

The Magic Treehouse

by Kate Staples

It was an unseasonably warm day in early spring when I first saw the man in the treehouse. The boys had just climbed onto the school bus, the older with shoulders hunched, weighted down with the gross unfairness of his early adolescent life, the younger still scribbling away at his math homework. In the winter, I generally drive them the half mile from our house, or their mother does, but that morning was so light, the birds singing with relief at the break in the cold, that we decided to walk. Or I decided and the boys, having no access to the car, agreed to walk with me. Though they never pretended to be happy about it and each attempt of mine to highlight the day's qualities was met with a sullen grunt.

On the way back home, I took the detour through the woods. There is a trail, created and maintained by deer, that loops around by the stream and ends at a field behind our house. Patches of snow crunched under my footsteps, I stopped to examine the occasional animal track, mostly deer and raccoon. When I reached the top of the little hill, I could see through the bare branches to our house on the next hill. I'd paused, trying to identify a bird call — it sounded like an oriole, though it was far too early in the season -- when some movement at the bottom of the hill caught my eye.

Between the two hills, the one I was standing on and the next rise where our house stands, is a clearing. In the summer, it is mix of long grass and weeds. In the early excitement of our marriage, my wife and I had discussed the possibility of fencing it off someday, keeping horses and maybe a dairy cow. The side of the hill on which our house stands is wooded with a mix of oak and maple and a lot of scrub. Nestled in the tree closest to the clearing, a large old oak, is the treehouse I built for the boys. It was situated to offer seclusion on the back and a view of the field, the stream and the hills beyond on the porch side.

It was on the porch that I'd caught the movement. At first it was a blur, but as my eyes adjusted to the light and the distance, I could

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make out a figure. He was sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs, his legs crossed at the knee. As I continued to watch, I could make out more details. He moved his arm back and forth, bringing what appeared to be a coffee cup to his mouth, though I couldn't actually see much more than his arm since his face was blocked by a newspaper. He put down the cup and turned a page.

I cursed myself for not bringing my birding binoculars. They were hanging next to the front door of our house. Slowly, I pushed my way through an overgrown bush, closer to the slope. As I moved, I kept my eye on the porch and the figure, and as I moved my imagination began to race ahead of me and I began to walk briskly down the hill. He was a thief, I thought, though there was little there to steal, then I imagined that he'd done something to my boys, even though it was an irrational concept; I'd just put them on the bus. In my mind, he was holding them hostage and would take them away, to where they would be forever lost to me.

In retrospect, I shouldn't have yelled. It must have given him time to get away. The wind was slapping my ears, and I somehow began to imagine that discomfort was being caused directly by this man.

About halfway down the slope, I began to run. Almost immediately, I fell. My left foot hit uneven ground and my angle twisted outward. I tumbled, rolled a few feet and by the time I had struggled to get back up and regain my bearings, the porch was empty.

I built the treehouse six years ago, when my older boy was eight and the younger was six. It was all my idea. As a kid, I'd always wanted to have a treehouse, but my own dad was too distracted by work, and not nearly handy enough to build one. The boys greeted the idea with the resignation. The younger was a Mama's boy, without an adventurous bone in his body. The older was a bit more like me, but had been flattened out over the years, his sense of wonder and curiosity reduced to constructing buildings out of ordinary blocks and scribbling in his notebook. Getting either of them outside was like convincing a cat to swim laps.

Finally, mostly by promising to make buildings out of some scrap wood in my shop, I got them worked up enough to help me design the treehouse and accompany me to the hardware store. Our first design was fanciful and complicated. I was pretty sure it was impossible, at least wedged into a giant oak. We had a peaked roof and wraparound porch with columns, a miniature replica of our house. When I told them it was impossible, the younger nearly began crying. Finally, I talked them down to a sloped roof and wide front porch, though they acted as if my practicality had stripped the fun out of it, that their treehouse was suddenly mine.

My younger boy wanted the treehouse to be right next to our own house, so Mommy could wave from the window. There was a clump of ash trees there, and it might have been possible to fit the house between two of the stronger ones, but his dependence ticked me off and, making my own decision, I built it at the far end of the woods down the slope, a good two hundred yards from the house. You'll change your mind in a few years, I insisted. Soon you'll be doing everything you can just to stay away from us. He had nodded uncertainly, his eyes averted, the way kids do when foretold their future thoughts and behavior by adults.

It turned out to be a mistake. The younger never wanted to go all the way out there and the older wouldn't go without the younger boy. The kids were tight.

When I told my wife about the man in the treehouse, she laughed and suggested I ought to check my prescription. Oddly, it was one of the kinder things she'd said to me recently, her tone was almost nurturing. Which prescription? I joked. She looked at me oddly and replied, glasses.

You should be happy someone is using it, she said when I described the man sitting in the chair. Her tone had gone hard again. Did you go up there and check inside? I turned away. I hadn't. I don't know why. It was so logical. Of course the man had gone back inside the house.

