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Before Virtual Reality ... a short story

When I was a young boy I had to walk to school. There were no school busses back then, even though the distance from my house to the school was almost two miles. I remember that it was a pleasant enough journey, except when there was bad weather, rain or snow. I began my trip by walking down a tree-lined brick street filled with small shops; a grocery store, a butcher, a shoe repair, two bars, a pool hall, a barbershop and an undertaker. Next, I hiked up a rather steep hill on a dirt path that cut across a green field. After that I crossed a road and came to another steeper path that passed through an overrun area that had once held a coal mine and a colliery. This was the most dangerous part of my journey because here was where my enemies would often hide in wait for me. Their attacks were quite often extremely vicious; I was pushed down in the mud, or hit with a rock that might split my head. Sometimes they punched my face and made my nose bleed. This was how people were bullied before the Internet. Back then there was no virtual reality, all the blows were real, and they hurt.

You ask why I was bullied. It was because I was small for my age, and my father had been a teacher, and also because he wasn't there. At the time my father was away in Europe fighting in a war. A few of the older boys, and even some of the girls, who bore a grudge against their former teacher for a real, or imagined, slight of previous years could take out their revenge on his son.

I returned to my home town recently to revisit my memories. Was I remembering it wrong? Surely a little five year old boy wouldn't have had to walk two miles to school. I was only five because I had started school a year early as our poor town had no kindergarten. My car's odometer indicated that the trip was almost two and a half miles. I had to estimate the distance because nowadays one cannot walk my former route. The empty fields, once covered with wild grasses, and dandelions being harassed by butterflies, were now filled by a development of identical town houses, some occupied, but most empty, apparently waiting for the economy to improve so they could be "flipped," by their owners.

The brick street I had lived on, and remembered so fondly, had been since paved over with asphalt, and the shops that once lined it were now all boarded up or turned into apartments. The only sign remaining that I remembered from my past was that of the undertaker. I looked around at this little town, wondering how I could have lived here in my youth. And then I realized that, despite not having a school bus, how much more my town had back then than it has now.