

blubbering and sucking suds off the swept floor, and Morris, only a boy, had felt as if he then knew what it meant to be ruined. He turned to Gabe and wiped away a tear, cursing the forces of the universe. He rolled down the window and stuck out his head. "Move it, you silicone bastards! My son and I have business to take care of!" He revved the Prius's pathetic engine and vowed to continue onward toward Bel Air.

From J Journal, Vol. 9, No. 2,
Fall 2016.

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The Corrective

I don't want to tell this kind of story. Consider it if you will, in pleasure or in anger, a necessary corrective, that may itself be corrected and improved upon many times over.

No question the tree loved the boy. Really it should have read every self-help book, at least a magazine article or two, whatever it could get its hands on, and then maybe checked with an expert on boys, or a specialist on trees and boys. It should have known that these savage little beasts take blindly all their lives, leave trees nothing but dumb stumps in their wake. It didn't of course. Know this. Or believe it in its heart of hearts. That's trees for you, I guess.

To the fine ends of its roots, which reach miles deep, anchoring a tree in addition to extracting water and vital nutrients, it wanted this boy to shimmy up its trunk. Leap from branch to branch. Peer from its highest cluster of leaves—ripe red apple in hand—across the whole neighborhood and beyond. The tree wanted to give the world to the boy. And like a mother or professional athlete or Mafioso, it was willing to make the necessary personal sacrifices. Why again?

Today's squirrels aren't that friendly? Birds, always squabbling, pecking, make lousy companions? A boy in thought sometimes looks lonesome enough to understand a tree?

For his part, the boy wanted just to kick the tree. He was young. Four, let's say five. There was this hardy towering brown monument to nature off the drive, rising from a circle of dirt to the sun, so unlike any toy in the house. And the boy thought *Kick*. Shaped his tender mouth to say the word (the K booting the remaining letters forward in a violent breath) and next he was at the tree with the toe of his shoe. It became sport after that. Like whacking the piñata on his birthday. Looking up at the tree, thinking of swinging the bat, sweets raining down, the boy would close his eyes and giggle and kick to the excited

cries of happy children.

The tree was okay with this. It understood. A relationship takes time, work. Emotionally, physically, maybe this boy was underdeveloped. It took what pleasure it could. What foot strength! it said. Stamina! It told the boy there wasn't a child in town—anywhere for that matter—so single-minded and dedicated as he. At the same time, the tree tried to gently steer him toward more mutually enjoyable games. It dropped vines to climb like rope. Shook loose a shower of green leaves for dancing in. Even startled roosting cardinals and jays. Such flutterings of color might fascinate the boy, no? Encourage birdwatching perhaps from the tree's own limbs. But the kid was a kicker.

And then he went away.

The nails for the two-by-four ladder smarted. But the boy's father had the right idea. And the tire swing (though it tugged and burned) was on the money. Watching the boy twist and glide higher, higher, the look of joy and terror on his downy face, well, this thrilled the tree. Its very sap leapt with his arcing flight; it felt itself nearly come off the ground. Then the father went off. The boy tired of swinging. Often he sat just hunched there, staring down, too bored for such a handsome long boy of, what, nine, ten? sneakers dragging furrows in the dust.

Listen.

Uh-huh, said the boy flatly.

There's a lot of fun to be had up here. Scrambling, clambering, so on. Stuff that's also they say good—essential—for a kid's coordination, balance, agility. I know games. Tons. Ancient ones for boys and trees.

Mm-hmm.

Have I got a view! You ever see where the railroad tracks meet the horizon?

Not really.

Let me lay it out for you. Up here you are king. Your every wish my command. That's not lip service.

Are those apples?

Well, yeah. I've got bushels of them. Hungry?

I guess so.

The boy's eyes got big.

The tree placed a heavy golden apple in his hand.

All at once it scooped the boy up, raised him higher than its highest perch.

He drew a sharp breath.

