

Paul's Treehouse
by [Gene Wolfe](#)

It was the day after the governor called out the National Guard, but Morris did not think of it that way; it was the morning after the second night Paul had spent in the tree, and Morris brushed his teeth with Scotch after he looked into Paul's bedroom and saw the unrumpled bed. And it was hot; though not in the house, which was air-conditioned.

Sheila was still asleep, lying straight out like a man on the single bed across from his own. He left her undisturbed, filling his glass with Scotch again and carrying it out to the patio at the side of the house. The sun was barely up, yet the metal furniture there was already slightly warm. It would be a hot day, a scorcher. He heard the snip-snack of Russell's shears on the other side of the hedge and braced himself for the inevitable remark.

"It's going to be a hot one, isn't it?" Sticking his head over the top of the hedge. Morris nodded, hoping that if he did not speak Russell would stay where he was. The hope was fruitless. He could hear Russell unlatching the gate, although he purposely did not look.

"Hotter than the hinges of hell," Russell said, sitting down. "Do the gardening early, that's what I told myself, do it early while it's cool, and look at me. I'm sweating already. Did you hear what they did last night? Beat a cop to death with golf clubs and polo mallets out of a store window."

Morris said nothing, looking up at Paul's treehouse. It was on the other side of the yard, but so high up it could be seen above the roofline of the house.

"Beat him to death right out on the street."

"I suppose some of them deserve it," Morris said moodily.

"Sure they do, but it's *them* doing it. That's what gets to me ... Drinking pretty early, aren't you?" Russell was tall and gangling, with a long neck and a prominent Adam's apple; Morris, short and fat-bellied, envied him his straight lines.

"I guess I am," he said. "Like one?"

"Since it's Saturday ..."

It was cool in the house, much cooler than the patio, but the air was stale. He splashed the cheaper "guest" whisky into a glass and added a squirt of charged water.

"Is that your boy Paul's?" When he came out again, Russell was staring up at the treehouse just as he himself had been doing a moment before. Morris nodded.

"He built it on his own, didn't he? I remember watching him climb up there with boards or something, with his little radio playing to keep him company." He took the drink. "You don't mind if I walk around and have a look at it, do you?"

Reluctantly Morris followed him, stepping over the beds of flame-toned, scentless florabundas Sheila loved.

The tree at the other side of the house gave too much shade for roses. There was nothing under it except a little sparse grass and a few stones Paul had dropped.

Russell whistled. "That's way up there, isn't it? Fifty feet if it's an inch. Why'd you let him build it so high?"

"Sheila doesn't believe in thwarting the boy's natural inclinations." It sounded silly when Morris said it, and he covered by taking another sip of the whisky.

Russell shook his head. "If he ever falls out of there he'll kill himself."

"Paul's a good climber," Morris said.

"He'd have to be to build that thing." Russell continued to stare, craning his body backward. Morris wished that he would return to the patio.

"It took him almost two weeks," Morris said.

"He swiped the lumber off the housing project, didn't he?"

"I bought him some of it." For an instant Morris had seen Paul's small, brown head in one of the windows. He wondered if Russell had noticed it.

"But he swiped most of it. Two-by-fours and four-by-fours; it looks solid."

"I suppose it is." Before he could catch himself he added, "He's got buckets of rocks up there."

"Rocks?" Russell looked down, startled.

"Rocks about the size of tennis balls. Paul built a sort of elevator and hauled them up. He must have eight or ten buckets full."

"What's he want those for?"

"I don't know."

"Well, ask him." Russell looked angry at having his curiosity balked. "He's your kid." Morris swallowed the last of his second drink, saying nothing.

"How does he get up there?" Russell was looking at the tree again. "It doesn't look as if you *could* climb it."

"He cut off some of the branches after he got the place built. He has a rope with knots in it he lets down."

"Where is it?" Russell looked around, expecting to see the rope tangled in the tree's branches somewhere.

It was bound to come out now. "He pulls it up after him when he goes in there," Morris said. The Scotch was lying like a pool of mercury in his empty stomach.

"You mean he's up there now?"

Neither of them had heard Shelia come out. "He's been up there since Thursday." She sounded unconcerned.

Morris turned to face her and saw that she was wearing a quilted pink housecoat. Her hair was still in curlers. He said, "You didn't have to get up so early."

"I wanted to." She yawned. "I set the clock-radio for six. It's going to be hot in town, and I want to be right there when the stores open."

