

Chapel Talk
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This Christmas Santa Claus brought Carter a small blue tent. It folds out from a plastic frame, and creates a hiding space when you pull the flaps down. Into it he hauls his new plastic backpack, complete with a compass watch, canteen for apple juice, frying pan and spatula, jackknife, hatchet, even a small log that he chops open to make a campfire for cooking hot dogs and marshmallows on a forked stick, a stick which emits a crackling, sizzling sound. Carter camps out there for hours, safe and content within his nylon walls; on Christmas night, at the big family dinner, he set his tent next to the dining room table so he could eat his supper there in seclusion. The tent became his universe.

It occurred to me, as I watched Carter trek with his backpack and play within those make-believe parameters, that he had inherited many of my genes. When I was his and Joshua's age, I made forts and tents constantly. There were bunkers of blankets draped over chairs and sides of beds, anchored by books or pillows. My brothers and I endlessly built tents with large sofa cushions, surely to the dismay of my mother, who vainly tried to maintain an orderly house. The best sofa for our purposes was the one in the TV room, with a green and orange pattern. The pads were sturdy, big, and smelled of the crumbs of many afternoon snacks. My brother Tom and I would prop up the two large cushions, hang a bed sheet between the top of the cushion and the back of the sofa, and then crawl in, peeking out at the room between cracks where we'd stuffed pillows. There was such energy to the creation, to balancing the perpendicular cushions, to getting the tension just right for the blanket to hold up the sides but not to sag overhead. Once the structure was completed, we'd cart in treasures, boxes of Fruit Loops, toys, flashlights, the security blanket, the favorite stuffed animal--mine was Piglet, "Pig-Pig." Even when the walls collapsed from too much internal activity or faulty construction, we laughed and tumbled amid the fallen ramparts, literally cushioned in the crash. It was dark and safe within the confines, but not too dark to be scary--it was more a subdued, amber light, because we knew that it was still daylight outside, that a parent wasn't too far away, nor was the kitchen if supplies ran out.

Tom and I also built forts outside, digging trenches in the grove of trees next to the barn and putting an old door down as our roof; we then camouflaged the door with brush and rocks and dirt. We thought we had our own "Bat Cave" until Dad saw us sneaking candles outside, which quickly terminated that adventure. The fort that lasted the longest was a Matchbox car city under the front porch, a place only little boys who lived for dirt and tiny crawl spaces could not only love, but discover. On a recent visit back to Connecticut, I walked by the house, now owned by strangers, and I couldn't imagine getting under "there"--but to a seven year old, it was a secret passageway into the heart of the pyramid. We entered either through a break in the lattice work under the side verandah, or by burrowing beneath the front wooden steps, an opening that you could cover with a basketball. Tunneling in over dried, dusty leaves, we bent down so as not to hit our heads on the low floor boards above us, where rows and rows of nails stapled the ceiling of this wooden cave. We followed the brick wall to our left, which was the outside foundation of the house, until we came to our "city"--a small, cleared-away knoll of dirt, probably only two feet by two feet, yet to our limitless minds, it was a vast metropolis. The roads had ruts in them from constant use; the dirt was always a little damp, like clay, so formations, embankments, even bridges and short tunnels, held for months. On the crest of the city sat our houses, flat wooden rectangular blocks with small black squares to represent windows, taken from a Brio train set, capped by red or green or blue triangular roofs. There were also tiny wooden trees planted around the roads and houses, also from Brio. We'd snuck them outside, stuffed in our blue jean pockets, slinking behind our mother in the kitchen like commandos retreating from enemy territory. The big stainless steel soup spoons were ideal for carving out roads, and we loved the game of trying to get to the utensil drawer without mom noticing our treachery. There are probably still spoons, forks and other purloined implements of construction under that porch, 35 years later.

Tom and I, or I alone, would play and play, steering Matchbox cars up and down the roads that meandered through the town, mirroring the traffic on Main Street just outside the lattice walls of our cave. We built new roads, pushing dirt back with yellow bulldozers and orange excavators. Occasionally airplanes crashed into a row of houses, or maybe a monster appeared to terrorize the inhabitants. There were constant sounds, of cars pattering, machines heaving, people moving--the running commentary spoken in the third person, the omniscient narrator creating life in a stream of imagination and imitation. We gave life to these inanimate objects: people, referred to as "the dad,"

"the mom," "the mean baby-sitter," "the man," "the boy," "the little baby brother," these people drove the cars, tumbled over the road into the river, escaped, continued driving. Even when a child plays by himself, there are sounds, the story is spoken, the words are made flesh and metal. The tale is alive; it is a drama, an intense performance.