There was his school rooftop and playground, Blackberries Produce, Mr. Romey's pond and farm, the movie house and diner and new mall, then ribbons of road narrowing off in every direction, a puff of white train smoke drifting over the far blue hills.

After that the boy got up to speed.

The yard echoed with shouts and taunting. Apples flew like snowballs. He and his new friends overrunning the tree with horseplay. Cracking off branches they whittled to sabers for dueling each other to imaginary deaths. (Using these to skewer countless bugs, not to mention, once, a gluey-eyed thrush hatchling.) One day an older boy, whose father was a jobless finish carpenter, unrolled a blueprint for a fort. The floor plan included beanbag chairs and a fireplace. With glinting saws and axes they flung themselves at the tree like a crew of junior lumberjacks. Gone was quite a bit of its crown. They gave it a regular backwoods lobotomy, truth be told. But what a clubhouse! Curtains, wall-to-wall carpet, a trapdoor and dumbwaiter. A grimacing Jolly Roger wagged by wind above.

But all the boys did, it seemed, was look at magazines filled with pink reclining women and smoke cigarettes. Or take turns with the boy's spyglass: watching his older sister shower and towel off.

Then the toughest boy (his father was a semi-retired pipelayer) popped through the hatch with a bottle of rum. This, he said, uncorking, will make us curse like sailors then fall wrestling to the bed. They got dizzy. Stumbled about laughing. Threw up. The littlest boy plunged from the tree. Broke a wrist, his collarbone, both ankles. Word reached home fast. Their hastily concocted story, bad fish for lunch, didn't wash. The boy's father tore the clubhouse down that night.

One kid said the tree sucked anyways.

One knew a guy with a moped.

One kid moved to Florida with his mom and new step-dad.

Another called the boy gay. Or probably gay.

McSween—the boy's best friend, even the tree had thought so—said he could see the boy's sister naked anytime, plus kiss her with tongue for a dollar in the shed behind shop class. Just ask around. And the boys never came to play again.

Green green! sweet brilliant green!

Now, the tree felt, was the perfect moment to rekindle their relationship. Those rude boys were bad eggs, anyone could see. But who in the world doesn't crave friends? Wouldn't offer up something like the tree to win them? It was hardly a selfish act on the boy's part. Desperate, maybe. The boy had a weak character perhaps. But betrayal? This was certainly no kind of word to use in connection with the boy. No kind of word for an unconditional giver to even have in its vocabulary. At any rate, all was forgiven. Not that there was fault. Or blame.

I'm still here, said the tree, leaning in expectantly.

The boy looked up. Fall was ending. Already you could taste snow in the air. The tree, bare of leaves, its poor bark cankered, flaking, was a shocking black skeleton stitched against the cold sky. From a rucksack the boy withdrew the last of the whittled swords. He began to whip.

Can we talk a minute?

Whipping.

Let's say we put down the stick.

A milky pitch rose from the raw gashes.

The sword broke in half.

So—

But the boy had turned heel, was toying with a ball of string covered with pocket lint and whistling down toward the brambled creek.

You are a tree, he said over his shoulder. A tree. Tree.

But! said the tree stretching after him. Boy!

In its longing it had lifted a wedge of driveway, pulling one thick root free of the earth.

Teenagers.

Once, because he positively had to he claimed, the boy peed on the tree.

Sometimes he stopped to touch the old swing; or look for spots in the weedy dirt where he'd buried childhood keepsakes: a Spanish coin or plastic soldier, his mother's pearl earring, a peanut-butter cookie. But mostly he came to carve his initials next to those of the schoolgirls he hoped to kiss.

The tree had been in love before, hell. It certainly knew a thing or two about unrequited love. Maybe the boy wanted some advice? A few pointers? Women love presents. To say nothing of men who know how to cook. They could, the tree suggested, make an apple pie together. Or can a batch of fresh applesauce. It had a pretty good family recipe for both. The boy and his girl could spread a blanket at its base. They could all picnic together.