"I wouldn't go today," Russell said.

"I'm not going down *there*—I'm going to the good stores." Shelia yawned again. Without makeup, Morris thought, she looked too old to have a son as young as Paul. He did himself, he knew, but Sheila usually looked younger to him; especially when he had had something to drink. "Did you hear about the National Guard, though," she added when she had finished the yawn.

Russell shook his head.

"You know how somebody said they were shooting at everything and doing more damage than the rioters? Well, they're going to protest that. I heard it on the radio. They're going to hold a march of their own today."

Russell was no longer listening. He leaned back to look at Paul's treehouse again.

"Ever since Thursday," Sheila said. "Isn't that a scream?"

Morris surprised himself by saying, "I don't think so, and I'm going to make him come down today." Sheila looked at him coolly.

"How does he live up there?" Russell asked.

"Oh, he's got a blanket and things," Shelia said.

Morris said slowly, "While I was at the office Thursday he took blankets out of the linen closet and a lot of canned food and fruit juice out of the pantry and carried it all up there."

"It's good for him," Sheila said. "He's got his radio and scout knife and whatnot, too. He wants to get away and be on his own. So let him. He'll come down when he's hungry, that's what I tell Morris, and meanwhile we know where he is."

"I'm going to make him come down today," Morris repeated, but neither of them heard him.

When they went away—Sheila to start breakfast, Russell, presumably, to finish clipping his side of the hedge—Morris remained where he was, staring up at the treehouse. After two or three minutes he walked over to the trunk and laid a hand on the rough bark. He had been studying the tree for three days now and knew that even before Paul had looped some of its limbs it had not been an easy tree to climb. Walking only a trifle unsteadily, he went to the garage and got the step-ladder.

From the top of the ladder he could reach the lowest limb by stretching himself uncomfortably and balancing on the balls of his feet with his body leaning against the trunk. Suddenly conscious of how soft his palms had become in the last fifteen years, how heavy his body was, he closed his hands around the limb and tried to pull himself up. Struggling to grip the tree with his legs, he kicked the ladder, which fell over.

From somewhere below, Russell said, "Don't break your neck, Morris," and he heard the sound of faint music. He twisted his head until he could see Russell, with a transistor radio clipped to his belt, righting the ladder.

Morris said "Thanks" gratefully and stood panting at the top for a moment before coming down.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Russell said.

"Listen," Morris was still gulping for breath, "would you go up there and get him?" It was a humiliating admission, but he made it: "You ought to be able to climb better than I can."

"Sorry," Russell touched his chest, "doctor's orders."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"Nothing serious, I'm just supposed to stay away from places where I might take a bad fall. I get dizzy sometimes."

"I see."

"Sure. Did you hear about the fake police? It came over our radio a minute ago."

Morris shook his head, still panting and steadying himself against the ladder.

"They're stripping the uniforms off dead cops and putting them on themselves. They've caused a lot of trouble that way."

Morris nodded. "I'll bet."

Russell kicked the tree. "He's your kid. Why don't you just tell him to come down?"

"I tried that yesterday. He won't."

"Well, try again today. Make it strong."

"Paul!" Morris made his voice as authoritative as he could. "Paul, look down here!" There was no movement in the treehouse.

"Make it strong. Tell him he's got to come down."

"Paul, come out of there this minute!"

The two men waited. There was no sound except for the tuneless music of the radio and the whisper of a breeze among the saw-edged leaves.

"I guess he's not going to come," Morris said.

"Are you sure he's up there?"

Morris thought of the glimpse of Paul's head he had seen earlier. "He's up there. He just won't answer." He thought of the times he had taken the pictures his mother had given him, pictures showing his own childhood, from their drawer and studied them to try and discover some similarity between himself and Paul. "He doesn't want to argue," he finished weakly.

"Say." Russell was looking at the tree again. "Why don't we chop it?" He dropped his voice to a whisper.

Morris was horrified. "He'd be killed."

The radio's metallic jingling stopped. "*We interrupt this program for a bulletin.*" Both men froze.

"Word has reached our newsroom that the demonstration organized by Citizens For Peace has been disrupted by about five hundred storm troopers of the American Nazi

Party. It appears that members of a motorcycle club have also entered the disturbance; it is not known on which side."

Russell switched the radio off. Morris sighed, "Every time they have one of those bulletins I think it's going to be the big one."

