

In the Trees

Steve Rasnic Tem

It was a good climbing tree, a good climbing tree for a good boy. And Will's son was a good boy. A wild boy, sure, but a good boy, a beautiful boy. A boy like Will himself could have been, if only he hadn't had to grow up so quickly. The fact was, Will had never been very good at being a boy. He'd never had the knack. At his son's age he'd been cautious and forced, an old man in the soft skin of a boy.

"Go to sleep, son," he said softly, a whisper from the old man he'd always been. He stood in the doorway and gazed at his son's head, small face and soft dark hair barely out of the comforter, sunk to his red ears in the pillow. "You need your rest. You can't understand that now, but take it from me, you'll never have enough rest for what lies ahead."

Will could see past the bed, out the window to where the climbing tree stood, its leaves lighting up with the moonlight. Will took another pull off his beer and wished it were whiskey. The climbing tree was a beautiful thing, standing out from the surrounding trees that formed the edge of "the grove"--more like a forest--that spread out from this edge of town seven miles before farm land started breaking it up.

But few of the trees seemed fit for climbing, and none of the others were this close to the house.

"I'm a good boy, aren't I, Dad?" his son spoke sleepily from his bed. But even in the sleepy voice Will could hear the anxiety that had no reason to be there. "I try to be good, don't I?"

"Of course, son. You're a good boy, a fabulous boy."

"Then don't make me go to sleep. I can't sleep."

Will knew this couldn't be true. This was just the boy's natural excitement talking, his anxiety, all the life in him rising to the top that made it hard for him just to lie down and rest, to permit the night to pass without his presence in it. His son sounded sleepier the more he said. He wouldn't be surprised to hear his snores at any second. He had to go to sleep. Sleep was medicine.

And he had to take his medicine. Had to grow up big and strong. And bury his old man someday if it came to that.

Will thought about what to say, tried to think about what his own father would have said, and drank slow and steady from the can, now lukewarm in his sweaty hand. "Tomorrow's another day," he finally managed, feebly. "You're young; you have a whole lifetime ahead. No sense rushing it; that was the mistake I made when I was a boy. I was always rushing things."

The wind picked up. The longest of the leafy branches thrashed the window. His son's dark head began to thrash, too, whipping back and forth across the pillow as if in fever.

"Stay still, son," Will implored, his hands shaking, full of pain. "That's no good. That's no good at all. You have to get your rest!"

"I can't sleep, Daddy! I just can't!"

Will moved to the side of the bed. It was a kid's bed, low and small; Will felt like a giant towering over it. "I'll help you sleep," he said, his own anxiety bubbling up at his throat. "I'll do anything I can."

Awkwardly Will dropped to his knees beside the bed. He put the can down on the rug, but it tipped over. Foam erupted from the opening and dribbled over the edge of the rug onto the wooden floor. But Will couldn't move his hands off his son's comforter. He reached over and stroked the good boy's hair, hair softer than anything in Will's experience. He felt the good boy's forehead for fever--not sure he would know a fever in a boy this small. He stroked the shallow rise of comforter that covered his chest and arms.

"I don't want to go to sleep, Daddy! I'm scared!"

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know," the good boy said, thrashing. "I never know." Will wasn't going to say there was nothing to be afraid of; he knew better.

Will looked around the room, for something, anything, that might calm his son down and let him sleep. And let Will sleep as well, for he knew he couldn't leave the room until a night's rightful relief for his son was well on its way.

A stuffed tiger, a bear, a red truck, a pillow decorated with tiny golden bells. His son barely looked at the toys as Will piled them up around his tiny, soft, thrashing head. "Had your prayers yet?" Will asked the beautiful, anxious boy, as if it was still more medicine he was talking about, still more magic. Will rubbed his hands together, prayerful-like, now desperate for another drink.

"No! I'm not sleeping!" his beautiful son cried, his tiny head red as blood, the wave of black hair across his forehead suddenly so like the greasy wing of a dead bird. Will made his pained hands into fists, not knowing whether he was going to caress or strike the good boy.

Will put his shaking hands together and prayed for his son to go to sleep.

"I want to climb the tree!" the good son suddenly cried.

And Will, who had never before permitted it, said "Tomorrow. I'll let you climb the tree tomorrow."

Will sat on the floor in his son's dark bedroom, drinking a beer. He watched the beautiful face--no longer bright red, or dark, now pale silver in the moonlight that had slipped through the open window--as his son slept, dreaming the dreams all good boys dreamed, but which Will, who had grown up all too quickly, had forgotten.

Behind and above the headboard of the bed was the open window, and the climbing tree beyond. The moonlight had planted silver flames in its branches. The boy's head was perfectly still. The boy's head no longer thrashed, but the climbing tree continued to thrash in the wind, making the silver flames break and spread, shoot higher up the limbs of the tree.

