

A Secret Hideout of Leaves and Mud

Charles Finn

Nonfiction

We would get down on hands and knees. Crawl on hands and knees. With a look over our shoulders to see if anyone was watching we would bend and part the green branches and enter the sheltering cave of maples and dogwood, curled ferns and shade. There, following the white soles of the leader's sneakers or the flat backs of our own hands, we would leave the known world, breathing in that first dull whiff of bare earth. Left behind was the crisp sunlight, the sweet odor of cut lawn, the thrum of traffic on the distant highway. Gone, too, were families and friends, dogs and their ilk, and our bicycles like young colts, left splayed on the green grass or hidden up the street, leaned in fake nonchalance against telephone poles. All this we traded for the busy comings and goings of ants, the soliloquy of rustled leaves and the solitude of our own company. We were seven years old and the world would never burn brighter. We were in the holy land – childhood – and this its epicenter, our secret hideout of leaves and mud. And yet to crawl back there now, even through the wide portal of memory, part those ancient branches and sit once again in the still air and dappled shade is to risk a kind of death. “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” said Thoreau, but you can also drown there, and memory is no safe harbor.

It is almost forty years since I have lived among the backyards, shortcuts and hay fields of my hometown, twenty since I left it all together, shipped out for college with a new typewriter and barely a whit in my head. Granted I have been back, passing through to visit my sister who still lives in the area, but at such times my

journeys into the deeper well of childhood restricted to stolen glances out of moving car windows, twisting my neck like some kind of obscene crane to poke my beak down a tributary of its past. Always on these occasions there arose a sense of wonder and foreboding: wonder at the innocence of the age I grew up in, where children could roam half feral, unsupervised from the time of the screen door slamming behind them in the morning to the call for dinner from the back porch at night; foreboding in the ghosts that were there, the many me's, too many me's, former me's and tadpole me's, outfitted in the uniform of the times with crew cut and polo shirt, white gym socks pulled up to my knees. Even in those brief glimpses I saw how every tree and crack in the sidewalk would hold too much meaning, be too ripe with memory and grief. Grief, I will note here, is not always the bitter pain it so often refers to, but also the sting of the unbearable – great happiness and the realization of times lost. Such a fall through memory can be vertiginous and the climb back out hardscrabble, the subsequent arrival in the present with its whiplash of reality too awful for words. Why I feel such a weight to my memories is a mystery to me. These were the halcyon days of my youth, days that were no straight lines, but like the brook that meandered through town stalled in eddies, flickered over ripples and collected in clear deep pools. Their logic was the logic of little boys, where a salamander was a glorious find, or a flat rock to skip a reason to rejoice. Trees existed for the sole purpose of being climbed and summer was not merely a season, it was all our good lives long. Our hideout was a sanctuary within the even greater sanctuary of childhood, and no different than hundreds of thousands of others, possibly millions, hideouts scattered across backyards, alleys and dabs of forests in every city and town. I have heard of ones that were elaborate tree forts, or as simple as three bed sheets pinned together. The physical structure was unimportant however, as in reality it was the edifice of imagination that sheltered and protected.

In its most basic form our hideout was a simple tent of leaves and overhanging branches, a natural cave in the undergrowth of a thick New England bramble. It existed at the end of a dead-end street, the street badly paved and the sidewalks cracked with age and humped by frost. Where the pavement ended was a patch of lawn, home to a man named Adams, a lawyer in town we barely knew or saw. Behind his house and not more than a few yards from the chain-link fence that surrounded his swimming pool, a steep bank led down to a small field of tall grass and a brown brook beyond. No one to my knowledge ever farmed this land or mowed the grass, and so by mid-summer it would grow almost head high. Taken as one this field, bank and brook became our de facto backyard, and countless hours were spent exploring every inch of it. Our hideout resided somewhat curiously at its very border, tucked in among the trees and shrubs that stood at the top of the bank. Most importantly it was just feet away from a well trodden path that led to the bottom, and so it was possible to sit in completely secrecy just feet away yet hidden from view to anyone who passed. Entering meant dropping onto hands and knees and pulling back a set of low branches, exposing an opening no larger than that of a dog door, a space just big enough for a small boy to slither through. From there you'd turn right and crawl down a short passage until appearing in a small hollow in the underbrush, the whole procedure akin to diving underwater and surfacing a lungful away in a hidden cavern of sweet air.

We dove. We sunk out of the world. We were five, six, seven-year-old snorkelers, swimming toward whatever the future might hold. The earth would be cool and a little damp, packed hard, and I remember thinking of worms. "So this is how it feels." We were never far from direct contact with the earth back then, running barefoot or digging in the sand, but this first touch was somehow

more intimate, more potent and thick with meaning. The ground felt infinitely solid here, somehow more real than at other times and in other places. Here was the basis of everything, you could feel it coming up through your palms and your knees. You were crawling along something elemental, not consciously or in the sense of the four elements, but with a knowing extended from far back in time. Although I hesitate to name it, the word that comes back to me is honesty, because down on all fours, patting the ground as we moved ahead – almost as if it was a good dog – we moved across the naked honesty of the earth itself, its bedrock of incorruptibility. Young as we were we knew that no lies were buried there and that the ground was the truest thing we would ever encounter. I don't wish to overstate this, but there was the sense that the truth to every known thing was at our fingertips and could be mined if one only knew how. And we were very close right then, closer than we would ever be. Like creatures that live without sight we were listening with our hands, feeling the truth of existence rise up through our knees. Our whole bodies became tuning forks, ones that need only be struck and the greater meaning of life could ring forth. I believe this stemmed from the overwhelming sense of fecundity, the living green all around us all, and the dead, dying and decaying leaves below. Adam had been created out of a pinch of sand, this we knew. Eve from a rib. Worming our way toward our hideout, noses inches from the ground, it was easy to believe how.

