



Birthday Creek

A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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No bow, no wrapping paper, no card. What manner of birthday present is so unadorned?

Last Friday you turned nine, Duncan, and I gave you a stealth present. No, not the giant Lego helicopter, nor the rock tumbler now grinding away in our basement. Fine presents, both, but not ones to feed your soul. This one had no on-and-off switch, no handle, and no instructions. In fact, you haven't yet realized it was a birthday present — and perhaps you won't, until you someday read this message.

You don't remember your first four birthdays here in your natal city of Omaha, but now we find ourselves back here for birthday number nine, and simultaneously we mark the end of three months in a new home. We have yet to name this third dwelling of your young life. What shall it be? Back-Woods? Willow Creek? Red-tail Thicket? Hmmm. The name needs to percolate, to bubble up to the top by itself, as any good identity will in time.

Whatever it becomes, though, it will likely emerge from behind. That backyard expanse — the rear of our whopping quarter-acre plot — is why we are here. We looked at scores of nice houses, dragging you and big brother around middle-class suburbia in search of the perfect house. It was the backyard that made it difficult: our new home had to back up to nature. It had to force the any-shade-of-tan walls and silly bluegrass expanse of suburbia up against atypical green space, bringing us birds and privacy and trees and play and sanity.

The perfect house never appeared, but we did alright. This new home, four years your junior, borders a tiny little creek and its greenway of willows and cottonwoods. Does the stream have a name? Not that I've yet found, so ultimately that detail may fall to us. Perhaps it will become Birthday Creek.

I can't claim that your mysterious present was hard to come by; it just had to wait its turn through a grinding quarter-year of moving-in chores. Ultimately, though, pruning shears, a grass whip and 15 minutes were all that was needed. Voilà: a new world. A two-foot hole now pierces the dense border of goldenrods that mark where the back edge of our lawn surrenders to the botanical anarchy of the creekway. That hole is a portal into

another universe, as surely as any wormhole that Isaac Asimov ever imagined. On your birthday, I gave that new world to you, where it belongs.

I confess to feeling a bit silly as I chopped into the irony of how firmly a barrier can manifest itself from the flimsiest of components. Those goldenrods scarcely needed to be hacked down, as they were already fading toward seasonal oblivion. Yet before the new hole, we could not pass through without immersion in their stems, their faded flowers, their downy seeds and their uncertainty.

So? No harm would come to us from any of those. Nevertheless, the barrier had held firm since the moving van pulled away. In fact, the wall of *Solidago canadensis* stretched full across our rear yard and the neighbors' too — a photosynthetic concertina wire shining in the autumn sun. Here was Nebraska's state flower, representing far more than just botanical branding. It was a barrier that needed breaching.

For American families today, the same barrier comes in many forms. All of them can seem virtually impenetrable. The bond between children and nature — once not only ubiquitous but nearly automatic — is hanging by less of a thread than Nearly Headless Nick's noggin. The mania of hyper-parenting, the too-distant and manicured parks, the over-scheduled days without a hint of free time, the media-fueled crime fears, and the metastasizing growth of plugged-in play have all combined to erode that timeless connection. Few folks even ponder what is being lost, but perhaps a tiny glimmer of concern is emerging. Just last week a distraught colleague asked what could be done to reconnect the frayed edges, to create a critical mass for restoring the nature of childhood. I took the tiniest of steps towards that goal with my flaying grass whip, and the goldenrods parted.

With that backyard barrier breached, explorations quickly followed. First you and I ventured out together, Hilary and Norgay tackling the unconquered wild. We noticed the faint critter trail. We jumped the creek, now found to be a mighty two-feet wide. We chose good whacking sticks, and you smartly spotted the beaver-chewed log, in such an unlikely haunt. The next day you eagerly guided Mom on your own little ecotour, proudly showing off the new-found world and its treasures. And later that day, exploration reached its zenith when you plunged alone through the rift, into a microcosmic universe of constant change and endless epiphanies, with nary an electrical cord in sight.

As the years ahead slip by, the tiny wilderness of Birthday Creek will probably grow ever-smaller in your eyes — but not, I think, in your soul. The joy of the wild, on a child's perfect scale, is a gift for the ages. I couldn't be more pleased with my birthday shopping for year nine.