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English 1301

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Place Paper

Little Acorns Grow

Looking at it now, it appears as little more than a few boards loosely held together with an old rope. But I remember it back when the boards smelled of freshly cut pine and the rope still smelled like sawdust and horses from the tack room in the old barn. My refuge, as I used to call it, built with the strength of my own hands. This sprawling oak tree on the back corner of the farm provided the perfect place. Its branches reached out far and high, as if trying to embrace the entire world.

The old wrought-iron bench still encircles the trunk of the majestic tree, but with much of the white paint flaked off it looks more like a golden-rust color than its once-pristine white. It still provides just the right lift I need to scramble up to the first branch, and from there I make my way up one branch at a time until I reach the remains of my old haunt. Although I last set foot here almost twelve years ago, my hands still know which limbs to grasp, and my feet still know just where to plant themselves.

As a child, fleet-footed and athletic, I used to retreat to my hiding place when my parents' arguments grew too loud or too unsettling. Safe in the arms of my tree I escaped the world, believing the loosely tied rope and wooden planks made me invisible. There I let the leaves shelter me, and the branches hold me. Although my father promised to build the tree house, and even went as far as to cut the boards, he never followed through. So I took over. My father

never let me use his tools, but I found a way around that. Using my jackknife, I whittled small, lopsided holes in the ends of each board. I threaded the rope through the holes, tying knots as I went to keep the boards from slipping down on one another. Then I tied either end of the rope to the tree to create walls. For the floor I merely laid the boards over the branches and, using the holes I whittled, tied them down to the tree and to each other. I took the rope from the tack room in the barn. Only Daniel, our long-time farm hand, knew I stole the rope, but he kept my secret.

Three weeks of my industry passed when I suddenly began to feel unsteady. Dizziness became a constant companion. My head throbbed with fever, and I noticed a strange numbness in my left arm. A slight streak of red ran from my palm to my elbow. I felt ill, but persevered. As I attempted to secure the front wall of my tree house to the upper branches I remember beginning to fall, but how I landed on the ground remains a mystery. Daniel found me. He took me to the doctor, who determined that I suffered from blood poisoning from a nasty splinter wedged between my index and middle fingers. I rested in bed, at home, and somehow my parents never even took notice.

After weeks of bloody splinters, cuts, bumps, and bruises, I completed my structure. Pride swelled within me as I looked at what I created. The tree became my home away from home. Friends never went there. It remained my own sacred place. I alone heard the whispers and murmurs of the leaves. I alone heard the plunk-plunk-plunk of acorns pattering around me, and the dull ping as they bounced off the floor. I alone felt the rain wash over me as I sat through downpours in that shanty, preferring that to going in the house where the air hung ripe with tension, and anger stung worse than the raindrops.

That mighty oak became my protector and my guardian. While not invisible, its branches shielded me from the casual observer. Toward the end of my parents' marriage, when things

became more hostile and sometimes violent, I ran away to my tree house. For two weeks one summer I lived there, with Daniel the only person who knew my whereabouts. He brought me food – mainly sandwiches, pretzels, and his old army canteen full of water – and he supplied me with blankets. He never told my parents. After two weeks I ventured home. My parents, so caught up in their own tragedy, never noticed my absence. At the age of thirteen, I often took care of myself, and ordinary days passed when I seldom, if ever, saw them, so they never gave my absence a serious thought.

After their divorce, they sold the farm, split the money, and sent me to live with my aunt. As an adolescent child – not a difficult one, but a mere presence nonetheless – I simply represented too much for anyone to want when starting a new, single life. In the intervening twelve years I never visited my parents and my parents never tried to visit me. No phone calls, no letters, no Christmas cards, not even a birthday note once in all those years. In that time I never returned to my hometown. I only return now to bury my mother, as her last wish requested my presence. According to her will, she wanted to make up for in death what she never tried to excuse in life, meaning, I suppose, the desire for my presence. And so now I stand at the base of that tree that for two years gave me independence and escape. The trunk, a little thicker, still possesses the knobs where my father cut off some lower branches. Not all the boards remain intact, but in my mind the tree house stands forever as if new.

My mind still sees the boards dripping with sap in the hot summers. I still feel the bite of the cold wind in winter. And deep in my mind, preserved in the vault of time, I still feel the life that flowed through me as I curled up in the sheltering walls of that tree house, suspended in the arms of my protector: the mighty oak.