, though, like what happened with Jenny Dunn the summer I was seven. Jenny Dunn. Dirty blonde hair. Dirty clothes. A year or two older than I was, a frequent participant in street play. Her house was at the end, not the dead end, but the mouth of the cul-de-sac. It was painted red, or maybe just the door and shutters were red, but that's the color I see when I think about that house.

Jenny and I sometimes played at her house. Like most of the kids in the neighborhood, I went in and out of various homes—the ones where other kids around my age lived—and they went in and out of mine, except when my mother said, “No playing in our house today. I have work to do.”

We didn't have to ask permission to go to another house; if our parents needed to find us, they knew the usual places to look. Anyway, we'd normally emerge back into the street within an hour, and every one of us knew we had to be home for dinner. Except maybe Jenny, whose home life was a little different.

When I went to Jenny's house, her dad was always in the den, even on weekdays after school, when my own dad and most of my friends' dads were still at work in the city—or at least somewhere that wasn't home. He'd be sitting in the lounge chair, TV on loud, lights low. He, too, makes me think of red. It was his nose that was red and bulbous, not like a clown, not something funny. More something bad or dangerous. Jenny said we shouldn't talk to him when in her house.

I never saw Jenny's mother. Jenny said she had one, but she was never there, not even on the weekends or in the summer.

Summer was when it happened. I know because it started with Kool-Aid. My mom had made a big plastic pitcher of strawberry-flavored Kool-Aid for us, all the cul-de-sac kids, and left it on our front porch with Dixie cups.

We were running, as always, maybe kicking a can or bouncing a ball or running away from the neighborhood bully, Howard Ruderman, who once chased me so fast on my purple Schwinn bike that I flew over the handlebars and hit my un-helmeted head in the street.

(For that, my mom stuck a bag of frozen peas on my forehead and let me lie on her bed until dinnertime. Nobody worried about concussions back then.)

That particular day, when we became hot and thirsty, Jenny and I peeled off from the group, poured ourselves some of the red Kool-Aid, and sat on the stoop to drink it. Two of the

Reed girls, whose backyard abutted our side yard, were sitting at the table on their patio, and I waved.

It was 1967, and the Reeds were the first Black family to move into our neighborhood. I was friends with the middle daughter, Sharon, who was the same age as I was, seven and in second grade, but not at my school; Sharon and her teenage sister, Denise, went to private school. I wasn't really friends with Sharon when Jenny was around, though. For one thing, Sharon didn't play in the street with the rest of us; unlike me, her parents kept close watch. She and I played in our yard or our houses, just the two of us, and for reasons I didn't understand back then, bringing Jenny and Sharon together seemed like a bad idea. In any case, that day, Sharon wasn't outside; it was just Denise and their little sister, Rhonda.

Jenny told me then that she had an idea. I didn't always like her ideas. One day at her house, she'd had the idea to go into the bathroom and pull our pants down to look at each other's private parts. I hadn't liked that at all, but she was older and knew more than I did. She'd told me it would be fun, so I pretended it was.

"Can you go in your house and get some dish soap?" she asked me this time.

"Okay, but why?" Dish soap didn't sound fun, but I wanted to please her.

"You'll see," Jenny replied. "Just go get some. Put it in one of these cups, but don't let your mom see you!" She handed me a Dixie cup.

I didn't usually keep secrets from my mom, but I knew she was in our family room, writing reports for the job she went to three times a week, and that she wouldn't see me if I snuck into the kitchen. So I went in our unlocked front door and tiptoed to the sink. The green Palmolive dishwashing liquid was on the counter next to it, and I took some. Not much. Just about a quarter inch of green in the waxed paper cup. I noticed it matched the green curlicues at the cup's rim. I left the house again silently, careful not to let the screen door slam.

"Okay, here. What are we going to do with it?" I demanded.

"I want to teach Rhonda Reed a lesson."

"What kind of lesson?" Rhonda was only four, and I didn't think she could learn much yet. She hadn't even started nursery school at that point.

"You know how she ate a whole box of forty-eight Crayola crayons and had to have her stomach pumped, right?"

I nodded. The whole neighborhood somehow knew about that, though I don't remember how. Things just got around.

“Well, I want to teach her not to be dumb and eat or drink just anything. We’re going to put a little bit of soap in some Kool-Aid and give it to her. It’ll taste really bad, but it won’t hurt her. I know because my dad washed my mouth out with it when I said a bad word one time.”

