

PLOD Essay:

Gravity by Kit Sleeman

Rose Lodge Nursing Home rests on a low, inconspicuous hill on the south side of Graham Street, Wonthaggi's main street. It is strange how this hill has apparently shrunk since my childhood.

The hill used to be a precipitous mountainside covered by a wild pine forest and undergrowth. It was home to snakes, rabbits, foxes and who knows what else? There were also human inhabitants: wild warring tribes of kids who occupied forts spread though the forest. The forts

were subterranean, terrestrial or arboreal and represented strong points in jealously guarded territories carved out by continuous tribal warfare and raids. It was advisable to keep up with current affairs and have a mental map of current tribal boundaries and treaty shifts when visiting the forest. Being armed was also sensible.

The south of this forest was bounded by the road to the rifle range. There was another road down the east boundary and a fence between the forest and the hospital grounds to the west. To the north, across Graham Street where Guide Park now lies, the pine forest continued, denser and wilder in swampy ground there. Most probably, a Bulliphant may have lived there since there were adjacent old mine workings to take refuge in. That part of the forest was quite spooky.

Through the middle of this forest and down the steep hill ran a dirt track. The soil underneath the forest was sandy loam and if people wanted such material to mitigate the clay in their veggie patch soil, then this was where they came to get it. There were little excavations and holes all over the hill.



The steepness and length of the track made it an ideal billy-cart run. The surrounding trees and the obstacles of holes and tree roots, not to mention passing snakes, made it ideal from a skills point of view. Only a skilled billy-cart driver could get all the way down the track without a wipe-out and possible injury. Carts would crash into trees, become airborne, flip over, or disappear off track into the undergrowth or down a hole. Many cuts and bruises and occasional broken bones were the outcome. It was a perfect course.

Then, billy-cart construction was a right of passage: every boy built and drove one.

There was no financial cost involved: old pram wheels and wood could be found at the rubbish dump and the only extras needed were some rope and some nails gotten from any Dad's shed. Cart design was flexible and allowed one's originality to show.

There was only one real bone of contention between rival design and construction teams: should a billy-cart have brakes? There were both yes and no supporters, but the overall consensus was probably that you're a woosy if you drive a

cart with brakes: Gravity should be free to do its stuff.

Jon and I built a billy-cart. He was the budding engineer, so he did most of the building, but I scrounged for stuff to build it with as well as he did. As the older brother, he was going to get first dibs on its use, so his doing most of the work was only fair anyway.

Jon had first goes from part-way up the hill and had a few write-offs, but none were serious. I had similar experiences. We then tried from further up the hill and had even better write-offs.

There was no shame in crashing: it was your reaction that was under the microscope. Sometimes, you had the hill to yourself, but at other times groups would take turns and scrutinize each other's technique and courage. It was not billy-cart racing, but an exhibition event. How you reacted to the inevitable crash was the important thing. Being carried away battered, bruised and bleeding was not a problem, but under no circumstances were tears allowed.

Eventually we pretty much mastered billy-carting down the hill and gave it away. I still found the hill an attraction, though, and used to ride my bike down it sometimes. I used to reach some pretty good speeds, so control was tricky. It was a bit like today's mountain bike racing except with bikes not designed for the job.

There were other challenging places with steep grades that enticed us. Mine waste dumps were tantalizing. They were there, and they were steep sided. So what can we do about this? The answer is: corrugated iron.

Tobogganing down mine dumps on sheets of iron was a popular activity amongst the boys. There was always waste iron around near the dump, so it was a no-brainer.

There were a few risks specific to mine dumps associated with this activity. Mostly, the dumps are rocky. A high-speed wipeout is painful. The dumps are not pristine: there is part buried timber and metal that can impale or slash you. If you happen to be tobogganing on a dump that is still live and burning, then you might also get burned.

Further risk was associated with the location of the dump. In many cases formation of the dump disrupted local drainage so that a swamp developed at the base. East area was a good example of this: they were very good toboggan dumps, but your ride path left you waist deep in a swamp at the bottom. As always, the swamps crawled with snakes.

Despite the risk many tried it and I did not hear of any injuries worse than could be fixed with a few stitches.

Nearby to Wonthaggi are also steep sand dunes at the beaches. Some of the tallest and steepest, due west of the town, no longer exist. Too much foot traffic over them for many years caused plant death, which allowed the dunes to be eroded by the ever-present wind. But there were still some steep dunes left. These also got the iron sheet toboggan treatment and surfboards were also used as toboggans on the dunes.

Sand dunes may seem a safer prospect for tobogganing than mine dumps, but they also held some dangers. The location of dunes is not static: the sand is forever moving as the wind reshapes the dune. As the sand moves it repeatedly covers then exposes shrubbery. The shrubs die when buried and then, when exposed, the wood is sculpted by wind borne sand into sharp spears. These are then buried again and are great for impaling people who fall onto them from their toboggan. But it was still great fun to fly down the face of the dune.

Gravity was a fun plaything.

