

Evan Balkan

You Can't Go Home Again, Again

“A man's maturity consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child at play”

-- Friedrich Nietzsche

In late spring 2018, I traveled to Ecuador, where I first visited the cities of Quito and Cuenca before exploring a volcanic crater and trekking in the Andes, topping out at just above 13,000 feet while wild llamas eyed me warily from behind precarious crags. Three weeks later, I was in Costa Rica with my wife and two daughters where we did what people do in Costa Rica: swim, zipline, jungle trek, and generally revel in all that eco-wonderland has to offer. But it was the trip in between that was the most “foreign” of the three: on a warm Sunday afternoon, I went to Bowie, Maryland, the town where I grew up. In 2001, my mother moved out of what had been my childhood home, and despite living only an hour or so away, I hadn't been back since.

I was in Bowie to watch my twelve year old daughter compete in a league championship soccer game in the very place where I used to play soccer, too—back when I couldn't conceive of thirty plus years down the road, or the 21st century, and certainly not kids of my own.

The game was scheduled for late afternoon, so I left my current home north of Baltimore several hours before kickoff so I could first visit my old haunts. I'd only been home from Ecuador a day or two, so I was still in the grip of that peculiar feeling in which home still feels slightly alien. Everything you know, the places you can navigate sleepwalking, feel just a bit off—the gleaming supermarkets, the cluck of familiar tongues, the taste of familiar foods, the world of the wide highway and the ubiquity of smartphone. But the grooves of home are deep and well-worn and so it wasn't long before I was back firmly within them. So how to explain it then when this feeling of foreignness intensified precisely because I was going *home* home, to the place where I was born and grew up?

There was the neighborhood itself, for one. Not surprisingly, it had changed in the seventeen years since I'd been there—not quite as well kept up, a lot more worn around the edges. It felt smaller, too, less an endless expanse in which to roam and explore. But I know this had mostly to do with the fact that, in my mid-forties, novelty is a harder thing to experience. Returning to the site of innumerable “first experiences,” experiences that have been reshaped a thousand times within the warpy reservoir of my memory and yet still burn with clarity, trying to revisit or mentally recreate them even while rooted to the very spots where they took place, was an impossible task. When my first stop is behind my old friend Damon's house, I feel less like a time traveler than a trespasser. The eroded dirt leading to deep woods at the edge of the small parking area was once the site of elaborate car tracks, our metal Hot Wheels tearing up the berms and racing at death-defying speeds. Now, it's simply an unremarkable spot behind someone else's home, and when a woman emerges from the back door of Damon's old house and walks toward her car, I slowly, guiltily slink away.

More times than I can count I've drifted off to sleep dreaming about the creek behind my childhood home. It slithered within a deep valley and was reached by making a beeline from my small backyard and down a little ridge before swinging hard right via a well-worn path that took us to that wonderful ribbon of water where our imaginations roamed free. That creek and the muddy banks that hemmed it in was a universe unto itself: one square foot of soil held multitudes—worms, bugs, life oozing over cupped hands, embedding under fingernails. Flipping over a rock exposed whole squirming and squiggling worlds reacting to the sudden light, such as brightly colored salamanders whose tails would come off if you pinched too hard and multi-legged pillbugs, which we used to call rollie-pollies because they could ball themselves into impermeable gray discs. In summer, soaring trees provided blissful shade, and then those same trees gave the world's greatest show come autumn, when the tips of our fingers would numb with the oncoming chill as we ran through falling leaves and churned up the scent of delicious, syrupy decay. In winter, as our exhalations plumed in front of us while we tested the creek's ice, one small step at a time, we'd occasionally see a beaver swimming under the surface, escaping air bubbles floating to the surface and trapping themselves there, awaiting spring melt to burst.

I couldn't wait to get back, to revisit and relive those many childhood moments, capsules from a bygone era of innocence, to a time in life when everything was still to come, when all the options in the world were still open, the future an unknowable thing waiting to be shaped by your imprint. When you were told back then, "You can be anything you want to be," you believed it. After all, you most probably absorbed the lessons of the Brady kids as they threw together an act to win a talent show and save the family financial hardship.

After Damon's, I head to my old house. I park my car out front and walk slowly around, hoping someone might come out and ask me what I'm doing and once I explain it, they'll invite me inside. Of course, this doesn't happen. So once I reach the back, I walk down the ridge to the path toward the creek, delighting in the memories and thrilling at the haphazardness of that old trail—the way it used to zig and zag through the contours of the underbrush before widening near the creek, as if hiding its secrets from those who didn't deserve its pleasures or who were too blind to see them.

I turn the corner at the top of the hill, ready to swing toward the path only to find it overgrown. More than overgrown, in fact. Impenetrable. This isn't simply a function of it being late spring. Clearly, no one has been down this way in many years. The vegetation is too thick, too high, too prickly with entangled weed and shrub.

Disappointing, yes, but no huge problem: this was my playground once—I know half a dozen other routes to the creek; I could walk these places with my eyes closed until I'm a hundred years old. So I pick my way along the hill to other trails only to find each potential path also completely overgrown. In fact, if I didn't know there was a creek down there, I would never be able to guess it.

As I stand there, looking around, lost, disappointed, I realize what the problem is. And I wish I didn't.

