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The Patent-Leather Boot of Tyranny

Is there any more oppressive American institution than birthday parties for children? Any greater sign of the abject servitude of modern parents? I can't think of anything, unless you want to bring up school tuition, and *that* is going up nicely all by itself, thank you very much.

The children come home from school like eager Maoists, waving little red invitations.

"It's Benjamin's birthday!" Paris yells.

"Anna's having a sleepover birthday," Molly cries, jumping up and down in place.

Violet chimes in: "Mummy, Bella's birthday is *soon!*"

My heart sinks. All three celebrations are scheduled for Saturday. Goodbye, leisure. Hello, car.

So it is that on a glorious fall day, when the family ought to be gambolling about in green meadows or whatnot, the little girls and I are belted into our vehicle, belting along a highway that leads to the Beltway. My husband is miles to the north, driving Paris to another party, afterwards to a soccer game, and at some point fetching Molly from a third party. Outside my car, a light wind frisks about in the trees. Happy strangers are flying kites beneath the noble monuments of official Washington. Life outdoors is, in short, one big, beautiful, autumnal cliché.

Inside my car, Violet and Phoebe are caterwauling. I have one ear tuned to them, the other to C-SPAN. Also, I am trying to keep us from being flattened by the inevitable hurtling Suburbans.

"It's negligent homicide, though I don't like to use the word," Jeffrey Sachs is telling the Congressional Black Caucus on the radio. He is trying to make President Bush look bad.

"Mein eyes," Phoebe protests Teutonically, "Der's too much sun in mein eyes!"

"Anti-retrovirals..." Sachs is banging on, "...HIV/AIDS in Africa!"

"I am *NOT* tired, Mummy, so don't you even *say* that I'm tired because I'm *NOT*

tired," Violet repeats in a voice that could strip paint.

"...Thank you, thank you," comes the gravely sound of Charles Rangel, legislator.

I merge dangerously on to a different highway. Just think, this is all for fun! Every year, every one of America's little darlings gets older. In our national affluence, the practice has grown up that parents must celebrate this natural passage in ever more lavish ways, generally an hour's drive from one's house. During the school year, hundreds of thousands of parents spend their Saturdays hustling like rickshaw drivers around cities such as Washington — usually late, usually mired in traffic, always fearing the lash and hoping for a tip.

A Humvee zooms by, and I eat its dust. Flipping down my mirror, I see that in the backseat, Phoebe and Violet are now zonked. Well, that *is* nice. I sacrifice my Saturday, face the terror of high-speed merging, and they go to sleep.

No, modern parents are like Soviets born after the Revolution who docilely accept their society, but ever so occasionally wonder, "Why do we live like this?" There is an obvious parallel, if you don't see it. The tyranny of birthday parties, like Soviet totalitarianism, has its origins in utopian happy-think. The road to Chuck E. Cheese is paved with good intentions.

Families used to have small birthday parties, and then the piñata crept in. You need a crowd for a piñata. In a spasm of egalitarianism, schools began decreeing that if *any* child were invited to a birthday party, *all* children must be invited. Parents began renting venues that could seat 50. Children began performing triage: Only neighborhood friends? Only the girls from the class? Only boys whose last names begin with A-K? Subversive parents such as myself began postponing parties until summer, when you can invite whichever friends you like, which is few as possible.

I don't mean to sound ornery or ungrateful. A friend asks lightly, "Say, can your child come to my child's party?" And you think, Why sure! What fun! We'd love to! This is Venus speaking. It takes Mars a couple of seconds to rally, and by that time you're sunk. Too late, Mars asks sullenly, and silently, "Uh, it depends: Where exactly *is* this party?"

For your indignities do not consist only of driving about like hired help so that your children can become hysterical with a lot of other children they see most days anyway. You also must stand about foolishly with a bunch of parents you either barely know, or do not know at all, beaming insincerely. All parents look on all children at birthday parties with exaggerated fondness. It covers the awkwardness, and relieves the necessity, of making chitchat with other parents. I have noticed that adult conversation is at its absolute blandest in these circumstances.

Father, gesturing to icing-smearred child: "She sure likes that cake!" The Child's Mother, folksy-like: "Yes, but what a mess!" (To the child, with self-conscious intensity): "Just *look* at you, there's *frosting* all over your *face*!"

Father, with forced heartiness: "Well, that's what birthday cake is for!"

The Child's Mother: "Ha-ha!"

Plus, parties cost a fortune. Factoring in all the balloons, moonbounces, pool rentals, ponies, magicians, puppet shows, movie tickets, party hats, noisemakers, pizzas, ice cream, paper plates, hot dogs, neon-frosted cakes, loot bags, loot-bag contents, wrapping paper, tape, Playmobil, Barbie, Lego, craft kits, thank-you notes, stamps, gas, and automotive wear-and-tear — factoring in all of that, as I say, and taking a stab, I'd guess that American parents spend on children's birthday parties in a year about what it costs to occupy Iraq. The obvious difference being that occupying Mesopotamia does not give your children a sugar high.

After every party, exactly 20 minutes after you've wiped the last frosting off their cheeks, said goodbye, strapped them into the car, scowled into their loot bags at the sight of yet more sugar, and asked them gently to please stop squabbling, they begin to cry. I've timed it.

We are now parked, the snoozing girls and I, in the parking lot of the place where their friend's party is supposed to be. Other parents pull in, unload, and toil up to the entrance balancing toddlers and giant, beribboned packages. I look down abashed at the small, mauled parcel we've brought. I try to think of something exculpatory to say to the mother of the birthday child. Good things come in small packages? Small but perfectly formed?

My cellphone rings. It is my husband.

"So," I ask warily, "How were the go-karts?"

"Actually," he says, "Paris and I had a wonderful time."

<http://www.nationalreview.com/gurdon/gurdon200310030823.asp>