I was shaken, I told myself, that's why I left. Maybe I sensed danger, or wanted to consult with my wife, to seek solace in her steadiness. I must have been thinking of days gone by, because there was little of that lately, she was too saturated with her own unhappiness to entertain the possibility of accepting any of my problems.

She went up to her office in the attic. I had no jobs scheduled, so I went out to the barn, where I was refinishing some old chairs I'd picked up at the junk store. Work was slow lately, but I was sure they'd pick up when spring arrived. It always did. Working on an old mission rocker I'd found at a salvage place, I managed to forget about the house and the man and even my wife's mysterious sadness until long after lunchtime.

I had planned on picking up the boys at the bus stop, taking the longer route past the treehouse, but I fell asleep in the barn and woke up too late to walk down there in time. Instead, I went back into the house and waited for them in the kitchen. When they arrived, I passed out apples and cookies. I asked them questions about their days and about school in general, all of which were met by suspicious looks, the older going so far as to ask why I wanted to know.

Their mother came down to greet the boys, and I shooed her away, ignoring the cold looks thrown my way from all directions. Then, clapping my hands to break the boys out of their torpor, I suggested walking down to the treehouse, checking to see if it had survived the harsh winter. Neither wanted to go, they preferred to retreat into their rooms, and their computers. Homework, they insisted, but I knew better. I threatened to turn off the internet connection and they grudgingly agreed to come with me. On the way down, I tried to maintain a lighthearted chatter but even to me, it sounded false, and I lapsed into silence and walked on ahead, listening to their occasional quips and laughter.

When they were younger, up until a year or so ago, really, the boys had hated each other. Each was jealous of the attention the other got from their parents, primarily their mother, and they fought

almost constantly. Occasionally, they used fists. Their mother begged them to stop; someday everyone else would be dead and they'd only have each other, she'd cried. It was melodramatic, but it worked. Or they realized there was no one within ten miles to play with, other than the buzz-cut boy with the switchblade down the road.

We came up on it quickly. I'd stained the wood in a dark finish so it would blend in with the tree bark, and though it stood out now more than at any other time of the year thanks to the lack of cover, it was still pretty well camouflaged. I was actually pretty proud of the job that I'd done. It was sturdy; it had survived six winters and numerous windstorms, including one that felled a tree disconcertingly close to our house. And it had a stripped-down, classic feel, it reminded me of a house I'd lived in years ago, long before the kids, before I'd even met my wife. Back when I could take odd construction jobs only if I wanted to, and otherwise spend all day and night in my workshop, making furniture that I liked without having to worry about catering to anyone else's taste, back when I could simply and cheaply.

I nodded at the older one, told him to go on ahead. I'd constructed a ladder out of two pieces of rope with thick boards knotted in for rungs. He got up pretty easily, but it was irritating to see that the younger boy could scarcely navigate it. He kept swinging and banging his knuckles against the tree. Finally, I snapped at him, something about him making it look more difficult than it was, and steadied it from the bottom.

They both disappeared into the house. For a moment, I was worried. What if the man was still there? What if he had a gun or a knife? I called up. They called back that it looked fine. Maybe they'd stay here a bit and meet me back at the house later. Part of getting them in there in the first place had been my promise that it was for kids only. I would stay out. Maybe that was in my head earlier, when the man disappeared. But I doubt it. I waited a few more minutes to make sure everything was okay, then I turned to leave.

This should have made me happy, I thought; finally, they were going to use the house. Instead, I panicked. I stopped and turned

back towards the treehouse. I wish I could say that I was worried about them, that I thought the man might return with malevolent intentions, but it wasn't that. I could see them through the side window, laughing, and at that moment, I knew only that I didn't want them there.

My head pounding, hands clenched, I called up to them that they had homework to do. When they didn't answer, I called again. The tone of my voice must have been harsh, because when they scrambled down the ladder, their heads were lowered, their eyes averted. We walked back to the house in silence and through dinner, they barely looked at me, though they spoke in animated tones with their mother, describing their teachers' foibles and the antics of their classmates.

On our wedding day, my wife looked so beautiful, I nearly cried for the first time since I was a boy. Her cheeks were a soft pink I assumed at the time came from happiness, her eyes were clear and bright. When the judge asked us to repeat our vows, she looked me directly in the eye and talked to me as if no one was there, as if our family were clusters of clouds in the distance. When people say that a moment is the happiest in their life, they either forget or willfully ignore the implication that their joy has peaked.

Our honeymoon was a mountain hiking trip I later discovered she never wanted to take. I was an outdoor person, she was bookish. Before we were married, she was my willing companion. She claimed that I opened her to new worlds. As it turned out, the worlds were those she was happier visiting than living and her enthusiasm for bird watching and camping was quickly replaced by a sort of grudging acceptance.

The boys, when they came along, were a distraction. In their early childhood, she indulged her previously unrevealed need to speak in high-pitched voices and generally treat two healthy boys as if they were invalids. As they have gotten older and a bit more self-sufficient, and she comes to grips with the fact that I'm what's left,

she's begun looking at me as if I sold her a pile of damaged goods or as if I, myself, was those goods.