I remembered my mother threatening my brother once that if he kept repeating some word, she would “wash his mouth out with soap.” But she’d never gone through with it; coming from a home in which parents didn’t spank or administer other corporal discipline, I doubted she ever would. I was quite surprised to find out it was a punishment some parents actually used. Jenny told me about her dish-soap experience matter-of-factly, as though it was nothing. I reasoned that if Jenny had ingested dish soap, then Rhonda Reed, who was foolish enough to eat forty-eight crayons, probably wouldn’t even mind.

We’d all eaten one or two crayons, but forty-eight? I imagined medium green and midnight blue swirling together in Rhonda’s stomach, along with raw umber and magenta and peach, a color that had been previously named “flesh” until someone had the brilliant realization that few people, if any, had skin anywhere close to that color, which to me looked like a creamsicle with its orange sherbet and vanilla ice cream melted together.

I imagined the multicolored, partly melted wax flying back out of Rhonda’s stomach in a single amorphous mass after some ill-defined type of electric pump was applied to her in some ill-defined way.

As an adult, I’d realize that Rhonda probably didn’t eat the whole box of crayons, that maybe it was ten or twelve, but probably not forty-eight, that the reports of the neighborhood kids were like a game of “telephone,” larger and wilder exaggerations building up with each new child’s version.

Years later, during medical training, I had occasion to pump a few stomachs, usually after an overdose of some sort. Now, with knowledge of the procedure, I laugh at my childhood imaginings. The procedure was much less dramatic than what I’d dreamed up back then. Just a clear plastic tube down the throat and some water flushed through it. No electric pumps, no big globs of anything solid. Strange how a child’s brain fills in the details it knows nothing about.

I didn’t object to Jenny’s idea. I may have consented enthusiastically or, more likely, agreed by not disagreeing. But I did participate. We put a few drops of the dish soap into a separate cup and filled it the rest of the way with Kool-Aid. We went to the bushes that separated the Reeds’ yard from ours—they were rhododendrons, young and small and past the time of blooming for the year, so there was no real barrier. Rhonda’s sister Denise was now all the way across the yard, looking for something in their storage shed. Through the bushes, we called Rhonda over.

“We have Kool-Aid!” Jenny told Rhonda. “Do you want some? It’s strawberry flavor!”

Rhonda, standing half behind one of the rhododendrons, smiled sweetly at us and nodded, and Jenny handed her the cup. Then we took off and ran to Jenny’s house.

I don’t know how long it took for my mother to find out what we’d done and hunt me down. It might have been fifteen minutes, but more likely it was much longer, an hour or more. What I remember is that we were in Jenny’s room, a room with graying, pale yellow carpet and a vague odor of stale cigarette smoke. We were playing with Jenny’s Barbie dolls, dressing them and planning a party for them to attend. I’d forgotten all about Rhonda and the Kool-Aid.

It was still mid-afternoon, bright sun and heat beyond the window of Jenny’s room, which was cooled by a small rotating fan on the desk. Hours before I’d need to be at my own house, across the street and one door down. But then I heard my mother’s voice in the downstairs entryway of Jenny’s house, and a low male voice that must have been Jenny’s dad, and then there was my mom, telling me I needed to “come home right now, young lady; we are going to have a talk” and then I was in our living room. I was sitting on the blue sofa and staring at the beige sculptured carpet. My mother didn’t sit down.

We weren’t “having a talk” because my mother was the only one talking. I knew I’d done something very bad, because she wasn’t yelling, but her voice sounded pinched and strained, and she was speaking faster than usual.

“Did you and Jenny give Rhonda Reed Kool-Aid with soap in it today?” she asked me.

I nodded, still looking down at the carpet.

“Why would you do such a thing? She’s four years old! And how much soap did you put in there? You could have made her really sick!”

She still wasn’t yelling, but her voice kept getting higher, and she was shifting back and forth from one foot to the other.

“It was Jenny’s idea,” I half whispered. “She told me to get the dish soap, and I didn’t know what she wanted it for.” I had a hollow pain in my belly. I shifted on the sofa. I wanted to run to my room and close the door.

“But the two of you put it in the Kool-Aid and gave it to Rhonda, right?”

“Yes, but Jenny told me it wouldn’t really hurt Rhonda. It was to teach her a lesson.”

“For what?” Now she was almost yelling.

“For eating crayons.”

“Oh my God!” my mother burst out. “Why were you listening to Jenny Dunn, of all people? What do you think Mrs. Reed thought when Rhonda went running to her with bubbles coming out of her mouth?”

