A Swinger of Birches

by Bruce S. Post

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
-- Robert Frost, "Birches"

Long before I heard of Robert Frost, I was a swinger of birches, but a utilitarian one. Swinging to me was less an exercise in exuberant joy and more a matter of studied technique, the way a hunter sights a deer, a farmer plants some corn or a carpenter drives a nail. The birch was an object, a means to an end, a component in the fort my friend Peeper and I set out to build. Think of it as wallboard.

Together, we had devised our two-pronged attack. I, being younger and manifestly more gullible, accepted what was, by any mature standard, the most foolish task. I would top off the tree short of its crown. Below me, his feet planted securely on *terra firma*, Peeper would topple it, sawing across its base.

I was skinny enough to shinny up the thin trunks of the birch trees in the woods up beyond our yard. Contemplating my task, I envied the squirrels, whose sure grasp on the bark enabled them to scurry up and down with scarcely a forethought. Scurrying for me was out of the question; worrying was not. More like a centipede than a squirrel, I inched upward with both arms and two legs wrapped around the tree. Friction, not speed, was my friend.

Our objective was to harvest as much of the straight trunk as possible. In building walls, one long piece was better than two shorter ones. Therefore, I had to find the sweet spot, neither too high so that my weight would tilt the birch down to the ground nor too short so that I would subdivide too much of the straight trunk between the base and the top. Bravery was rewarded; timidity was not.

Arriving just below the crowning branches, I learned what it meant to hold on for dear life. Then, releasing my right hand, I searched for the small saw tucked into the waistband behind my back. Below me, on the ground, Peeper stood with his own saw, ready to attack the base. First, I would start sawing, and he would soon follow.

It was, like much of life, all in the timing. If Peeper finished before I had decapitated the tree, the crown might have snagged an adjoining birch, leaving me stranded, kicking the air, twenty feet above the ground. Ideally, I would saw off the top and ride the sagging birch down

just as Peeper was finishing his cut below. Then, before the bottom trunk thunked to earth, I would grab onto a close-by tree, saving me the effort of having to shinny up again. We repeated the process over and over until we were done.

We were builders, efficient but unreflective, never pausing to think that we were destroyers, too. Our object was to fashion that rough hut, a fort in the woods where we could do what boys do.

We sorted the fallen birches by length, and when we had enough accumulated, we began to build. We stacked and stabilized equal lengths of trunks, and soon, we had four walls and an opening for a door. We took the crowns that eventually made it to the ground and used thin branches, twigs and sticks to weave a roof. As structures go, it was shabbier than the shabbiest hovel in a hobo village, but it was ours. And, it was grand, a palace for our young imaginations.

Frost, I would later discover, had written about both birches and boys. Rather, he had written about birches and a particular boy, one he imagined as having lived too far from town to learn baseball, a boy who found his play in climbing a birch tree and riding it back to the ground as it bent under his weight. For him, it was "good, both going and coming."

It was good for me, too, the going and the coming, even though I lived close enough to town to actually play ball. Yet, baseball lacked the magnetic attraction of shinnying, sawing and sailing birches. Baseball was organized; it had rules; it had structure; it had a hierarchy and a merciless process for winnowing the wheat from the chaff. Out in the woods, however, we were equals, comrades and companions, a small community of boys bound together by a common goal: Fun. And, in those pre-pubescent days, we had only one inviolate rule. No girls.

To generically describe this place of birches as merely woods would be an injustice. They were The Woods, as much a geographically distinct entity as the Amazon, the Boundary Waters and the Grand Canyon. I never knew to whom they legally belonged, but like the commons of old, they were ours to explore.

Our little tribe used, at least by today's standards, an archaic form of communication: the spoken word. No email. No Twitter. No instant messenger. Our discussions were unmediated by electronics. If I wanted to know if Peeper or David or Stan was home, I walked over and knocked on the door. Along the way, I might actually discover something. Jeannie, down the street, had a new bike. Mom and Pop Toacher, who ran a little store on the corner, had finally gotten that shipment of salted pumpkin seeds we were anticipating. Geese might be flying overhead, foreshadowing winter or spring depending on the direction they were headed. A little walk opened numerous possibilities the way each pitch in a baseball game can yield unpredictable and innumerable results.