Always apples with you, said the boy. Women like guys with money. Does that grow on trees?

But daybreak next day, the boy leaned a ladder to the tree.

Maybe I will pick those apples, he said.

Inside, the tree pirouetted. For real?

Sure.

Tender new twigs sprouted on the spot, their tight green buds unfurling. For the first time in years the tree straightened up. It felt it stood ten feet taller.

And saw off your branches.

Branches?

Then skin you of bark.

My bark—

What's with the third degree?

No no. I'll happily give my branches for, you know, to help build your house. My bark for a kayak or decorative baskets or medicinal purposes or whatnot. It's just—

Kidding, said the boy, fiendish smile full of joy. Of wicked innocence. The tree remembered the boy before he could walk or

talk. His mother rolling him past in a jouncing big stroller. His sweet bonneted head. His round-eyed gooing and gagagaing. There was the same spark and gleam in his eyes.

Well? he said. Let's get cracking.

The tree swung a branch across its waist. Bowed with the graceful deference of a loyal subject. Then wildly shook itself, firing apples to the ground. The boy, sliding and diving, caught one after another in his old baseball mitt. Out! cried the tree. You're out!

He's out! repeated the boy, filling half a dozen buckets then fetching a wheelbarrow.

Off came his shirt and up the ladder he slipped, nimble as a thief, plucking every apple in reach, before finally lying back on the tree's bough. He lit a smoke. Wiped the glaze of sweat from his brow and taut chest. Not bad, eh?

I never knew I had so much fruit.

They're perfect, said the boy.

I wish we could stay like this forever, the tree said.

He was snoring.

When the tree woke from what it thought were its own zippery snores, the boy was gunning a dented primer-blue Camaro up the drive.

Out jumped Vickey Abel, a girl everyone knew had slept her way through half the high school football, basketball, track and chess teams. (Varsity and junior varsity.) She shook a spray can. Put a glistening fat black arrow-pierced heart on the tree.

Nice wheels, huh Wood?

Engine's burning oil, maybe. You check the frame rails for rust?

Cosmetics. Vickey, Wood. Wood, this is Vickey.

Hey, Wood, said Vickey, finishing up their initials.

Ms. Abel.

She's a hell of a chess player, Wood.

What happened to our apples?

I sold them to the vinegar works.

Before the tree could open its mouth, the boy spun off. The icy

ends of Vickey's frost-blond hair lifting with velocity.

The tree could still hear fishtailing tires squeal from blocks away.

That ought've been it. How much can one tree take? That is, how much can it give? And by this I do mean: What precisely did this tree hope to gain by so much over-giving? It's the rare bird indeed who yields relentlessly, unremittingly, without demanding *something* in return. Even Christians for instance, for their generosity, expect little short of everlasting life. Maybe the sport of boxing alone is an example of pure charity. Most fighters I think would agree that it's far more important, and pleasurable, to give better than you get, unless of course you're looking to rope-a-dope, as Muhammed Ali did George Foreman in Zaire in '74. By the fourth round that mountain of a man was a punch-empty stumblebum; by the end of the eighth, facedown on the canvas counting sheep. At any rate, I'm not sure our tree would follow this line of questioning. God help it, it had a heart the size of Sherwood Forest. That was its strength, its skillset in the parlance of our time. While the boy, well. I said from the start this is not my kind of story. What to do but speed things to an end.

Naturally the boy took the tree's branches. His hair was long and his heart heavy and he needed to go to Europe, to find himself. He was home from college. Had in fact dropped out of, or was thrown out of, several colleges. Ever been to Paris? he'd asked the tree. No. But it thought it had family there. Read any Hemingway? The tree didn't have eyes, really. Well the boy told the tree he was getting out, he didn't care what anybody thought. Had he saved much? Was the tree kidding, the video store barely paid minimum wage. He couldn't even afford these Gauloises. He tapped another from the pack. The Camaro? What? Checked the bluebook value recently? Earth to Wood, he'd totaled that car like years ago.