I hadn’t thought about that at all. Somehow I hadn’t considered that Mrs. Reed would find out, or that there would be bubbles, or that maybe Jenny wasn’t telling the truth when she said that the dish soap wouldn’t hurt Rhonda. But I didn’t need to answer my mother’s questions, because she just kept almost yelling at me.

“Jenny Dunn did not want to give Rhonda poisoned Kool-Aid because she ate crayons. She was giving it to her because Rhonda is Black! Jenny’s parents don’t like it that Black people are living in our neighborhood, and Jenny is being cruel to the Reed girls because her parents have taught her that they aren’t as good as she is.”

Now her voice was steadier and lower. Her teacher-voice, I guessed, left over from when she used to teach eighth grade before she met my dad. Her hands and shoulders relaxed a little.

“It’s wrong and ignorant to think that way. I need you to know that, not to listen to Jenny when she says otherwise,” my mother concluded.

I don’t remember if more was said. I do remember the hollow feeling blooming into a deep red burning from my belly to my face, and then me bursting into tears. I didn’t know why I was crying, or what the burning was, though later I would understand it was shame. What I comprehended then was that I’d done something that my own mother said was bad and ignorant. Ignorant was a new word, but it sounded terrible.

It wasn’t until many years later, long after my mother died, that I began to wonder how she was so confident that Jenny’s idea was an act of racism, a plot to intimidate the Reeds, rather than just a nasty children’s prank. Did she know for certain that the Dunn family was bigoted? I don’t remember her ever talking to Jenny’s parents, or to Jenny, directly. Perhaps it came from neighborhood gossip, or perhaps from the Reeds themselves, as she talked to Mrs. Reed frequently. Maybe there had been previous conflict between the two families, whose front doors were almost across the street from each other. Or had she just assumed that Jenny’s family, a family she might have seen as “trashy,” with less education and more overt family strife than our own, would be racist?

Of course I was aware that the Reed family had a different skin color than my family and our other neighbors. I also knew that they kept to themselves more than most families on our block, but I’d never really thought about why. As a white, privileged child in a neighborhood full

of other white people, I hadn't needed to think about it before.

I didn't explicitly know that some people disliked other people just because of their skin color before my mother told me, but I must have felt it on some level, because it immediately rang true. Now, put into words, the idea seemed scary and creepy and stupid.

My mother then told me that Rhonda would be okay, but that I needed to "march myself over there and apologize to Rhonda and to her parents," and that I was not to go to Jenny's house ever again.

In the end, my mother went with me to the Reeds. She and Mrs. Reed had been friends ever since the Reeds moved in, and I supposed then that she wanted to make sure that I apologized properly.

It didn't occur to me that my mother was probably mortified that Mr. and Mrs. Reed might think my parents were racist and that I'd learned it from them. I don't think that her friendliness to the Reed family was performative; she and Mrs. Reed seemed to genuinely like each other. But at the same time, my parents skewed "liberal" on social and political issues, and I think it was important to her to be seen as socially progressive, to not appear prejudiced in any way.

When we got there, the way my mother and Mrs. Reed looked at each other made it clear that the two of them had already discussed the incident in depth. I said I was sorry and that I hoped that Rhonda didn't feel sick and that I'd never do anything like that again. I told them I'd listened to Jenny because she was older and bigger than I was, but that I shouldn't have, because I knew I was doing something wrong.

Mrs. Reed said I was forgiven. But Mr. Reed, just home from work and in his white button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up, stood there with his arms folded and didn't speak. I'm pretty sure he never forgave me. Sharon and I went back to playing together, but it was always at her house after that, and unlike my mother, Mrs. Reed supervised our activities.

I never did go inside Jenny's house again, and I rarely saw her after that. I didn't miss her big ideas or her red shutters or her red-nosed father, who frightened me. Jenny still came out to play kick-the-can with us now and then, but much less frequently. I guess she didn't think the neighborhood was as much fun when she didn't have someone to boss around, so she stayed inside more. I kept my distance from her, and she kept hers from me.

After that day, I had a new understanding of why the Reeds sent their daughters to private school, and why they didn't let them run around the cul-de-sac with the rest of us. I now noticed that there were no kids with dark skin in my school, except for Debbie Abraham, whose mother



was from India, and her skin was just light brown. I knew her parents had needed to meet with the principal once when two boys in my class said something cruel because she was from a different country.

