

Sk8th Grade

by Chris Ladd
FUN EDITOR

Here, in college, peers surround us. Age wise, we look pretty much the same. None of us feels "big" or "old" or "mature." I don't.



I don't realize that in my years here, I've become old. College old. The kind of old I once saw in elder cousins and in my sister's friends. I don't realize this because that realization would imply some kind of reference that just is not there, a reference that can't exist in this place.

That's not to say one can't find these references. I found one last week. At a

WHERE THE
HELL IS
WAYNE, ME

roller rink.

I can still smell the faint tang of disinfectant the high school kids behind the counter spray into the boot of skate after skate as they readied the RollerRama for business. I was there with a group of friends, and we were early. Open Skate starts at 7:30, not before.

So we mill around the parking lot, and this is where we have our first glimpse of reference. They pour out of cars, our references, from passenger seats and rear sliding doors. Long chains of parent/child drop-offs.

These are junior high kids. They stand in circles near one of the handicapped spaces, shifting their weight until the RollerRama opens. These kids are looking at us, sneaking glances, as we stand in our own circle not far away. We stand taller, stubbled, and mysterious. We are instantly hip. Automatically cool.

These kids watching us have braces and bad skin. They dress poorly, in fashion knock-offs they've seen on television. They wear big hoop earrings and basketball jerseys. They put

each other down and let doors close behind themselves without holding them open. These kids are frozen at their worst state of development.

And we are above them.

What happened next might not have been appropriate. It may have been cruel, or statutory or... I don't know what. What's important is that it happened. We can't take that back and so, for the sake of posterity, I will record now what we did in that parking lot, and what followed inside the rink.



We were to give these numbers to a rink patron of our choice. We were to give them to one of these kids. We would remain within the RollerRama until each of us had propositioned a minor.

On slips of paper we took from our pockets, we wrote false names and telephone numbers. We each took one of these slips and slid them into our pockets. There were eight of them. This was our game.

"Herbert, 573-6378".

"Gina, 1-800-438-6984"

"Tommy, tommytune@aol.com"

"Jenny, 867-5309."

We weren't to leave the roller rink with these slips. We were to give them to a rink patron of our choice. We were to give them to one of these kids. We would remain within the RollerRama until each of us had propositioned a minor.

Ideally, this is a win/win situation: the kid comes out feeling great, we feel cool and inventive and funny. In practice, convincing a roller skating stranger to call you sometime is harder than it seems, and, if possible, more embarrassing.

At 7:30 we go inside. It costs five dollars, and many of the kids hold this money tight in their hands. They've been holding it in the parking lot, holding it ever since their parents gave it to them. I thumb past my credit cards for a ten spot to cover admission and a rental.

Inside, it's like a brightly lit junior prom on wheels. The floor itself is crowded and tight, and pop songs blare from speakers overhead. Some kids skate together, some alone. Some dance while they skate and, logically, some of these dancers fall down.

Because they can say no, they can refuse the slip. It's an interesting shift of power.


One by one, my friends lose their slips of paper, some more heroically than others. One gives his to the girl working concessions. We gave him an international number and the name "Franz," so he asks the girl if she's ever been to Europe, and then when she says no, tells her to call him if she ever is and he'll show her around. Smooth.

Another slaps a high five to a passing skater, and leaves him with her number. He's impressed, until he comes over to talk to her and she forgets the fake name we gave her on the slip. Gina. D'oh.

I'm awful. I try the cute and bumbling route, falling into passing 13 and 14 year-old girls on roller skates. When I planned this, I would apologize, we would talk for an awkward moment, and I would tell this girl to call me sometime. But these girls have been warned against people like me. Against older men. I'm frustrated, but glad the girls are smart enough to be wary. At this moment, at RollerRama, I am a slimeball.

I end up giving my number, awkwardly, to a badly dressed girl who bumped into me near the ladies room, and nearly getting into a fight with her boyfriend who, although angry with me for propositioning his girlfriend, was just three quarters my weight. I weigh 150 pounds.

We had fun at the rink, but losing our numbers wasn't easy. We were just as shy and insecure as the kids.

We're old. We're stubbled. But truly we are nothing more than extensions of these acned adolescents. These kids are going to grow up and go to college or work the phones at a telemarketing warehouse. They won't stay like this. They will be us before they know it. We're not so big, no matter what these kids think. 

The rink is packed, more crowded than I think I've ever seen a roller rink before. People edge into the concession stand and order slurpies and ice cream bars. A whole pitcher of Hawaiian punch costs three dollars. The roller skate/blade rental counter is mobbed, one big adolescent amoeba. There is no line; to make it here, you must be bold, or you must be tall. I am tall.

My friends and I glide around the RollerRama, and we look around the floor at the twelve-teens zipping past. Who's it going to be? To whom will I be forever known as "Herbert?" There's a buzz between my friends and me now, a nervousness. These aren't our names on the slips of paper; these aren't our numbers. We have nothing to lose. But we're holding our slips as tight as some of these kids clamped onto their five-dollar bills in the parking lot. Asking something of these kids, we put them in a position of power, put them in a place to judge us, to be better than us.