

## DOWN THE BROOK

*Gobby*. That's what we called the thick foamy goo engorging the brook near the quarry. Gobby, like in that kids' song about gray green gobs. And enticing, of course. As if a rain cloud had semi-solidified, plunged to the earth, and insinuated itself *down the brook*. We plodded around in it, scooped it up, stirred it with a stick and marveled at its odd consistency.

It seems obvious now that the gobby goo afloat in the brook was some kind of industrial waste dumped there by one of several medical or chemical companies situated on the outskirts of our town. Likening the state of New Jersey to a body of chemical compost, one could say that in those days our town was, if not the armpit, at least an active sweat gland. On any given day noxious, or certainly malodorous, fumes wafted through the air, and sometimes even small particles of inorganic residue floated around perceptibly.

It was the mid 50s, however, so the only identified threat to our well-being was the Russian A-bomb, from which wealthier folks protected themselves by building bomb shelters. We populists simply practiced hiding under our desks at school with our heads between our knees. When we weren't doing that, the teacher was passing around chunks of asbestos for us to examine and peel apart, and for fun I was collecting a tube of mercury from accidentally-on-purpose broken thermometers at home or from the sample vials of the appealing silvery liquid metal at school.

Yet early on I intuited correctly that, for me at least, there was more toxicity in the social and intellectual milieu of our town than in the air or *down the brook*. In fact, the brook, which was not usually so polluted at the access points closest to our home, was the one place of refuge, the best place for (mostly) wholesome adventure for the kids in our neighborhood.

*Down the brook*. It didn't matter which direction you came from or where you waded in, you were always going *down the brook*. It was one of those glorious essentially adult-free zones of youthful adventure and escape. Despite the benign myth of the nuclear (interesting choice of words) family espoused on then popular TV shows like *Father Knows Best*, *The Ozzie and Harriet Show* and *Leave It To Beaver*, kids of that decade did not bond with, communicate earnestly with, or even rely much upon their parents. Quality time was when you were away from your parents, preferably irrelevant to them. You desired this status so that they couldn't keep track of you and thereby catch you lying, stealing or vandalizing, as you typically did when not *down the brook* savoring the spoils. (Hey, an impoverished kid's got to have some means of self-sustenance and empowerment!)

Dodging parents was accomplished with greater facility in very large, poor, and agitated families like mine. It translated into spending minimal time in one's household and constantly bolting, often with younger siblings in tow, over to the ball fields, the park, the candy stores, and, of course, *down the brook*.

Though growing up in a small town in New Jersey was not akin to being reared in an inner city, my youth was far more dickensian than sit-com. My Daddy was a truck driver with a rage disorder and a mean kick. I always thought the best thing about him was that he was gone most of the time. Mom was one of those fundamentalist Christians—the kind who love Jesus and everyone in the abstract but are mean-spirited and bigoted in the real world. Ever since moving to New Jersey from Kentucky, where she had been a *bonafide* person, Mom had suffered from agoraphobia, xenophobia, and recurrent bouts of paranoia. I thought the worst thing about her was that she was *there* all the time. Still, our family was in better stead than many others who lived in the neighborhood.

*Down the brook.* Little wonder that the smooth-flowing currents, rock-strewn solidity, and leafy hideaways of the brook beckoned such untethered youngsters. No small number of kids from my neighborhood graduated from *down the brook* to *up the river*; that is, to reform school, where really *bad* boys were routinely sent in those days. At least five boys from my eighth grade class got *sent up* in the late 50's. Bad girls didn't get *sent up*; they got *knocked up* (impregnated) while serving as sexual prey for just about anyone from the local priest to their own father.

None of the four boys and three girls in my family got *sent up* or *knocked up*, though we certainly got *knocked about* at home, in school and in the neighborhood. We also rather blatantly *knocked around* town fulfilling our quota of good and ghastly deeds. Perhaps because there were so many malfunctioning (a description that seems more apropos than today's oversubscribed use of the word *dysfunctional*) families, the kids in our end of

town tended to *knock around* in packs or informal gangs. Having lots of siblings made it easy to form the nucleus of such a group. Some of the older boys in town actually formalized and attired themselves into a gang of ruffians known as the *Imperials*, but my older brother passed on it. I would have been inclined to be an Imperial, but, fortunately, I was too young and of the wrong gender to qualify for joining in their shenanigans. I did help form a couple of junior gangs (one was called *The Flying Red Daredevils*) that imagined feats of audacious derring-do that would bring us untold worldly riches and delectable notoriety. What we actually did was break a few windows, let the air out of *enemy* bike tires, and occasionally beat up on other gang members and sometimes each other. Who was on your side was often as capricious as the chosen activity. We would frequently break up into teams and figure out ways to pilfer soda, candy and menthol cigarettes and then escape *down the brook*. Sometimes we would loot construction sites to build lean-tos: makeshift shelters or hideaways devised from tree trunks and branches and disguised as undergrowth. If we had snagged some tarpaper, we would waterproof the lean-to and during a warm summer rainstorm light up a smoke and leisurely consume our sweets, hearkening to the brook water rushing over our rock trail, but trusting it would recede before dark. We young thieves took great pride and comfort in indulging our stash, celebrating our fleeting camaraderie, and hiding from the scrutiny and authority of adults *down the brook*.