Limb after limb dropped to the ground.

The tree barely had to help. And when it tried it realized there was nothing to help with. It kept reaching to lend a hand but, well. The boy

sure knew how to work a chainsaw. What was consoling, not that the tree needed consolation, was the thought of the development.

East of the other treetops, the boy's now-rundown school and playground, Romey's pond and farm, the new multiplex cinema, newer mall, and brand new strip mall, was a clear-cut expanse of land, a kind of open grave rumbling with orange backhoes and bulldozers. The tree was almost certain the lot was zoned for luxury condos. Construction would begin any day. What site foreman wouldn't want to cut costs on framing timber? Not to mention fresh bark for landscape mulching and garden design. The boy would be touring on one hell of a shoestring budget—pronto! And when he returns he buys one of the units and lives forever within the tree's own wood.

The boy hit the kill switch. There! he said lifting his protective face shield.

It was dusk. The setting sun a molten line across the horizon. Fireflies had just begun to wink in the fading lavender air. At its feet, nothing but a brown-green heap of everything it had once been.

And how, said the tree, a little hangdog but holding a forced smile. It had hardly noticed, so busy it was thinking of the boy learning to appreciate cheeses and how to ski, but this *was* upsetting. Yet again the boy was leaving.

You could help loading the truck?

The tree sat shrugging ineffectually.

Right, the boy said.

I'm going to miss hugging myself.

Hey I'll be back. Older and wiser. Cultured. I won't take you for granted then.

Sell high.

Will do.

Visit Jim Morrison's grave!

You bet.

Don't forget to ask after house prices.

The boy headed in the opposite direction of course, some two towns over where he sold everything to a fledging toothpick factory.

Nevertheless when he returned after years abroad, the tree was beside itself. Several families had lived in the boy's house since, but none had had very friendly children. Now the boy had a face full of whorled brassy beard, which he kneaded and stroked as he talked about felling the tree to build a solar-powered cabin on a sustainable organic farm in an intentional community. He'd found the perfect piece of unincorporated land out west, apparently. The tree was confused. Wasn't this the state of Illinois? But why spoil a reunion with bickery grievances new or old. Like, Ten years and not so much as a postcard? And, I saw you haul my branches to the toothpick factory. It could still be of use to the boy. Now his family, too.

Hey I almost forgot, said the boy. My wife and kid. They don't speak much English.

Hallo, said the boy's wife, stepping forward.

Hallo, said the boy's small daughter.

Come! Gather round the ole maypole here the tree said. It always wanted to learn a foreign tongue. Perhaps they could sit and have a brief lesson? Or maybe the boy would quick fashion a chunk of it into a sturdy bench for everyone? He was that handy. Who knows? they might share a couple beers, eat some sausages. While the night away in song—

They were in a hurry the boy said. Only popped by to show off the old stomping grounds. They'd catch up soon enough.

Lunch tomorrow? the tree suggested.

Bombensicher! said the boy, marshaling his family down the drive.

Auf Wiedersehen, said the boy's wife.

Auf Wiedersehen, said the girl.

Midlife crisis.

Divorce.

Midlife crisis.

Divorce.

Could not do it anymore, is what he's telling the tree: family, the steady office gigs he took to support his ever-growing broods, the mortgages, the monogamy, the monotony. He needed to find that

taillight-red sports car of his youth. He needed to sleep with an exotic dancer. Couldn't a yearly guy's weekend cure what ailed him the tree wondered. That's exactly what his wives said. Nope, he was in love with a waitress.

But the waitress left him for an exotic dancer and he spent unholy stretches of time in his pajama bottoms, watching TV from a pull-out couch in a studio apartment cramped with takeout containers in varying stages of greasy decay. Hence he stood: balding and paunchy, wild-eyed behind bifocals, ogling the tree as if it were an anodyne for chronic dissatisfaction.