Sex is sporadic and engaged in with closed or averted eyes. None of the old adventure remains; we used to view each others bodies as if they were vast landscapes to discover slowly. I don't know when and how we tired of the search, when she began avoiding it by working late in her office, sometimes falling asleep there and slipping into bed in late, after she was sure I was asleep.

It was a few weeks before I saw him again. I'd been watching, taking a daily walk in the woods beyond the field, following a circuitous route until I had a good view of the treehouse. I would flatten my body behind a tree and peer through the binoculars, scanning the porch, the windows, for any sign of activity.

By the time I did see him, I had almost convinced myself that I'd been imagining things. My wife and I had had a fight that morning, money again, and I was in a foul mood. Work still hadn't picked up. Our area was hit harder than others by the bad economy and the news, when I could bear to listen to it, was all bad. The days when I could listen to the radio in the morning with any sort of reassurance or benign interest were long gone.

The previous day, I'd barely glanced at the treehouse, and I would have done the same on that particular morning had I not smelled something, a tangy aroma so familiar I smiled before I'd consciously identified it. Pot. Its affect on me was more immediate than if the treehouse had been on fire and I immediately came to attention and reached for my binoculars, which I focused on the porch. I could make out an amber bottle in a familiar shape balanced on one of the chair arms. I could swear I saw a wispy puff of smoke floating from the open front window. Suppressing an initial desire to move down the hill, I remained behind the tree and waited for something to happen.

When was the last time I smoked? Until that moment, I hadn't realized how much I missed it. I still had a bag stored somewhere, probably weak and stale by now. Slowly, I shifted my position in the

woods to catch a more direct draft. I found a spot in the sun, leaned against a tree and closed my eyes.

I stopped trying to catch him, and like a wild animal which becomes accustomed to a foreign presence, he became more casual in his movements. Never did I get a clear look at his face, but I saw shadows, particularly in the early morning, when the sun's light was just beginning to illuminate the hills behind the woods, spreading a pinkish glow into the valley. Occasionally, I could see him carrying something, a book or a magazine, a cup of coffee. He read a lot. Sometimes I could see his silhouette at the window, staring out in my direction, motionless. It was almost as if he could see me, as if he were watching me watching him. In those moments, I would stay as still as possible, barely breathing.

In those mornings I saw more wildlife than I'd seen in all the years we'd lived in the house. A fox led her cubs through the dewy grass, a skunk ambled a few yards away leaving a trail of stink behind her, a golden eagle built a nest in a high tree.

While the mornings were still cold, I bought a blanket. I was careful to make sure that no one saw where I was going. I'd make half a pot of coffee and pour it into my thermos. It became a ritual and I looked forward to it the way I used to look forward to the long expanse of my days years ago, when I was a person I recognized. My wife either didn't hear me leave or didn't mention it. We seemed to be getting more alienated from each other, barely speaking, and as our distance increased, the boys rallied around her and I spent more time outside. I found my old stash of pot in the barn and brought it out with me.

One evening over dinner, my wife asked me about the man in the treehouse, whether I'd seen him again. The question took me by surprise — it had been months since I mentioned it — and I must have flinched because her expression changed from slightly mocking to surprised. Then she laughed. After a moment, my older son, who had become so quiet over the winter, looked up at his brother. There

was an exchange of information. I figured it was another one of the inside jokes they seemed to be sharing lately, as they further excluded me from their lives, another nudge out the door. Only the next day did I understand.

It was a Saturday morning. The school year had finished the previous week and the boys had dispensed with all of the more immediate activities, the ones they'd been yearning for all winter. Early summer boredom had begun to set in. I heard them first. I had fixed up my viewing spot with a folding chair and a dug out hole into which I'd set a cooler where I stored a blanket, my binoculars and some snacks and I was sipping my coffee and chewing the last bit of a granola bar. The younger boy was laughing, a high uncontrolled laugh I'd never heard. The older's voice carried, but I could not hear the words.

Quickly, I looked back at the treehouse. It was still early and the sun had not risen high enough to hit it directly. I could make out his shadow, frozen in space, and though I couldn't see where he was looking, I imagined we were connected, that we shared a feeling of panic. I had to resist the urge to call out and warn him.

I could see them now, a gray sweatshirt my older son had found in my closet last fall and taken, an act I'd found irritating even as my wife tried to convince me it was flattering. The younger was animated, swiping at low branches with a stick.

The sun burned through the high clouds and was illuminating the upper halves of the trees, creeping slowly down the trunks like a fire burning in reverse. The roof of the treehouse shimmered and inside, the shadow began to look softer, thinner. As I watched, it shifted slowly towards me, drifting gracefully, fading with the light, until it reached the window, where it paused just as the boys reached the ladder and began to climb. My eyes shifted between the boys to the shadow, which was definitely facing me now, it surely saw me. I could feel it reaching out, the tendrils of its fingers floating towards me. Caught on a breeze, it began to rise slowly into the air, until it caught the sunlight and dissipated. I watched the spot where I'd last seen it, trying to make out where it might have gone. A sharp noise

brought my attention back to the treehouse, where the head of my elder son appeared in the window, clear as day.

