

The Treehouse

by Jason Conde

I noticed Sean changed after his grounding. We no longer played night soldiers around the block, no longer biked to the creek to catch crayfish he'd crush with his boots. Sean stopped hunting lizards, stopped charging smaller kids toll to pass his way. He even quit smoking the near-finished cigarette butts that littered our streets.

I thought it was the guilt from seeing Mrs. Potok at the door, sobbing, holding her dead Ella. "It was him," Mrs. Potok cried. And it was, but only on accident, Sean pleaded. He didn't think the rock he threw would get close to the cat, let alone hit it in the face. I imagined it was the tears rolling down Mrs. Potok's wrought wrinkles, the humility on his mother's doughy face and his stepfather's strikes that set Sean on a more placid path.

My mom didn't like Sean. She caught him in our garage once, digging through an old box of insecticides, but knew nothing about Sean's reputation around the neighborhood. She was busy then, checking groceries and cleaning our dentist's house twice a week.

One night my mom shook me awake. I opened my eyes to a dark room. Threads of streetlight filtered through the blinds of my windows, but not enough to illuminate my mom's face. "Did Sean kill a cat?" she whispered. I nodded. "No more friends with Sean, okay?" I nodded. "Okay? No more." I closed my eyes and moments later heard a door shut.

Sean told stories. Stories of driving across the Gulf of Mexico to Hawaii in a jeep, of eating hot-dogs boiled in beer for breakfast, about his german shepherd killing a moose in Canada and a fight between a tiger and a lion (the lion lost), stories his real father told him before disappearing. Sean stopped telling these stories at school because of the kids who questioned every inconsistency, every exaggeration. I questioned as much as I believed.

I found him behind the liquor store one day on my way to the

creek. I was going to catch spiders. He was sitting on a blue crate, peering through a Penthouse. "Hey," he called. "Come here!" He showed me some pictures of naked women in the magazine, then tore a page out. It was a picture of a blonde with massive breasts that he folded up and put in his pocket. He ripped another page out, this one a picture of a brunette with long coils of hair and breasts like cones. He folded it up and handed it to me. "You goin' to the creek?" I nodded. "I'll go with you," he said. "I gotta to check my crawdad traps."

Because Sean changed after killing Ella, I figured it would be fine being friends again. I didn't like that cat anyways. It once scratched my hand while I tried feeding it a baloney slice. The scratch became infected and filled with pus that my mom squeezed out between her thumbs.

Sean brought me to a treehouse inside the woods east of the flea-market. It was built high in a towering eucalyptus and almost completely hidden by leaves. The treehouse had windows cut clumsily in every scrap-wood wall. Outside these windows were nothing but leaves, long and lean with sharp tips. The branches above rustled seeds in through a window cut in the ceiling. The seeds clustered in the corners where they dried dead.

Sean and I climbed through the ceiling window and further up the tree. From that high up the breeze made the branches whistle. From the highest branches we could see, in the distance, city skyscrapers shrouded in smog.

Above the treehouse we found a nest with six speckled eggs like earth-toned oblong gumballs. "I wonder where the mom and dad are." Sean said.

The wind grew, growling around the treehouse and making the leaves scuffle like a frightened flight of pigeons. I felt the wind tug at my sweater and pull my weight. I had to wedge myself between a branch fork after I almost lost my grip.

When the wind calmed, Sean said, "If we touch the eggs, the

parents will smell us on them and drop them from the nest, because they'd be contaminated." He looked me in the eyes. "My real dad told me."

A few days before killing the cat Sean gave me a lizard. We were sitting on the slope of the creek bank, the water below shallow. He pulled the lizard from the pocket of his muddy jeans and held it belly-down in the palm of his hand. He squeezed a finger against its back, making the mouth slightly agape. "This is yours," Sean said. I took the lizard lightly in my fingers.

The lizard's tail was missing and in its place was a bloody stump covered in lint. Where my thumb pressed against its belly I felt the cool smoothness of its scaly skin. Where my pointer finger pressed against its back, I felt the roughness of what was exposed. Sean was digging in his pockets again and pulled out a red firecracker. "Here," he said, holding it out.

Then he gave me a rubber band from his wrist. "Make sure the fuse is at the tail."

Sean fished out his father's Zippo, plain beat up and dented. The silver gild was chipping off in flakes. It wasn't working as well as it used to. The Zippo had trouble keeping a flame and Sean cursed when it failed him.

One day, inside the treehouse, Sean asked, "You think it was an accident, right?" I didn't respond. "That the rock hit that cat. You know I didn't really mean to hit it, right? It was an accident. I can't ever hit anything."

I said nothing. We sat there, silent on the floor of the treehouse, ten times our height above the ground. Sean took out his Zippo and flicked at the thumbwheel. It sparked but never lit. In the distance I could hear cars driving along the interstate and the wind streaming through the leaves. "It doesn't matter what you think," Sean said, still flicking. "You're dumb."

Again I said nothing, and after a few minutes we left.

Things changed after that. At school Sean said, "I'll play War with you, but if I win you gotta say my name." He called me faggot when I walked away instead. I saw him at the creek, but when I approached he began throwing rocks. A few days later, Sean snatched my Mambas out of my hand just before I opened the pack, and when I tried to take them back, he pushed me over and my head hit the concrete.

Once, when Sean's bike was no where around, I climbed up to the treehouse. Inside I found a Hustler with torn and weathered pages, some crumpled candy wrappers and empty soda cans. A "For Sale" sign was tacked on a wall. Nothing interested me so I climbed higher to view the city.

Along the way I found the nest, eggless and empty. I continued on, maneuvering up and around branches that thinned at the ends. When I got to the top I looked for birds.

The sky darkened as I climbed down the tree. I passed the nest then the treehouse. From the lowest branch I leaped to the ground and heard a soft crunch, like brittle bones breaking. I looked down and found broken shells at my feet, their speckles a shade lighter than the surrounding earth.

