

## What, Me Worry?

By Christopher Vickers

I grew up in a cooperative housing project, a long spit from a snaking slab of concrete protruding from the coastline called the Breakwater. The tail end of the love movement had left my post-hippy parents looking for somewhere to stay put in Victoria, B.C.; the co-op in James Bay was an affordable place to raise a family around like-minded people. To me, though, it was Fenway Park, the beaches of Normandy, Evil Knievel's show stopping runway—everything. I lived in B-block, an apartment complex flanked by trees and a winding garden path. C-block was across a courtyard and behind it was a long alley leading from a tool shed to a wooden playhouse and a small field. The alley was lined with a fence and fruit trees protecting us from the dastardly plans of the kids from the other co-op.

Summer days saw a gaggle of kids aged five to fifteen hanging out together. We lived in deep imaginations brought to life by the uncanny braveness of youth. There was an inherent hierarchy in the co-op. The oldest wielded power over the younger kids with their sheer size, punctuated by an air of snooty knowingness. The top of the pecking order was a nefariously stalwart boy of thirteen named Malcolm. He looked like an athletic James Dean, roguishly handsome with a glint of danger in his eyes. His right hand was another thirteen-year-old named Dylan. Tall and wiry, Dylan was at his core a peace-maker—a sage, but still game to stir the pot of childhood chaos, while Malcolm was more than likely to set the stove on fire.

The duo had started a top-secret club called the Brat Patrol. The clubhouse was located in Brendan Marshall's Tetris game of a garage largely because it had the luxury of a beat-up couch. The club had recently procured a vehicle by swiping a shopping cart from Thrifty Foods and piloting it back to our corner of James Bay. They kitted

it out with two-by-fours placed crosswise through the bottom compartment, so more kids could cram onto the side of the cart, hooting and hollering. The Brat Mobile was the slow-moving scourge of the neighbourhood. Suffice to say, I would have played chicken with an atomic bomb to be part of the Brat Patrol, but Malcolm just wasn't having it.

"What's the password, Vickers?" Brendan said leering at me with a cracked smile, as he mounted a stool behind a makeshift milk crate entranceway to his garage.

Brendan Marshall was the son of an actor and a witch. He was a year younger than me, but his ability to conjure richly theatrical strangeness made him untouchable. We were inseparable when I had broken my arm the same week he had totalled his collarbone, but lately he was playing capo for the older boys and had been busting my chops over the teeniest missteps.

"I'll give you a hint, it exists in the known universe."

"Come on, Bren, that's impossible. What do I have to do to be part of Brat Patrol?"

"Fly to the moon with those Dumbo ears," Malcolm butted in, "then maybe get us some Cokes."

A wave of red cascaded over my face. I turned away from the thrum of laughter and slunk home to explore my cash flow situation. Not unsurprisingly all I could find was a single dime at the bottom of a pocket, wadded up in some Bazooka Joe comics. I was masterful at raccooning in the pursuit of the consumption of sugar, so I knew I could forage for bottles to return, but that could take all afternoon and Malcolm could down a couple of soda pops in a matter of seconds. Not unlike the buzz it produced, sugar was a fleeting social currency.

It's peculiar how much emotional shapeshifting we do as children to fit in. How far we will bend and break ourselves to not be made fun of—to be accepted. On any given day in the co-op, rank and

stature could come plummeting out from under your feet. I needed something really special to become a member of the Brat Patrol, but what did I have to offer? Gazing past the parade of heroes posing on my Justice League wallpaper, my eyes focused on the big box recently given to me from my Uncle Brian. I had just the thing! I scooped up as much treasure as I could hold in my arms and raced out of my room, taking the flights of stairs in leaps, rocketing out of my front door into the courtyard.

“What’s the password, Vickers?” Brendan asked, popping his head up from a stack of milk crates.

“You can stuff the password, Bren. These *Mad Magazines* should do the trick,” I said, revealing a teetering pile of the fantastic and crass comics.

Malcolm and Dylan appeared out of nowhere, sliding up to Brendan and I, smoothly relieving me of the stack.

“Where did you get these?” Malcolm asked, flipping through a *Mad*, the cover depicting the freckled nitwit, Alfred E. Neuman, poking his head out of a sea of black umbrellas, holding his hand out to check for rain.

“My Uncle Brian gave me his entire collection. They go all the way back to the ’60s. I have tons more.”

“The same Uncle who beat Zelda?” Brendan chimed in, wonder ballooning in his eyes. *The Legend of Zelda* was the most popular game on the newly released Nintendo Entertainment System. A few lucky homes in the co-op had got a Nintendo that Christmas, but now it was summer and no one had come close to finishing *The Legend of Zelda*. No one, that is, other than my Uncle Brian.

“Yeah, he’s awesome,” I said, glowing red again, now with gushing pride from the rays of attention beamed my way.

Dylan had already fanned out the *Mads* on the dinged-up coffee table they had scavenged to spruce up the clubhouse. A week before

it was just Brendan's garage, but entering now was like setting foot in the inner sanctum.

"Take a load off, Sir Vickers," Dylan said with an over-the-top British accent, gesturing to the couch.

"Wait a minute," Malcolm said, surging at me from behind, twisting my neck in a vise-like headlock, "how do we know you're going to be true to the Brat Patrol—are you going to rat on us to parents?"

"No," I said.

"Sell our secrets to the other co-op?"

"I'd never do that!"

"Will you choose the Brat Patrol over your other friends?"

Malcolm was dragging me around as I struggled against his wrenching grip. I was an immensely sensitive kid and my response to any emotional extreme was eventually tears. As I stumbled back and forth in Malcolm's hold, I could feel the hot, wet pressure building in my face.

"Hey, Malc, let him go," Dylan said, slowly approaching us.

"Not until he says he chooses Brat Patrol."

"Come on, man. You're hurting him."

"Do you choose Brat Patrol?"

"I do!" I said, holding back tears through gritted teeth.

Malcolm released his grip, and I dropped to the concrete floor. It was like that growing up in the co-op. One minute you could be excluded from incalculably cool activities by someone who went from tyrant to friend in the blink of an eye; next, the curtain would be lifted and you were suddenly a junior member of the Brat Patrol.

That afternoon I held no hurt or malice. I was steeped in the moment as we poured over the black and white pages, laughing and doing ridiculous voices and impersonations—the musty smell of the

old magazines thick on our hands. Folding in the artwork on the back covers, we marveled at the images transforming into something entirely new.

“Wanna take the Brat Mobile over to the vacant lot?” asked Malcolm, throwing the last of the magazines in a corner. It was everything I wanted, cruising down the block, the late afternoon sun sparkling off the shiny metal of the Brat Mobile, mouth open wide in a howl of exhilaration.

“Sure,” I shrugged, as the first wave of many mothers’ bellowing voices echoed names throughout the courtyard, cueing kids to scurry home for dinner.