*Down the brook*. Simply through gender prerogative the boys owned the playing fields and any glory (or ignominy) derived from sports in my day, but *down the brook* the metaphorical playing field was leveled. Whoever was light of foot and blithe of spirit

ruled, regardless of gender. My favorite competitive activity *down the brook* was definitely the Tarzan swing. There were several of these over the years, but usually just one good one at a time. Natural vines made the most interesting, though erratically located, swings; you could feel like a real Tarzan in our *jungle woods* on one of those. For high drama and more enduring delight, however, there was nothing that compared to a cable swing. The big kids would crawl out on a sturdy branch overhanging the brook and attach to it one of those long woven metal cables lifted from a construction or telephone installation site. You could really sail through the air on one of those cable vine swings, and I remain proud that I was the lightweight champion of that particular diversion. Preparing for a turn at the swing required someone to snag the cable from where it dangled mid-brook, and pull it toward the side where the rocks were or toward the higher grassy bank on the more wooded side. You'd have to yank the vine or cable back as far as you could and then heave your body *at just the right angle* to swing loftily back and forth across the brook, perfectly, *intuitively*, timing your drop to land either back on the bank or on the rocks. You were a **winner** only if you accomplished this and held onto the cable for the next Tarzan. You were a **small time loser** if you accomplished this but butter-fingered (dropped) the cable, momentarily halting the fun and necessitating another snag of the cable. You were a **big-time loser** if you mistimed your drop or were the unlucky one the cable or vine snapped on. Hopefully, you had only to splash your way out of the shallows and endure a few sniggers from the other kids. Eventually, however, someone had to contend with that most horrid of humiliations: finding yourself dangling from the vine over the brook, with no hope of recovery until you lost your grip and made the inevitable fully clothed plunge into the middle of the

brook. Depending upon your height, you then either had to swim or wade out midst the resounding sneers and jeers from the sidelines, and perhaps the cruelest taunt of all, “Oooh, you’re gonna get it, when you get home!” And we did. Well, *they* did, because I never fell in and was so lithe of body I rarely even got a *soaker*. (The term we used to describe slipping into the water off the rock trail we had constructed or the fallen tree trunk we had dragged into position to enable crossings at some shallow point along the brook.)

So, as a preadolescent, I would deftly sprint back and forth across the rocks or grab the Tarzan swing with sublime bravado and sail over the brook. I’d watch bemusedly as lesser mortals took a tentative first step on the rock trail or quaked before the mighty vine with visions of beatings from irate parents gyrating in their heads. Most families in my neighborhood could ill afford the extra shoes or set of clothes required by repeated dunks in the brook. My physical prowess in the outdoors, along with that of my siblings, was an unacknowledged boon to our parent’s meager holdings! (And to my personal hide, I might note.)

Besides escaping from adults and the Tarzan capers, there were other group activities I loved *down the brook*. On warm days following abundant rainfall, when the brook offered up deep pools of clear water, parents would sometimes allow us to don our swimsuits or old T-shirts and shorts and actually swim in the brook. (Of course there were also those irresistible days when you just kicked off your shoes and jumped in, fully clothed, praying that the sun stayed bright and warm enough to dry you out before you

returned home for inspection.) The brook also afforded innumerable Huck Finn fantasies for neighborhood kids. We were forever constructing rafts that we envisioned drifting away on, out toward the Raritan River basin. To this day I am disappointed that all our rafts got waterlogged or simply broke apart or sunk before we even got beyond shouting distance.

Not much else about being *down the brook* was a disappointment. The brook was always like a good old welcoming friend. Even in your best clothes you could find a spot to wade or dangle your feet on a hot day. You could count on there being a smooth rock to sit upon to watch the dragonflies hover above the ripples or to catch glimpses of all manner of small furry animals and birds. There were tons of fish to observe or catch, and seasonal runs of snapping turtles or eels. Once my brother Bobby, who practically lived at the brook, deposited a bucket full of squirming eels at our kitchen door! (The bucket was empty the next morning: where did they go? I still don't know.) I also have my suspicions about Bobby's connection to the ancestors of several small snakes still lurking around my Mom's house.

Fortunately, in my day, a young girl could feel safe going down the brook alone.

Sometimes the bigger *bad* boys would hide out there when they ran away from their parents or from reform school, but you had known those kids and their families all your life, and mostly felt like helping them. All they ever wanted was some of your looted candy or cigarettes and a promise not to reveal their whereabouts. You did have to keep a wary eye out for copperheads along the bank of the brook, of course, and after wading

around in the shallows I had to pull leeches out from between my toes more times than I care to recall. Some of my favorite solo activities included masterfully skipping stones across the surface of the brook, and rambling through the woods to discover, to my never-ending delight, an exotic jack-in-the-pulpit or Venus flytrap plant. I was also known for my knack at finding patches of luscious wild blackberries, and I had a propensity for nipping the bottom nodes off the honeysuckle flowers to taste their sweet nectar. These skills, along with my talent for whistling shrilly across the rough edge of a blade of grass, had been honed in my early childhood in Eastern Kentucky.

Today the brook still gurgles its way through memories of my childhood, though I don't often go there when I visit my New Jersey hometown. A few years ago, just before my mother died, my brothers David and Alan were at the old family house with me. David wanted to check out something in the woods and said, "Let's go *down the brook*."

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