All these decades later, I still remember my chagrin and bewilderment over this dawning. Suddenly, our neighborhood had taken on a sinister air. Did the family of the blonde, blue-eyed twins down the street dislike people who were Black? Did Howard Ruderman, or did he just hate everyone equally? Did kids whose parents didn't like Black people always feel the same way as their parents? Why hadn't I noticed any of this before? Suddenly, I saw danger everywhere. If the color of someone's skin could be perilous, what else did I need to worry about?

It wouldn't be too long before I found out. When I was ten, my brother started junior high school. A lot of Jewish families lived in our neighborhood, and in elementary school, it didn't seem that we were different than anyone else. But in the junior high, my brother got beaten up in the bathroom for being Jewish.

We moved to a new town nearby for the next school year, and I started middle school there. I wasn't assaulted, but I did hear whispers of "Jew" and "Yid" when I walked by certain kids, and sometimes they threw pennies at me and my friend Melissa. One day someone spray-painted "KIKE" in black on Melissa's beige hall locker. The principal had it painted over immediately, but nobody ever found out who did it.

I sat with the other Jewish kids at lunch, and we mostly stuck together socially. I wasn't "cool" or "popular," but I was okay with that. I had a busy after-school schedule of music and art lessons and Hebrew High School (I was bored with learning extra Hebrew, but all my friends were there with me twice a week). I had an active social life with other teens from my synagogue and my Jewish youth group.

The anti-Semitism was a taste of what it felt like to be the subject of bigotry. Yet I doubt it felt the same as the experience of the few Black kids at that school. They, too, were the victims of verbal slurs and social exclusion. They, too, stuck tightly together and sat at their own table at lunch. The outward effect was the same, but I think the internal effect was different.

On some level, even then, I think I understood that the contempt of anti-Semitism was different than the contempt of racism. Though the history of Judaism is rife with oppression, I was not, myself, coming from a place of oppression. Anti-Semitism was focused on myths and fear of academic and financial success of Jews in America. The point of the taunting was to make me feel "othered." In comparison, the anti-Black racism seemed focused on maintaining the oppression that was already in place, that is the history of Blacks in the US. The object was to make them feel "less than," exactly as my mother had explained when I was seven.

In the early 1970s, my middle school and high school years, every time I watched TV, I'd see a public service announcement featuring two young children, one Black, one white, playing on a swing set together. A song from the musical *South Pacific* played in the background: "You've got to be taught to hate and fear, you've got to be taught from year to year, it's got to be drummed in your dear little ear, you've got to be carefully taught."

I'm not sure when that ad was phased out; maybe the TV executives realized that it never really worked. I couldn't find reference to it on the Internet, and none of my friends or family remembers seeing it. I thought maybe I'd imagined watching the ad, or had it confused with something else I'd seen or heard, but I finally found some references to it in a Reddit thread; the author of the first post was asking if anyone remembered that announcement from seventies' TV. I felt assured that it was real, but I guess it didn't make much of an impression on the average TV watcher. Still, it stuck with me, likely because my awareness of racism was already heightened at age seven.

By the time I had kids in the 1990s, I foolishly believed that such a message would be unnecessary, but of course that wasn't true. From the time my children reached third or fourth grade, I could see how different cultural groups separated themselves.

In 2007, my daughter came home from ninth grade one day crying angry tears. She'd sat down at lunch with a Black friend, a girl who'd lived across the street from us for ten years. Two white girls approached and taunted her: "Are you white or are you Black? If you sit there, then you're Black and you can't sit at the other tables." What registered for me was how bold and blatant these remarks seemed compared to the whispered insults of my youth.

Of course, my daughter's brush with the high school culture of racism brought me right back to Lane Court and Kool-Aid with soap bubbles. Half a century had passed, but Jenny and Rhonda were still rattling around in my brain. I comforted my daughter, confirmed her reality that the lunch tables were self-segregated, that in an ideal world, they wouldn't be. But I didn't know what else to do.

I still don't. I'm still a white woman living in a mostly white neighborhood. I'm still not good at talking about race, at navigating interactions that place race in concert with other power dynamics, at reading a room full of diverse people. I make assumptions, make mistakes, get it wrong, try again and again. Hopefully it will come more naturally to my children and grandchildren.

I glance at the carefree kids playing on Kent Road one more time before I move on with my dogs. Which Kool-Aid will they drink? I see Mr. Reed, arms crossed, waiting.

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