

## **Spark #1.00 - Was there a childhood...**

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Was there a childhood for the world when one is a child, and a far grimmer state of affairs when asked to vote? Or is it always like this? It's all true? None of it's true? Is this some weird zen dialogue with history? Smile and pay attention. Now, for today's lesson:

People find the world around them inspiring. People surrounded by trees — a place in the country, everyone's ideal, someday, somewhere, over the rainbow we'll find a new way of living, and it can happen until after forever. Bear witness to what's about you. I didn't get to see a cow up close until I was 8, and it was in a zoo. With a manacled bear and some penned in deer. It was a long time ago.

It was 1969 and the world was dying under the burden of my dad's Plymouth Fury III Wagon we called the Green Barge. Thank the forces-that-be for modern medicine. It was all quiet on the battlefield and only a few enemy were found. The older kids up the street made one hell of a mess. One of the neighbors strung up his dog out of frustration at the welfare state. God damned nut job. I was eleven. I was with my friend who died in a motorcycle accident. We shoplifted cigarettes and matches and hopped on our bikes and rode like the sweaty sulphurous wind down to the tracks, to the fetid pits, to the government arsenal filled with jeeps and tanks, and beyond to Industrial Avenue and farther down the road to short ruin.

It's like a big park for machines. Really.

And we arrived at the Edison Bridge. It was the high afternoon in New Jersey at the rumpled banks of the old Raritan. A slow moving river of decay, all but dead save for some hardy shad, eels, and frogs. Spanned by a massive feat of engineering- it was fantastic- a giant and very high bridge cut an acute arc over the earth, vaulted on concrete pillars, each pillar set solidly in the rank and smelly river.

Nearby was a leaking tank farm and refinery filled with oil and gasoline. It leaked into the river, leaving a psychedelic of magenta and blue on the slumping river. Matches, cigarettes, gasoline. Do the math. We smoked the cigarettes one after the other. I started feeling sick. He wasn't — he was having fun and being a complete knucklehead. Just like me. So we threw matches on the water, the flame delicately coiling to the rolling filthy water. They would land and make a gentle hiss, as the trucks roared above our heads, their wheels slapping across the break in pavement right where the bridge met the earth, reporting with a faceless loud chirp, and their engines roaring off into the distance, amid the granular polyrhythmic percussion bursts of the cars speeding close behind them. The living river was above my head- it was the highway. Below me was the sick river - where occasionally we would hear a satisfying hiss in the water followed by the appearance of the wooden match corpse in the watery grey. Very bleak, on reflection.

Finally, one of the matches lit off some gas, which ignited something else with a whooshing thumpy sound. Soon a pond of flame appeared in the river. We stood our ground at first, as the flames were

fanned by the breeze and its bouquet of lighter fluid from the refinery. It all seemed so basic- frozen fear, flames, water, stench, and a black column of smoke rising to the bridge above. It seemed we were transfixed for hours- this horrible dead place belching smelly acrid filth into the air. I was appalled and fascinated at the same time. I couldn't believe my eyes. Somehow we diverted our gaze — I think the sirens of the fire truck did it- broke our attention from the frankensteinian horror of our merry bicycle adventure. We got the hell out of there.

We found an outcropping covered with crappy little trees and sumac bushes, and hide ourselves and our bikes behind the opaque fronds of our hasty hideaway. The fire trucks arrived, growling and hissing, and immediately set about spraying opaque white foam onto the river. I felt relieved, and while my friend didn't let on, I think he was too. Even if he was as wild as the miserable hound tied up in his tiny backyard of chainlink fences and swingsets from Two Guys, he saw the the same foamy crap billowing in the breeze, as it oozed its way to Perth Amboy and the ocean beyond, dragging the roasted hydrocarbon in ever tinier bits to Ireland.

When the police cars arrived, we got on our bikes and high tailed it home. We couldn't tell anyone...

I didn't want to go home- too crowded- too cramped. I was on my bike, my freedom, riding in my world, and I instead went up the hill into Raritan Manor, where there was an overpass. I stopped on the bridge that spanned the real river- the river of traffic; the smelly roar of the Turnpike beneath me, and to the south west I saw the orange sun was sinking in a grim magenta haze. I just watched it all go by, and thought- it's like a wine bottle- all the yeast eats its food and dies in the alcohol it craps out. The waves of steel, rubber, and glass roared beneath me. It was relentless.

When I got home and went to my room, I sat at my desk and looked out the front window at the turnpike. My head was in my hands. A jet shrieked overhead to land at Newark Airport. That was my inspiration. That was the nature of my inspiration. The baby monkey doesn't like the wire mommy. He sings songs that click and whir...