

# **The Swing**

By Camille Cole

## The Swing

Every year in early June the volunteer firemen in our Upstate New York village came to my grandparent's house. The giant red truck with the scoop ladder rumbled down the driveway and into the backyard. We kids would gather as close as allowed, waiting and watching while they extended the ladder to the top of the towering elm tree. Grandpa retrieved the swing from the barn and waited with the rest of us while the men in uniforms suspended the pride of the neighborhood from the same sturdy branch as the year before. Every year it was higher, closer to heaven. Every year the crowds grew larger.

After church on Sundays, we'd all pile into the rusted gray Plymouth—my sisters and brothers, Mom and Dad—and make our way over the hills and around wide pastures dotted with dairy cows. Dad would ease the old beast to a stop at the bottom of grandma's driveway and the race to the swing ensued.

*Take turns!*

In the summer time, all kinds of wicker lawn furniture would be arranged under the tree, a stadium of sorts—the church of the swing. Dad would unload a playpen out of the trunk for the current baby and set the wooden contraption up near the tree.

On Sundays when the whole family came—aunts, uncles and cousins—there'd be iced tea in large glass tumblers lined up on one of Grandma's hand painted trays and a plate of molasses cookies.

I'd lean back in the wicker lawn chair—pretending to be one of the grown-ups—and wait my turn, the swing's thick rope creaking on the hard-worn bough way up in the old tree. Uncle David's swing pushing was like a dance, like Fred Astaire setting a child afloat on a wooden seat suspended from an endless rope. He'd pull my brother back as far as he could and then leap forward, vaulting all

the way underneath and then he'd let go. The swing and my brother soaring toward the sky and the tips of the lowest green constellations; when he hurdled back to earth, his eyes wide and fixed in terror, I'd move closer and wait for my turn. The rule was you got to ride it out until the swing had almost stopped its back and forth swaying.

If I had to go to the bathroom, I'd hold my place, hold my bladder. Other sisters and brothers and cousins would be playing in the grass nearby, waiting.

My father wasn't as good a swing pusher as Uncle David. He'd run under the swing and everything, but I don't think his heart was in it.

My grandmother towered over the other women in the family, her silver hair fell away from its French twist. Her sensible shoes with thick heels and laces added to her height. The navy blue dresses she always wore cut from the same pattern, some polka-dotted, some stripes or soft floral patterns. My mother would say, when Grandma wasn't around, "It's that sugar syrup she puts in there that makes that tea so good."

Dad would run to carry trays for Grandma and line them up on the wicker serving table. "Mother, let me help you with that!"

Aunt Helen fussed and arranged glasses and white linen napkins. I can see her bending over the playpen, tying a bib around my sister's neck. Even as a young child, I was aware that my father's older sister Helen wanted babies of her own. My mother had told me Helen couldn't have children because Mom liked to gossip about Helen. But to me, Helen was a stand-in mother. I'd watch her moved about the lawn, her long hair swinging over her shoulders. Sometimes she'd tie it up like my grandmother's; sometimes she'd give me a hug for no reason in particular.

On special days like Easter, Memorial Day or the Fourth of July, Aunt Wilma and Uncle David and my three cousins came down from Rochester. Helen and David were twins, my father's older brother and sister.

Cousin Barbara and I would pull the wagon and the old tricycle out of the barn and then help Grandpa pick peas from his garden. He always wore a

starched white shirt and a tie. When he worked in the garden or tended the chickens and the rabbits, he'd remove his jacket and vest and put on his garden cardigan. From his lawn chair, he'd watch us kids skyrocket into the branches of the elm tree. I can still hear us squealing with delight. Sometimes he would tease my aunts or my grandmother. Oh Claude, they'd reply in feigned exasperation. Sometimes he just smoked his pipe.

Cousin Barbara and I had a game. We'd help Grandma shell peas from the garden into a large bowl on the back porch. It was a race to see who could empty the most pods the fastest. We'd squeeze the crisp green shells; scrape out plump pea seeds while our brothers and sisters glided past on the swing—they'd be reaching for the sky, begging for more pushes. Babies played on blankets in the grass or in the playpen.

Even when the potato salad and tomato sandwiches were served, the swing still cut a swath back and forth past the Family gathered beneath the tree.

There is a picture in the family photo album of me taking my first step under the swing. At nine months I had stood there in the worn dirt beneath the swing, holding the seat. Then I let go, teetering away into the soft green lawn. Someone snapped a photograph.

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"When do you think the corn will be ready, Dad?" my father asked his father.

"Not for a couple more weeks."

We kept time in the summer by the first ears of sweet corn. If the corn was ready in the middle of the week, Dad and I would head to Grandpa's as soon as he got home from work.

Dad looked like a boy next to my grandfather, his thick dark hair combed like Elvis's. Grandpa's thin gray hair barely covered his bald spot. He'd looked down at my father, empty his pipe into the palm of his hand. I could imagine my father as a young boy, calling to his dad to push him on the swing.

