

The Rope Swing

On the hill below our deck is a rope swing. We have never figured out if it is on our property or the neighbors, but it is accessible by a public path and gets a lot of action. Our children enjoyed it when they were young and I've enjoyed a swing or two on it as well. But one day when I was feeling a bit under the weather, I was just dozing off for a nap when I was startled by the sound of squealing children below. I ate to admit that their screaming makes me grumpy. After all, it's a lovely joyous thing, that rope swing -- a rope rhapsody. I am glad there is something in our neighborhood that is special and joy-making. Why it has to be right below my bedroom is what I don't understand.

When I think of my childhood's special places -- Bouncing Betty, that wonderful hill behind our street of houses that was the perfect track for sledding, and Swinging Limb out in the more rural parts where the flurry of tract development had not yet reached -- I become aware now that these were places owned by other people but used by the neighborhood children without a thought to property possession. Just as the local animals — deer, raccoons, cats and squirrels — have no regard for some piece of paper that claims title, any more than we honor the territorial songs of the birds above.

Instead the childhood landscape is full and expansive — back paths, shortcuts, special trees, little clearings in the woods (Whose woods? Who cares?) I remember the orange crate hideout back in a woodsy clearing, older girls having tea. I remember wanting to share some magical place I'd discovered with my mother, but on the way there, she resisted trespassing, and so this wondrous place was forbidden her. But not to me. And later, when we moved to Evanston, I had back ways all around the neighborhood, over other people's garage roofs and along the tops of brick walls, never touching ground. I spent my youth invading other people's territory. Who am I to complain about kids swinging on a rope swing right by a public path? Even parents might assume that it's public property.

Still, I wonder why the kids have to be so noisy. The swinging itself doesn't bother me; it's the screaming that drives me indoors when I'm trying to read on our deck. But the other day my friend was visiting with her small son. He was trying out the rope swing. I heard myself encouraging him to swing wider and look up into the magic of the canopy of leaves and yell "Yippee!"

"Yippee!!" he yelled at the top of his little lungs. And that was just the right sound for the rope swing. So I cannot censor the noises. They are the natural noise of a rope swing swinging, the natural sound of a childhood being fully lived.

I wonder if the neighborhood children have a name for the rope swing, and if it will have a special place in their childhood memories.

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