We engaged all five senses along the way. The jingle of bells on a summer evening was a signal that Ed the Ice Cream Man, moonlighting because he had five daughters, was coming down the street. The smell of the blossoms in the little orchard in our backyard meant apples would soon follow. The sight of that blacker-than-black cloud on the horizon sent my brother and me sprinting home in time for our mother to hug us tight as we took shelter under the kitchen

table. Social media, to us, was a handshake or a hug. And the taste of Mom's rhubarb pie on Sunday night could actually dry my tears after Dad left for another week away from home.

Our range on a daily basis was limited by how far our feet or our bikes could take us. As a result, our immediate neighborhood was largely our solar system, and The Woods were the center around which it revolved.

Apart from my flights upon the birches, I have one other indelible memory I associate with The Woods: the campfire my buddies and I built on their periphery. On a grey, darkening autumn afternoon, one of the guys had some matches, someone else brought tin foil and each of us contributed a potato. We placed stones in a circle around a small depression, gathered twigs and broke fallen branches across our knees for firewood. Soon, the fire flared to life and we waited for the coals to redden enough to bake the potatoes we had wrapped in the foil.

Before the fire grew hot enough for baking, it generated a lot of smoke. Initially, it was irritating. As the wind shifted so did the smoke, and we likewise had to shift where we sat to avoid choking on the smoldering fire. Then, suddenly, nuisance disappeared and imagination was kindled.

Across the valley, far on the other side of town, we spied a telltale signature in another dark column rising above a treeline. Indians! Someone snatched one of the blankets we sat upon. Each of us grabbed a corner and held the blanket above the fire, capturing the rising smoke. Every few seconds, we would whip the blanket from the fire, liberating the smoke in an upward rush. We truly were a tribe, and we sent our smoke signals aloft for those far-off braves to see. To our eyes, it seemed they did, responding in a dusky Morse Code of long puffs and short dashes. The message they sent was a mystery. None of us knew Morse Code, but that was immaterial. It was the experience, not the message, that mattered.

Finally, the coals were ready, the potatoes were thrust in and we waited for them to finish. As they baked in the red heat, we told stories and sang songs. I recall only one, a tune my father passed on to me from his childhood, a refrain he repeated so often that it is embedded somewhere in the retrievable recesses of my brain:

> There's potatoes in the oven, and they're cooking nice and brown;
> There's a good old watermelon when the season comes around.
> In the pantry there's a chicken, in the smokehouse there's a ham,
> But I'd rather be that chicken than a poor, old man.

Years later, I am much more an old man than I am the young, make-believe Indian. I now exchange text messages rather than smoke signals. I have traveled much farther than my feet could carry me. The Woods have receded in my rear view mirror, if not in my memory. And, I have done many, many things. Actions that once seemed fearless – shinnying up the birches -- now seem foolish. Yet, because I was brave enough to be foolish then, I learned an existential truth I appreciate now: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches." Worse, indeed.

Afterword:

In his classic opening to *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy wrote, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Could it be the same for memories? Are happy memories all alike; every unhappy memory unhappy in its own way?

As families go, mine was happy; my friend Peeper's was not. Even though my father worked far from home for two years, returning only on weekends, holidays and vacations, we had a stable, secure, warm and welcoming family unit: Something psychologists clinically call functional, a rather antiseptic term that can dim the bloom on any rose. Peeper's was, to the contrary, dysfunctional, anchored as it was by a father who, while always there, was usually drunk. No bloom there.

At least he and I shared this mutual reverie, and presumably, happy experiences beget happy memories that can be drawn on later for comfort and solace. Knowing what I know now, I like to think that Peeper, who became an alcoholic himself, might have periodically found some consolation and a measure of relief from our days in The Woods.

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