Dad was really into that corn. On those days when we'd stop by in the middle of the week, just my father and me; I had the swing to myself. I'd pump my legs and grip the well-worn hemp rope while Dad and Grandpa strolled through the vegetable garden, dropping the best ears into a paper bag.

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Dutch Elm disease surfaced out of nowhere, like an agricultural tsunami. People talked about it in the grocery store, on the front steps of the church. I heard George Nightengale in the five and dime telling the clerk he'd lost all the trees in his back yard. No one seemed to know what was happening, but the elm trees lining the streets in our village started coming down, leaving wide blank patches of dirt along the sidewalks.

The county guys planted grass seed. They put up small fences made out of sticks and string to keep people off the dirt spots.

One Sunday afternoon we were all sitting under the tree, my grandmother resting her arms on the sides of her wicker rocker; Aunt Helen lounging on the cane-bottomed chaise. "Mother," she reached out and touched my grandmother's wrist. "Look up there, at the top of the tree. Do those leaves look yellow to you?"

We all raised our heads and squinted. My grandfather, just come in from the garden, stood behind my chair. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

"There's nothing wrong with that tree." The tone of his voice signaled the end of the conversation.

On the way home I listened to my parent's conversation from the back seat. The tree had to be looked at. What was my grandfather thinking? Couldn't he see that the tree had to be looked at?

Sometimes my parents talked as though we kids couldn't hear them. I heard the annoyance in my Mother's voice, the tone she used when she talked

about my father's family. She had come from out West where she said people were different. She hadn't seen her family in a long time. I watched her blond curly hair flap around the side of her head next to the opened car window. She was the only one of us who had blond hair.

Not long after that, I heard them talking in the kitchen about how the tree had to come down.

Dad drove over there one day by himself. He wasn't gone long. Grandpa wasn't going for it. The tree wasn't coming down. Not on his watch. Not the swing tree.

The County Guy from the Extension Service came around one day. My father got the call from my grandmother. He was telling my mother in the kitchen—I could hear them from the dining room—he doubted his father would have told him about the visit from the County. Grandma told Dad that Grandpa had run the guy off the place, told him he ought to know if his tree needed to come down or not.

That weekend we didn't go to my grandparent's house on Sunday. Instead, Uncle David drove down by himself and he and Dad went over there, just the two of them. No one said anything, but we all knew. We had absorbed the battle with an absence of words. We hung close to home and waited for the sound of my uncle's Plymouth. I'm not sure if we were afraid of losing our tree and our swing, or afraid of what might happen to my father and my uncle.

The car rolled into the driveway late in the afternoon. Mom already had dinner on the table and me and my brother washed up without being told and then hurried to take our places, to find out what had happened.

Uncle David mussed my hair and took the chair next to me. He asked if we'd heard the one about the pink elephant. I looked at my brother who was building a fort with his mashed potatoes. Uncle David told another silly joke. No one laughed. No one said a word.

For the next few Sundays we stayed home. No one asked why. No one mentioned the tree. Then it started getting cold out and what trees were left

became stripped of their leaves by unknown natural forces other than the change of season.

A chill wind came in off the lake one Sunday morning early in October. On the way home from church, giant flakes of snow swirled in front of the windshield like a kaleidoscope.

“You kids leave on your good clothes, we’re going over to your grandmother’s for dinner.” My father turned off the car at the end of our driveway. “Stay put, I’ll be right back.”

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Nobody said much on the ride over there. I watched the pastures and the statue-like black and white cows zip past the car window. I had that kind of lonely feeling you get when all the leaves have finally disappeared and blown away leaving empty branches against gray sky.

That day my father approached my grandparent’s house from the bottom of the street instead of from the top like he usually did. We couldn’t see the back yard as we pulled up out front.

Dad opened the front door slowly, without knocking. We all lined up behind him, waiting for our cue to go on in. Grandma called out from the kitchen. Grandpa didn’t move from his chair. He was smoking his pipe, reading his paper. He didn’t look up when I came into the room.

“You kids run along outside and play now.” Dad took off his jacket, hung it on the back of a dining room chair and then stood by the opened front door.

“Gee Dad, it’s cold out there.”

His look said it all. Outside, kid. He acted as though I had it coming, and the door shut with a bang behind us as my sister and brother and I edged back outside. We stood on the porch for a while. Three cars passed. “That’s a Ford,” I said after the last one stopped and turned into the neighbor’s driveway.

I stepped down off the porch, grabbed my sister's hand. I could tell by the way my brother was lagging behind as we circled around the house that he wanted me go first. My sister let go of my hand.

There it was—a big smooth platform where the tree used to be—a big empty sky. The corn in the garden had dried and fallen over in crooked rows of brown husks. I stepped up onto the stump, spread my arms wide and looked up. My brother didn't hide his tears.

I couldn't help wondering if the fire department would show up next year, or if someone was going to call them and tell them not to bother. I couldn't help wondering how we could be a family without the tree.

Not long ago on a visit back home I drove past the old place. It's been years since I saw my grandparent's house. I stopped the car alongside the curb just past the house so I could see into the back yard. There, where the stump had been all those years ago, stood a giant maple tree, a rope swing dangling from a towering branch.