His neighbor nodded sympathetically. "But listen, we don't have to cut the tree clear down. Anyway, it must be nearly three feet thick and it would take us a couple of days, probably. All we have to do is chop at it a little. He'll think we're going to cut it with him in it, and climb down. You have an ax?"

Morris shook his head.

"I do. I'll go over and get it."

Morris waited under the tree until he had left, then called Paul's name softly several times. There was no reply. Raising his voice, he said, "We don't want to hurt you, Paul." He tried to think of a bribe. Paul already had a bicycle. "I'll build you a swimming pool, Paul. In the backyard where your mother has her flowers. I'll have men come in with a bulldozer and dig them out and make us a swimming pool there." There was no answer. He wanted to tell Paul that they weren't really going to chop down the tree, but something prevented him. Then he could hear Russell opening the gate on the other side of the house.

The ax was old, dull and rusted, and the head was loose on the handle so that after every few strokes it was necessary to drive it back on by butting it against the trunk of the tree; each blow hurt Morris's already scraped hands. By the time he had made a small notch—most of his swings missed the point of aim and fell uselessly on either side of it—his arms and wrists were aching. Paul had not come down or even looked out one of the windows.

"I'm going to try climbing again." He laid down the ax, looking at Russell. "Do you have a longer ladder than this one?"

Russell nodded. "You'll have to come over and help me carry it."

Russell's wife stopped them as they crossed Russell's patio and made them come inside for lemonade. "My goodness, Morris, you look as if you're about to have heat prostration. Is it that warm out?" Russell's house was air-conditioned, too.

They sat in the family room, with lemonade in copper mugs meant for Moscow Mules. The television flickered with scenes, but Russell's wife had twisted the sound down until Morris could hear only a faint hum. The screen showed a sprawling building billowing smoke. Firemen and soldiers milled about it. Then the camera raced down suburban streets and he saw two houses very like his own and Russell's; he almost felt he could see through the walls, see the two of them sitting and watching their own houses—which

were gone now as police fired up at the windows of a tall tenement. Russell, winking and gesturing for silence, was pouring gin into his mug to mix with the lemonade now that his wife had gone back to the kitchen.

He felt sick when he stood up, and wondered dully if Sheila were not looking for him, angry because his breakfast was getting cold. He steadied himself on the doorway as he followed Russell out, conscious that his face was flushed. The heat outside was savage now.

They moved cans of paint and broken storm windows aside to uncover Russell's extension ladder. It was as old as the ax, dirtied with white and yellow splashes, and heavy as metal when they got it on their shoulders to carry outside.

"This'll get you up the first twenty feet," Russell said. "Think you can climb from there?"

Morris nodded, knowing he could not.

They hooked the two sections together and leaned them against the tree, Russell talking learnedly of the proper distance between the bottom of the ladder and the base of the object to be climbed. Russell had been an engineer at one time; Morris had never been quite sure of the reason he no longer was.

The ladder shook. It seemed strange to find himself surrounded by leaves instead of looking up at them, having to look down to see Russell on the ground. At the very top of the ladder a large limb had been broken off some years before and he could look straight out over the roof of his own home and all the neighboring houses. "I see smoke," he called down. "Over that way. Something big's burning."

"Can you get up to the boy?" Russell called back.

Morris tried to leave the ladder, lifting one leg gingerly over the stub of the broken limb. Giddiness seized him. He climbed down again.

"What's the matter?"

"If I had a rope," Morris gestured with his hands, "I could put it around my waist and around the trunk of the tree. You know, like the men who climb telephone poles." Sirens sounded in the distance.

"I've got some." Russell snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute."

Morris waited. The noise of the sirens died away, leaving only the talk of the leaves, but Russell did not return. Morris was about to go into the house when the truck pulled up at the curb. It was a stake-bed truck, and the men were riding on it, almost covering it. They were white and brown and black; most of them wore khaki shirts and khaki trousers with broad black leather belts, but they had no insignia and their weapons were clubs and

bottles and iron bars. The first of them were crossing his lawn almost before the truck had come to a full stop, and a tall man with a baseball bat began smashing his picture window.

"What do you want?" Morris said. "What is it?"

The leader took him by the front of his shirt and shook him as the others circled around. A stone, and then another, struck the ground, and he realized that Paul was throwing them from his treehouse trying to defend him, but the range was too great. Someone hit him from behind with a chain.

The End

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