

Where it is Warm, in memory of Jean Craighead George

by Jonathan Crowl

Michael remembered when he would lay awake at night as a child and in his mind escape to the woods. He went there to leave the yelling down below and his fear of what might happen should it travel up the stairs to find him. So often and so early was he sent to bed that hours were lost in this imaginary home, a hollowed-out tree trunk in a forest hundreds of miles from where he lay. He would come here after his book and flashlight were taken and when the discomfort of living made it difficult to sleep. His mind was active, always on the run, always getting away, and when it wasn't books that sheltered him, often it was a dead tree.

There was no similar escape close to his home. Nor were there trees. In a nearby prairie he would sometimes mat down a path through the grass and belly-crawl like a snake, celebrating his unseen refuge. During the summer he would pick apart acorns and savor their grainy meat while daydreaming of a quiet, meager, self-sufficient life tucked away in a fold of the world. In the twilight of those days Michael would lay awake in bed and hear the voices of his friends playing night games on the other side of his bedroom walls. It was cold enough in his room that he could close his eyes and pull up his sheets and imagine that the snow was building up around his tree, the entrance obscured by a pelt he had made -- he couldn't explain how but he knew that when the time came such tasks would be obvious. Here he stayed, for hours at a time, in the winter of his mind curled tight around a humble fire that kept him warm and happy. And the children screamed and shouted and the snow accumulated. And Michael was at peace.

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He is older now, a grown man still alone, still without a hollowed tree to fill. When life is hard or scary, as it can be for those unsure of themselves, he closes his eyes and arrives in the forest and curls around the fire, the space as snug as when he first found it. Michael takes a heavy blanket and pretends its weight is the snow pressing in, deadly and beautiful, it cannot reach him here.

Most of us have a place like this, open arms, a room with a door. Others only know the quiet places they build for themselves, in the preserve of a dream, to escape the cold.

