

GENETIC BUBBLE WRAP

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When considering my own childhood, it becomes apparent that I simply was not a risk taker. In fact, the most dangerous game I ever participated in was sled riding in my neighborhood. The hill was steep and there was a building to be avoided at the bottom but there isn't any way I can squeeze it under the heading of dangerous games. Luckily, I married an adrenaline-driven daredevil. His childhood stories quite literally make my jaw drop and his antics over the last couple of summers of high school unmistakably flash "DANGEROUS GAME" in brilliant neon.

The summer following tenth grade, my husband Scott and some of his friends from school would ride their bikes near where they lived. "It started in Chenango Bridge," he explained. The boys would take turns jumping into the Chenango River from a rope swing hanging from a tree limb on shore. "It was exciting," he said. "We didn't even think about getting hurt. It was just fun and a good way to cool off." This relatively mild level of risk-taking carried them through that summer and into the next.

Toward the middle of the summer following eleventh grade, the same boys heard about a rope swing into "Boland's Pond" from some older kids. This location was a little further down the river. Boland's was a topsoil company and the land around their business was a stone quarry. They would excavate the soil, essentially creating gravel pits. One of the largest pits was filled with water that seeped from the river. At the edge of this pit was a tall tree, conveniently outfitted with a rope swing. The boys would take a running start and jump into the standing water from the bank. "It was about a ten to twelve foot drop before you hit the water," according to Scott. The boys were undaunted. "This was even more exciting. The jump was better with more distance from the bank. It was great!" he enthused. It's significant to note that these summer rituals were deeply rooted in the childhood underground, as none of the boys' parents had any awareness of this activity. It's also interesting that part of the appeal of these activities was defying the murky legends of injury or even death surrounding them. "You'd hear that so and so had broken his leg or even his neck," Scott said.

As the boys got older, the level of danger in this particular game was amplified. By the end of the summer before their senior year, Scott and his friends moved their sport to the bridge between Boland's Pond and Chenango Valley High School. They would climb out on the steel beams under the bridge and drop approximately 25 feet into the river below. They would "preventatively" scan the river for potential dangers like logs or other debris. They made sure the surface looked clear, ignoring the potential threats below. This overconfidence and oblivion regarding real hazards is addressed in *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*, "Dangerous games let children prove their courage and skill. Insulated by the assurance of youth, players may not hesitate to jump into a game that looks risky" (Tucker 2008, 36). Scott and his friends quite literally jumped into their dangerous

game without a lot of consideration for the possible consequences. "I felt a little risk, sure, but what I really felt was freedom. I didn't feel scared," Scott shared.

The pinnacle of the boys' jumping adventures and, ironically, the *coup de grâce* took place the summer after their graduation from high school. At this point the boys were no longer confined to the area reachable by bikes. They had motorcycles and cars to facilitate broadening the range of their fun. They spent the summer exploring various gorges in Ithaca, New York. One favored location had a rope swing that hung from a tree on a large cliff. "I felt a little trepidation," Scott said. "I never went first. I had to swim downstream and climb all the way back up. It took quite a bit of time."

One hot day that summer a lot of kids were gathered at this location. "It was a party spot," Scott explained. They heard some kids talking about the "devil's punchbowl." They followed some people there. "We followed these railroad tracks, walking along the top of a ravine. As we got closer I could hear a lot of activity. There were about twenty people in a little gathering spot. Beyond that spot was a narrow path to the edge of a sheer cliff. It looked like a punchbowl," Scott remembered.

Scott also remembered the awe he felt at the height of the overhang some of the kids were jumping off of. "It was at least two telephone poles high," he said. He and his friends received instructions from the "veteran" jumpers. Scott watched two of his friends jump ahead of him. "I was very reluctant," he admitted. "Still, all eyes were on me and I felt that peer pressure. It was intense. I followed the directions I was given, pointed my toes, crossed my arms and jumped. The water was unbelievably cold. The impact jammed my knees up and almost into my face. My tailbone hurt so bad that I had trouble moving my legs to swim back. I swam with my arms."

The myriad ways in which this story could have ended tragically didn't hit my husband until he was safely out of the water and experiencing a painful motorcycle ride home. "We really pushed it to the limit that day," he acknowledged. "I knew how stupid it was. When it sunk in, I felt duped by my friends. I felt like I had cheated death. I learned to trust myself more."

When I hear the details of this dangerous game I wince. As the mother of three boys possessing their father's thrill-seeking DNA, I shudder at the thought of the games they have yet to invent or participate in. I can only hope that my prudent DNA will temper their play, at least a little.

WORK CITED

Tucker, Elizabeth. 2008. *Children's Folklore: A Handbook*. Westport: Greenwood Press.