It's a tired old lament, I know, the well-worn howl about some nebulous "younger generation," poor kids who grow up in a time without imagination and play, unlike people like me who were fortunate enough to come of age in the last quarter of the 20th century. These paths are overgrown—are gone, actually—because kids no longer sprint out of their houses at first light and stay out until dark tramping through woods, upending rocks, splashing around creeks, digging up worms. Instead, they're tethered to their screens like babes to bottles (of course, so are most of their parents; let's be honest). To be fair, I saw nothing insane myself about occasionally sitting in a dank basement on a gorgeous summer day playing Atari when I was twelve years old. Still, it feels different. It *is* different. Back then I could get all jacked up on Joust or Asteroids, but then I unplugged the game—that old blocky plug often got dangerously hot—and then there was no more electronic distraction. I was back in the world. No wi-fi. No data keeping me "connected" (to what, exactly, I'm not sure). The only unseen waves floating around my head back then were radio and UHF. But today? Even those kids who *want* to run around outside and explore creeks and woods and underneath rocks will often find it difficult to find friends to play with because everyone's away at prescheduled, highly organized activities. And if they do find each other? Inevitably, they'll wind up watching a YouTube video or commenting on someone's Instagram story.

I turn away, back toward the empty neighborhood and my waiting car and I beat it, down in the dumps as I leave my old neighborhood. I can't contemplate the sites of my old adventures because I can't get to them. They've become inaccessible not only mentally, but now physically, too. And it bums me out.

But at least I can still go see my daughter play soccer, something I enjoy immensely. Her team is crazy good and they're playing for the league championship. And if they win, they'll get big old trophies, a thing actually earned in this elite travel league: only the top team gets them and the dozen other teams in the division who do not come in first get nothing.

I set up on the sideline and take in the game—blissful, outside, play—the smell of grass and mud, the shouts of impassioned spectators, a beautiful balletic choreography on an open field. It's something like heaven, I imagine. The field is tightly mowed and clipped; this is no rec league rough grass patch. There are three officials—head referee and two linesmen—and each kid had to hand over an i.d. card before the game to prove age and authorization to play. It's all tightly controlled and orderly. I do need to tune out the more obnoxious parents, however; some veer into the sort of behavior they presumably would never tolerate from their kids, keeping up a constant drizzle of complaint and outrage. The referees ignore it, used as they are to the inflamed passions of those living vicariously through their battling and often beleaguered children. Occasionally, in other

games, things spill over and a parent or coach is dismissed, stalking away from the sideline after being ejected from the playing field with a look less of embarrassment or regret than a sidelong glance of triumph. But today is a fine day; everyone seems more or less in good spirits and the din from the sidelines is mostly good-natured and encouraging.

I take around a dozen pictures of my daughter in action, knowing that with a quick flick of the finger I'll weed out those that aren't very good. My parents used to take pictures of me when I was a kid playing, too. I shouldn't romanticize the way it worked back then: waiting weeks for the pictures to come back from the developer and sometimes just to realize you got double exposures. But there was also joyful discovery then, too, that particular thrill in flipping through your photos and discovering a perfect one, one you hoped for but hadn't really known for sure that you had.

But quickly I put the camera away. I want to actually watch. I coach soccer myself, and I still play as well. So I can appreciate what I'm seeing, that despite their relatively young age these kids know their assignments and they accomplish their tasks remarkably well. The attackers move smartly to open space, the midfielders play effective two-way soccer, and the defenders operate in wonderful concert. It's free-flowing and yet tightly organized, both things at once. But when the ball squirts out of bounds, play halts a moment before resuming again, hard reminders of the rules and white lines and grids that hem them in.

For me, back then, on Saturday mornings, I donned my blue and reds and ran off to a game as well. We had refs, too, of course, but I don't recall them. During those games—games that meant the world to me, on Saturday mornings when I watched the Smurfs over cereal and then laced up, butterflies swarming my gut—before I played my heart out on the field, I kept my uniform on all day after I got home and I didn't even run back inside but rather headed to the grass lot in front of Damon's house where a neighborhood game was always in full swing. I would dive right in. In fact, it was always in the back of my mind during league games if I failed to score – “I'll get a couple in the game later, at home . . .” I *played*, in other words, during and after, I *played*.

My kids don't really do that. After the game, they and their teammates hop into oversized cars and SUVs and head back home. We do, too, of course, my wife and daughters and me, and as much as I want to take a detour on the way back home and show them my old house and the trails I used to run, I know it's a pointless exercise. I suspect—not unreasonably—that they wouldn't be interested, and in any case I now know I can't find those trails even if I wanted to. They literally no longer exist.

The sweet spot, I suppose, comes somewhere outside those lines that are perfectly drawn on the field, dissipating instead to messy lines, lines that travel in zigs and zags, lines in woods, lines between trees, lines down to creeks, lines that surely must still be out there, somewhere . . .

I don't know what kind of nostalgia trips await my daughters in their later years. I imagine, and hope, they will think tenderly of these times, of the particular thrill of being part of a team and achieving: my daughter's team won that day, as did my older daughter's team a few weeks earlier, the team I coach—both champions, both earning their accolades.

I imagine they'll think fondly of these championships and of these games they played and I hope even more so that they'll never realize that they weren't really so much games at all.