Will watched his beautiful son's face, relieved at its peace, but could see his nervous, living dreams torturing the bright flaming limbs of the climbing tree.

Again, the beer had grown warm in his hand, but he continued to drink. Tomorrow his wife and daughter would be back from their trip. Maybe she could get their son to sleep. Maybe she could talk him down out of the climbing tree. Will had been crazy to agree to the climb--it wasn't safe, it had never been safe. He'd never let his beautiful boy climb the tree before, no matter how much he'd begged. Now he didn't understand how he could have given in so easily. He'd change his mind and tell the boy, but Will had never been able to break a promise to his son before.

The curtains floated up on either side of his son's window, flapping severely as if tearing loose. Will hugged himself and imagined his small, good son hugging him, protecting him from the chill wind of adult pain.

It was a good tree, an outstanding tree. Will drank and watched his beautiful son play in the uppermost branches of the climbing tree.

His son was better at climbing trees than he had ever been. His son braved things that had terrified the young Will, left him motionless and dumb. And old, so old the other young boys were strangers to him, wild beasts scrapping in the trees. His son was a much better boy than Will had been. His son had all the right talents for being a boy.

He was a wild boy, but a good boy. The boy loved it when the branches almost broke, bent so far they threatened to drop him on his head. The boy laughed at terror; it thrilled him. Like other boys Will had known once upon a time, his sweet boy had no sense about danger.

The boy shook the upper branches and made as if to fly off with the tree, laughing. Will imagined the tree up-rooting, then turning somersaults in the darkening, early evening air.

Behind him, the wife said, "Will, it's getting late. It's time to get him in." Will's wife knew about a boy's safety.

But much to his surprise, Will discovered he didn't want his son to come down just yet. As the sky grew darker and the wind increased Will took pride in the way the boy held fast to the uppermost branches, shaking them like some small, fierce animal, dancing among them like some unnatural spirit. That's it, son! That's it, he thought, throwing his head back and permitting the flat beer to gush down his throat. Don't leave the trees for a life down here

on the ground. It happens soon enough--you'll understand that someday.

A sudden wind caught Will full in the face: his hair stood up and his eyes were forced closed. Another gust knocked the empty out of his hand. He could almost feel himself up in the tree with his son, just another boy to join that good, wild boy. Will staggered to his feet. The wind took away his lawn chair. He moved forward toward the base of the tree, trying to remember what his clever son had done to begin the climb.

"Daddy, I want to climb, too." Will knew the tug on his pants. He looked down at his little girl, who was using his leg to block the wind.

"You're too small!" Will shouted down. But the wind was dragging his words away.

"You let him!" She began to cry.

Will picked his little girl up in his arms. "Too dangerous," he spoke into her ear.

"Will!" His wife's scream beside him warmed his ear. The wind had grown cold; he could feel ice in the wrinkles of his clothes.

He turned. Her face was white, floating in the cold black air. "It's going to be okay!" Will cried against the wind. "He's a good boy! A great boy! Don't you see? A much better boy than I ever was!"

Will turned back toward the tree, where his son played and laughed, his son's face hot and glorious in the wind, the moon laying shiny streaks into his dark hair. Lightning played in the distant boughs of the forest, moving toward the house. Will started toward the climbing tree, his wife and daughter clinging to him. But he remembered he no longer knew how to climb, and stopped halfway between the house and the tree.

His beautiful son stopped laughing and stared down at Will. Will brought a nervous hand up to his lips, then realized he had no beer. He felt a sudden panic as he knew his son had seen what life was like back on the ground.

Lightning began to ripple the trees. Up in the highest part of the tree, his beautiful son laughed and started climbing higher.

It was a good climbing tree. A wonderful climbing tree. Will had taught his good son not to be afraid to do things. Will had taught him the lessons Will had never known. Will had taught him not to be afraid to live.

"No!" Will cried out to the trees. "Come back! It's not safe!"

But in the trees there were boys laughing and playing, unafraid and with no sense of danger. Dark hair flew as the boys climbed higher, pushing and wrestling in the weak, thin upper branches of the forest. Lightning bleached their hair. Wind and electricity gave them wings.

"Will! Get him back!" his wife screamed.

"He's a good boy, he's a wild boy, he's a beautiful boy!" Will shouted above the wind.

The climbing tree rose up and did a sommersault, the kind Will had always been afraid of doing. The forest floated up out of its roots and shouted. And all the boys in the trees laughed so hard they cried, in love with themselves and in love with each other.

And Will's beautiful son was gone, climbing so high, climbing to where Will had always been afraid to go.

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