I know deeply why Carter loves his tent, why the faculty children constructed their fort in the gully behind our home, why my children build fairy houses in the roots of the big beach tree by the tennis court and by our lake in New Hampshire: it's dirty; it's touchable; it's a creation; it's a domain they can control, a small theater that frames the stage without limiting or imprisoning it. There is so much to touch, so many sounds, and even if you are alone, you are never lonely because you have your invented world at your finger tips, bursting with life and movement and disasters that only you can heroically restore. It's all there, under the sticks or beneath the towels. I can still touch the feeling inside that sofa fort, its close, padded walls, the Green Hornet logo on the towel above me, Piglet tucked into my armpit, my back sunk into dad's favorite pillow snatched from his bed, my knees bent over the Tonka dump truck as I silently eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Wonder Bread, cut in four triangles, knowing the Welch's blueberry jelly is already sticking to the corners of my mouth. It is total satisfaction, bliss, security: I have food, shelter, companions, entertainment. Those walls protected me in my new womb from little brothers or from a bath or from a baby-sitter. It was my drama, even as I participated in it, even as I was a god of it.

Where did those forts go? All of us here are too big to make tents with sheets and towels; we're too gangly or old to duck underneath chairs and sofas. Our forts have become houses; tents, like umbrellas, are for outside use only; and it seems as if it's harder to control Life and Life's pace, harder to find safe spaces besides a bed in which to hide. Are the adult castles and fortresses and barricades a perversion of that fertile childhood imagination? What happens to our make believe world? And why does "make believe" imply fantasy, when the two words together seem to mean reality?--To make, to create, to touch; to make something believable, see-able, touchable, understandable, share-able. Shouldn't we still be make believing?

The day after Christmas I went skating on a secluded pond near us in New Hampshire. It had been very cold for the previous two weeks, with little wind and no snow--the perfect conditions

for black ice. Black ice is frozen water with little air in it; the ice you normally skate on is grayish-white, filled with air bubbles, and it's bumpy. Black ice is like skating on glass--no rink can imitate the texture of black ice. My family laced up our old skates and ventured across the initial area of white ice to the edge of the black ice, and gingerly, nervously, skated onto it--nervously because you feel as if you are skating on water, running over the flattened waves. There's something magical and forbidden about black ice: it's so pure, yet so dangerous as you glance through the frozen layer into the water a mere five inches away, looking at the silent rocks and leaves and pond grass below, or even scarier, peering into nothing but fathomless dark depths. Soon, however, our hesitation transformed to awe and exuberance and bravado, and we tore over the frozen prairie, pretending we were hockey players in the Stanley Cup or skaters in the Olympics. The ice was so clear it reflected the blue sky and white clouds at our feet. We skated fast, gazing down at the clouds, searching into them as if they were 3-D posters, waiting for the secret message to materialize before our eyes teared over from the cold. I tried to catch the tops of the trees of the shoreline, but they kept receding quicker than I could push my ancient legs. When you cut the ice, white shavings slid across the surface. The sound of blade into ice was pure, harsh, clean, firm.

As I skated away from the others--the pond was almost half a mile across--I kept thinking about Carter and his tent, how tents and forts and dolls and blocks allowed us when we were children to conceive worlds out of nothing. We were artists. Within Carter's imagination, he can hike towering mountains, he can fall without hurting himself, he can set up battles with his plastic green army men or go into space with his plastic rockets or cook plastic hot dogs. It's almost as if he's rehearsing reality, going through the scenarios he will eventually face, mapping out the initial draft of experience with the actors around his bent knees. Then, when ready, Carter rips open the flaps, bursts out into a larger arena, fortified within for the contests without. In that regard, St. Andrew's is paradoxically both a tent and the existence we meet outside: it is a harbor where we fashion miracles and bonds and bridges out of nothing; where yearly, daily, we invent traditions, nicknames, stories which elevate into myths. As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote: "And what we said of it became a part of what it is." We, too, are artists. Yet this school is suffused with and invaded by reality--by accidents, sickness, failure, departure, divorce, death. We are not immune here, and sometimes before we are ready we are forced to confront and tackle those defining moments of our humanity.

What can those youthful bastions and make-believe worlds do for us now? I don't think I'm talking about the loss of the child within us that fails to hear the reindeer's bell at the end of the Christmas tale, *The Polar Express*. Instead, our task, our mission, our childhood inheritance, is to hold the legacy of the tent as sacred, lasting, fortifying. We must make of our moments something permanent (*To the Lighthouse*, p.), constructing something tangible, yes, but surely stronger and eternal when those monuments are forged ephemerally. We can't forget how to be artists, how to be magicians. As we begin a new year together, even as we are buffeted by another blow to this community, I hope we can rediscover our forts, celebrate and sanctify that space, re-find what's in them and what provisions we need. But let's also affirm how we leave that realm, how we must experience a life where the challenges are bigger, more threatening, less known and controllable, less touchable, dirtier in intangible forms. Maybe as we make believe, we can still shape the scene believable. Maybe this will be a winter of skating, of snowy free days, of tents and magic excursions that make us believe and build again.