What to say? I look pretty much like a gallows at this point.

Hmm.

Chop down my trunk if you think it'll do any good. Beyond that, my advice is be a good citizen. Keep current on your alimony. Watch your sons and daughters grow into men and women, that sort of thing. Stick with someone, somewhere.

Valuable feedback as usual, the boy said. I'll certainly give the subject serious consideration on my trip.

The last of the tree was cut. Its trunk hollowed and shaped into a canoe, he paddled off in search of the thing, or source of the thing, that had eluded him always.

Here I would like to report something cheerful. The boy didn't come back. Never, ever came back. (Lost at sea, hit by a bus, joined a traveling circus or doomsday cult.) There remained stump enough for the tree to regenerate, in time, entirely. Or that magically, mercifully it was turned into a bird or spirit. Loosed in the world as a herd of deer, as Chekhov might have it. I wonder then of its need to give. Was it the standing still that so troubled it? The stately yet sedentary, solitary existence all trees must endure? While around them creatures come and go. Grow and change. Leave. Was it the waiting? like a pet, or light on in a room, for someone, anyone to come in? Simply walk through the door and say Hello, hello? Oh I missed you!

But a stump it stayed.

And the boy, old, old, old, stooped in mustard-colored slacks or better a pair of dingy sweats, nimbus of white hair sprouting mostly from his ears, pattered up the drive with his wrinkled and scared-looking face. The stump nearly got excited but knew better. It said nothing, an act which felt almost like, for the first time ever, living for its own pleasure. Then it braced itself. Ready to be yanked from the ground like a common weed, the gaping hole in the earth proof of its last wound. How the boy would do it, why he would do it, who knew. You can't eat my roots, said the stump.

Eh? the boy said. Speak up!

My roots! You can't eat them.

Wouldn't want them if you offered.

Well I'm not. You can't sit on me either.

Who's to stop me? he spat and, crouching with a grunt, was turned into a tree the moment his butt hit the stump. Such transformations abound in our literature, to say nothing of the world over. Dante we know made suicides into trees—weeping willows, I think—who moaned from tiny bloody mouths when birds and other animals plucked off their twigs. They never harmed themselves again. The Hopi, Pottawatomie, Hotcagara, and Micmac all have similar tales of change, though in some cases their boy becomes a stone, because he craved immortality. Yesterday I read the story of the nymph Daphne who, begging her father, Peneus, to thwart the unwanted advances of the god Apollo, was turned into a laurel. First her limbs and bosom enclosed in tender bark, her hair becoming leaves, her arms branches, then her feet stuck fast to the ground, as roots.

So it was for our boy. Whose true wants, true desires, we still know not a thing about.

Now let's begin again from the start:

Once there was a tree. Slumbering for centuries perhaps, years and decades certainly, it woke groggy and confused. At its base stood a little boy, looking up.

Mr. Tree? tapping a node on the tree's trunk. Excuse me, Mr. Tree.

Me?

This boy had soft brown eyes and a round head of fine shining hair and a thick bullfrog poking from his overalls bib, its ivory-white throat swollen the size of a jawbreaker. It peeped. The tree bowed for a closer look.

Want to play?

Alexis Ivy

How I Flirt with One-Eyed Joey at the Homeless Shelter

I want to know his eye, how it got to be that way— torn blind like that. Why does it take so long for his left lid to wake, crusted shut each morning, his caged eye. When he asks for socks I ask him, *pattered or unpattered*—because he's interesting. Warm, he says, *and a cap for my bald head*. His court date is tomorrow and so I bring him a razor from the razor bin—*Thanks, I'm all set*, he says, *I'm not shaving my beard off*. He won't let me find him a face saving button-down shirt in the pile of donated clothes. Tells me, *But you see with the two nicest eyes I've ever seen*.