It was maybe ten feet to reach the end of that tunnel and come to the opening where we could sit up and more easily breathe. The ground sloped away down the bank and there was no level place so we sat in the V-shaped cups between tree roots, our skinny behinds bone to bone with the trees that grew overhead. Crouched with our knees pulled up to our chests, or sitting cross-legged, “Indian style” the coolness was refreshing as we waited for our eyes to adjust.

There was in fact plenty of light, and spots of sunshine found their way through the green canopy, moving on the dirt floor in hypnotic blotches like a swarm of insects. Even with light puffs of wind the air was incredibly still and the ambient noise from beyond all but blanketed, hushed as if covered by a layer of snow. With the quiet, the buzzings of bees and occasional chirp of a cricket grew in proportion and our voices naturally fell to a whisper. We were not hiding from anything in particular, but our secrecy was all important and to be discovered would have been a terrible fate. It was not a matter of privacy – we planned no dastardly deeds – but there was an innate need to be out of view of adults, to live in the world as separate beings, alone and self-sufficient, masters of our own fate. Our hideout provided us something like this. It added the gin of secrecy to our days. Better than any house or home it sheltered our daydreams, gave them walls and structure, a place from which they could begin, leave from and come back to. I don't wish to imply that any of this was conscious, and it is only all these years later that I begin to understand. And yet all these sensations, subliminal in nature, entered us truly as a glass of cool water; two small boys, vessels being filled, unselfconscious as the trees we sat under.

At the sound of distant voices we would go quiet, shushing each other and re-cocking our ears. Already our senses had been heightened, the close contact with the earth and idea that we were hiding paring them down to the essentials. Thus we became wild animals, alert and skittish as deer, ready to bolt at the first sound of a snapped twig. As the voices came closer we'd hold our hands to our mouths and pinch our noses, our eyes fixing each other with naked looks then darting away. At first we might suppress a giggle, but the situation was too serious and the consequences of discovery too real. As the footsteps came closer tiny needles of fear pricked us from all sides. We were on the verge of breaking away, tearing a

new opening in the trees or fleeting down our “escape root”, a slick path straight down the hill. Almost always we'd recognize who was approaching and we'd mouth the names to each other, “That's Bill and Dale.” Then when they'd passed we'd let out a sigh of relief and the inevitable, “That was close.” Such routine scares provided the drama we needed, the danger and suspense. The rest of the time was given over to a list of traditional activities; destroying insects and playing with matches, or fiddling with sticks, whittling them down to fine points with our pen knives, the curled shavings piling up like duff around our feet. It's possible we collected butternuts and stored them in strategic places, caches of “ammo” for our perceived and sometimes real wars with neighborhood friends. And there was talk of Indians I'm sure, the scouts and braves we modeled ourselves after. Our hideout was not a hub of activity but a place of lassitude and calm, its deeper meaning felt, but unknown to us at the time. We were simply little boys, children of our own creating, sponges absorbing the visible and invisible around us. And I believe if it was possible you could have picked us up and wrung out the whole of Waterbury, Vermont circa 1970 and let it drain into your lap. And into this puddle would have run all the great, great things of importance; the exact color of the sunlight at seven pm on the outfield grass where we played Little League, a flattened penny with the smell of creosote, like burnt toast, mixing with the odor of hot steel and lilacs at noon at the railroad tracks, even the rotting corpses of baby robins we never saw but knew were there, abandoned by their mother who we had shot with our BB guns. Yes, it was the holy land, full of terror and malice as it should be, but we walked by and large above this, floating almost, immune to its greater vicissitudes. Crouched then in our hideout truth is what we ultimately found. I could not have named it that then, but that is what it was. Sitting almost knee to knee an innate understanding in the thread of life was being woven into us. We were being steeped in time, this was the dawning realization,

that like a tree or a frog we were alive and would one day die. Simultaneously we were learning we were immortal, that this moment was immortal and that it never would pass, never be lived again. These contradictions didn't bother us, we simply took them to be. I believe our understanding of the world back then was pure, as pure as it could be, uncorrupted by science or religion. All this was communicated to us by the trees and the shade and the cool earth, by the ants that climbed the trunks beside us and mosquitoes that whined in our ears. The thick odor of rotting leaves, (a narcotic more transporting than any we would take in later years) told us these things. We had only to pull back those few branches to find out.

And so here I sit all these years later, marooned in middle life, trying to get back to that place, to find that hole in the branches. It is a searching we all come to sooner or later, positioned on this high plateau of adulthood, the future sloping away in one direction and the past in the other. And what do we arrive here with? Wisdom? Knowledge? Maybe. More probably regret. Regret at not knowing. Because we knew something once, I can sense it in these memories, something that only a small child can know, and with my net of memories I cast for it again. I go fishing in the river of time. I want to rediscover what it was like to live without worry or fear, to live in that improbable moment called forever, get back to the holy land. But try as I might the current is swift, the years wash by, and the beautiful rainbow-sided fish of my youth slips through my fingers. There is so much we forget. Our memories are all that we own. And I think we are born knowing everything.