

## The Childhood Fort



My husband and I were driving out of the province of Quebec and back down south to our home in New York State along a flat, cheerless road through endless miles of fields and farmland. Out of the corner of my eye, I detected a surprising break in the monotony: a stream cutting between two fields, one planted to corn and the other to soybeans. This narrow, anomalous area formed a natural boundary.

As we approached, I saw that maple and poplar trees crowded the streambank, creating a modest sanctuary of

dappled shade, and I glimpsed water coursing through. A jumble of junk caught my eye.

Wedge against a tangle of tree trunks in the shadows was a small structure. I sat up attentively to get a better look as we cruised past. A fragment of rusty corrugated sheet metal formed a roof, and a motley collection of planks served as walls. In a flash, I knew it for what it was—a fort.

Building forts was a passion for me and my siblings, who grew up in suburban Southern California. Ours was a different landscape, to be sure, but just as stultifying in its own way. As children, we often have a need to break away. It became important to us to have place to escape or retreat to, no matter how small or ramshackle. I think our forts were also a bit subversive, because they were built by and for kids but made from cast-off materials foraged from the adult world.

Like the glimpsed streambed fort, our best efforts resembled crude little playhouses or tiny sheds. What they lacked in design and style mattered little because we made them ourselves. We were constantly absorbed in the getting and building. Like resourceful nesting birds or rodents, we spotted potential materials, then found a way to move them to the site without adults noticing or caring. Finding a suitable roof or wall, for example, might take weeks of reconnaissance and planning, perhaps even trespassing on a trash pile, construction site, or garage. Then it would have to be surreptitiously and laboriously conducted to the fort site. Placing it was sometimes a

triumph, and sometimes a frustration accompanied by setbacks and adult-like muttering. And thus a young fort-builder learned to repurpose, to problem-solve and, sometimes, to realize a vision.

Finding one big element like the roof or a wall often made the start of the project, dictating where a fort could be set up and how high, and what other sorts of materials were now necessary or possible. Looking back, this was an interesting way to acquire skills I now know are useful in the adult world, such as adapting to a site vs. working with top-down design. While I didn't grow up to be an architect, I have certainly been served by the ability to work from a cornerstone assumption.

Having a spot to call my own was also important because I was packed into a small house with five siblings. We ranged out over the neighborhood in those days, furtive as feral cats and individually intent. Our forts were tucked into overgrown weed patches, thickets, hedgerows, poorly maintained parkland, or even just out behind the garage. Inspired by the beloved childhood classic My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George, one of my brothers and a friend constructed an especially elaborate structure against a mature oak down by a creek, plotting to live off the land just like Sam Gibley.

I remember well my best fort, which I established out of cardboard, plywood scraps, and old sheets in our narrow, fenced side yard, adjacent to the trash bins. I scratched out a level floor in the cool dirt and laid down carpet scraps. I was very territorial, though occasionally I permitted one of my brothers or sisters to visit. They'd sit wide-eyed on an old, stained cushion (in my mind, a grand sofa) and sip juice from a Dixie cup (I had several arrayed neatly on an upended box; in my mind, a fine table). But they couldn't stay; "Go make your own!"

The streambed fort's existence made complete sense to me, and its position pierced my heart. I decided it was the creation of local farm children. It was a place where they could escape the sameness of their exposed surroundings while also getting away from the adults, not to mention the hectic activity and noise of farm equipment and animals.

A childhood fort is wrapped in a force field that makes it private and enchanting, greater than the sum of its rickety parts. Did my parents know I'd lie awake at night in the lower part of a bunkbed in that overcrowded tract house, dreaming of more décor and structural improvements? My fort was a cherished haven, as wondrous as a princess's palace, as secluded and comforting as a hobbit's hole.

So too in my imagination, that streambed fort belonged to a girl who would slip away when her family wasn't watching, to add some small item or to sit in the shade and watch the stream, alone with her thoughts. If a little brother tried to join in, she would have to decide whether to make an angry fuss or to share a cup of juice, admonish him to respect her space, and swear him to secrecy. The conversation would be carried out in whispers.