

Return to the Magic Tree House

by tommy klehr

"You can't smoke in here, Jack," his father said. "Your mother will kill me." Those were the first words spoken as the pair rode in silence from Chester County. Jack pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth and tucked it above his ear.

Distant lightning lit up the sky.

"Looks like we're in for a storm," his father said.

Jack knew this already. He rubbed his left elbow, then looked down at the manilla envelope on his lap.

"Drop me off here," Jack said. "I want to walk."

"But we're almost home," his father said. "Besides... your mother wants to see you."

When Jack didn't respond, his father complied and slowed down, pulling over in front of the Burlap Bean. Jack opened the door, put his foot out.

"Don't go there," his father said. "Shoulda been torn down long ago. If it was up to me..." he trailed off.

Jack hesitated, then pulled himself out of the car.

"She's gone, ya know," his father said, then leaned over to the passenger side. "They moved away years ago."

"Yeah," Jack said as he closed the door. He tucked the manilla envelope under his arm.

Jack walked to the coffee shop, as his father slowly drove away.

He squeezed his left elbow again as the thunder grew louder. He pulled the cigarette from above his ear and lit it. There had been no smoking in Chester County, but some guards would look the other way in return for favors. And there were those who failed to keep up their end of the bargain. His broken elbow, the result of a smoking infraction, and the residual pain was a constant reminder of a lesson he should have learned earlier: *You can't trust anyone.*

When he got to the door of the Bean, he stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette against the brick building and put it back in the pack. He went in, hoping that the faces inside had changed in his absence. He poured his coffee and paid, all while looking down. On the way out, he heard a few voices that sounded familiar, but if they recognized him, they hadn't let on.

Jack walked from the coffee shop, down Hickory Lane. He stopped when he saw the sign for Frog Creek Park.

The old wooden bridge was barricaded now. He used to stand here and watch Annie as she walked from her home on Camelot Avenue, go to the center of the footbridge, and stand on her toes to peer above the tall weeds that grew along the bank. She'd wave and then run to meet him. "Race ya," she'd say after she had already started running. He always let her win.

The memory faded as he turned around and faced his destination. The night was dark, but he could still make it out silhouetted against the glow reflecting off the cloudy sky. So many days he stood here — this exact spot — looking up at the tree house — their tree house. He missed her. Missed the feeling of her skin as she grabbed his hand, squeezing it, as they would race to the ladder.

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Tonight, he walked alone. No racing. No hand in his. Instead, he held a cup of tepid coffee. When he got to the tree, he finished it, cringing at the taste of the beverage. He tossed the cup aside and climbed the ladder, gripping the manilla envelope in his teeth. The boards were slippery, though solid after all these years since the last time he climbed them. He wondered if anyone had been here — if *she* had been here — since that day. When he got to the top, he sat on the edge of the open hatch, letting his feet dangle. He looked at his feet and further down at the hard ground below. The rain pattered as it landed on the roof. He heard, then felt the light splash of water dripping from the leaky ceiling.

He lit the other half of his cigarette, then used the lighter to look around. Their make-shift table had collapsed, its former contents — three candles, assorted books of matches, and an ashtray — spilled

to the floor. He saw books and magazines, scattered in decaying piles. He righted the tallest pillar, and lit it. In the dim light of the flickering candle, the memories came back to him.

* * *

Annie had called the place magic. She would bring books and read them to him, his eyes glued to the dancing of her lips, his ears to the music of her voice. They'd drink warm cans of soda, eat Fritos, and waste the hours away with their youthful imaginations.

She was magic to him. The first time he kissed her, or anyone for that matter, it was in the tree house. That was the summer when he had just turned 14 and she was 15. It was her idea. She always lead the way — he always followed — a dog behind its master.

The summers came and went. The warm soda was replaced with warm beer she'd get from her brother. The Fritos with pizza from Fresco's. The books were eventually replaced with Hustlers she'd borrow from her father's dresser and cigarettes she'd steal from her mother's purse. The kissing was replaced with other pleasures. Always along for the ride — anything she wanted.

"Do you love me?" she asked one day in a moment of post-coital nostalgia.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Would you kill for me?"

"What?"

"If someone was trying to hurt me, would you protect me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Promise me?"

"Promise."

She sat quietly and stared at the ceiling for a minute.

"Here," she finally broke the silence and offered him a cigarette. He took a drag and coughed, looked at her puzzled. "What is it?"

"Magic," she said.

* * *

The last summer was after he had just graduated high school and she had finished her first year at Widener.

"This is my friend Kathleen," she said when he climbed up the ladder one day. He didn't mind sharing Annie with Kathleen, but the novelty of Kathleen soon wore off, however, when Annie arrived with another guest — Teddy. He didn't like Teddy. Teddy was older, had a job, and Annie's attention. He began to envy the latest addition. He would watch them out of the corner of his eye, longing to switch places.

On that last day, Kathleen grabbed his chin and pulled him to face her. "I'm right here, asshole," she said. Embarrassed and angry by being caught, he pushed himself off of Kathleen, then in a fury, attacked his rival. The details were vague to him now. He remembered the surprised expression on Teddy's face as he went through the open hatch, Teddy's slender body being supported momentarily by his neck and one foot. He remembered the crying, the shrieking of the girls. Teddy's neck twisted, and then he dropped to the ground headfirst. Jack closed his eyes tightly as his mind replayed that image.

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He had no memories after that. Not until he found himself standing in a courtroom, before 12 strangers. He looked at the twelve people before him. They weren't his peers. They didn't love her like he did. How could they judge him? Only one word was spoken by the foreman, then he heard the sobbing of his mother behind him.

With authoritative / authoritarian hands he was secured and escorted away. He spent seven years under their care — and their watchful eyes. *Trust no one*. No place was safe except to escape to his mind... where he was haunted by the memories of her.

A flash of lightning lit up the room, bringing him back to the present. His eyes focused on the manilla envelope sitting beside him, his name and inmate number in large black type.

He tore open the manilla envelope, removed the first letter he sent her, still sealed. He twisted it so he could see the writing in the dim candle light. To the right of her name, he saw the stamp in red ink. Holding the letter between his thumb and fore-finger, he tipped

the opposite corner toward the candle, watched the flame take hold and grow until her name was consumed. He turned the letter around and watched it blacken, then disappear. He dropped the burning letter through the hatch, watched the glow drop to the ground, her memory slowly fading along with it.

He repeated the ceremony for each of the letters in the envelope. When he dropped the last burning memento, she was finally gone. He took out another cigarette, lit it from the candle, then blew out the flame. He sat alone in the darkness, the only light, the glowing tip of his Pall Mall, the only sound, the crescendo of rain on the roof. The ache in his elbow growing as the storm came home.

