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Tree House

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The Tree House

This land was familiar, the long rolling hills quilted in green. The trees were full and close together. And in the thick August air they did not move, even with the rush of this east bound bus, noisy and gray on a winding road. The valleys were deep and blanketed with long, cool shade. They were places of shelter, places to hide. I watched through the tinted windows and let the heavy book lay on my lap.

The night before, the bus had blazed through Kansas grasslands that gently waved, reflecting the moon on its velvet surface. And though I'd never been to sea, it seemed to remind me of being lost in the middle of dark waters, not knowing exactly where the earth stopped and the sky began. I was moving farther and farther from the mountains. Sometimes I sensed the drop in elevation, a slow decline with every mile. I breathed deeper, talked slower. I felt my accent returning with each stop the bus made. I'd ask for a Coca-Cola instead of pop, cheese grits instead of western omletes. But as the bus rolled into Tennessee, it was the trees I noticed most. They were so different from the harsh northwestern vegetation that grew separate and strong, crudely twisted by the winter wind and heavy snowfall. I had forgotten how trees touched one another, hiding the earth's surface, softening the hills.

My parents had lived here since I was a child, and I knew they would never leave. "Jobs are scarce," my mom had written. "Your father's not having much luck. We might have to sell the house and move to an apartment in the valley."

"The valley is a beautiful place," I told my father on the phone. "Change isn't always a bad thing."

"You're only a teenager. You don't understand what losing this home would mean to your mother," my father told me.

And it *had* been a year since I had felt that unhappiness which the lack of money brought down upon my family. In the wide land out west, I could forget, but on this bus I remembered it all—the fights, tears, uncertain silences, frustration. It would only be a few days though, just enough time to get things together before school started up again.

In the living room they argued about insurance as I showed them my pictures from the summer. My articulate father spoke loudly as if his point were valid. My mother's voice was almost a whisper, a technique she used on her first-graders to quiet them down. The pictures lay on the thick twine of an old wicker trunk my parents used as a coffee table. I snapped one on top of the other, giving names to the unfamiliar people and landscapes, looking up occasionally to check my parents' reactions. I had maps and a written log to explain them all, but leaning back against the couch, I seemed to have nothing to say. They passed the pictures back and forth to each other and sometimes ask what they were looking at. We were rushing because Dad's football game was coming on soon, and dinner still wasn't started.

The next morning I woke at noon to work on my financial aid application for a study-abroad program. The papers and forms were spread across the bare

shining surface of my old desk. I sat down and leaned back in the chair, noticing the painted flowers that were still preserved under the stain-proof finish. I remembered how silly I thought those flowers were when I got the desk for my eleventh birthday. I never said anything though. I didn't want my parents to think they had wasted their money, and I tried to use it, too, instead of piling junk on it all the time. But it was up against a large window, and I rarely felt that I got anything done there. The view was all green, up in the pine needles and maple leaves. Mom had called my room the tree-house when I was young, and to me it became that, a place separate and hidden. As I grew older, I would stare through the window's warped glass that blended the shapes and colors of the waving trees. I would listen to music so loud that it drowned out every thought, and I would twirl around in the old swivel chair, trying to keep my eyes on the outside that twinkled and danced to the melody.

I looked down at my application, picked up my pen and chewed the cap. **State your academic, career, and personal goals and how your experience abroad will help you achieve these.** I twisted the pen in my mouth, clicking the plastic against my teeth. I grabbed a sheet and wrote "make money" on one side and "overcome materialism" on the other. Then I paused. I could hear the cats scurrying on the roof. It was their place to hang out, not inside the house but safe, on their turf. It bothered my mother, though, the way they'd sit like gargoyles in the gutters and peer down at us when we would come or go. They would crawl along my parents' bedroom window sill and let out long, horrifying cat cries that made us all feel a little guilty for never touching them except for tapping at their noses through the screen. No one in our family really considered the cats their's, but my father fed them and built a warm place for them to sleep on the upstairs porch.

It seemed strange to me the way my parents kept them penned up, but there were other things around the house that I was noticing as if I were seeing these things for the first time. The paintings of old churches barely visible through the mist, the furniture with its seams tearing and color fading, the mildewed walls of the pantry, the loud hum of the dryer bought twenty years ago. Even my parents revealed things about themselves-the way my father let his artichoke plants grow brown by the kitchen sink, the way my mother wore layers and layers of mismatched clothes even in the summer heat.

My mother asked if she could go shopping with me. There were only a few things I needed, but I agreed, seeing as how I was leaving so soon after I arrived. I drove slower than usual. I hated the occasional gasps mom would make at the roll-stops and the tires' squeels. I was wearing dad's cut-offs, and my thighs stuck to the seat. Mom had on pants that fit awkwardly at the top; I noticed they were an old pair I had left at home. She was telling me about the changes around town, pointing out what had been torn down or built up within the year, and I glanced over at her as she talked, marking the changes in her appearance. Her hair was darkening, the highlights almost completely grown out, and she was always wearing her glasses now. The skin on her neck was looser and soft looking, setting her chin apart like a little purse that disappeared when she smiled. I could picture her old, where the wrinkles

would fall along her face. It seemed strange that I would one day look at her aged and know how that face had changed. She always had looked young for her age, but at 45, there was a tiredness about her.

We stopped at a red light, and I tried to straighten my hair knotted from the wind in the rear-view mirror. Looking at my reflection, I remembered how on the bus ride home I had stared at myself in the window for hours, noticing the lines around my mouth, just two when I smiled which probably had been there all of my life. But with the reading light shining down like a spot light, the lines looked deeper and darker. I looked ghoulish, like a different person, but it gave me pleasure to be different. My stomach would tighten at the eeriness of each slow expression I formed. Even my smile was deranged; I liked that best.

The light turned green. We waited for a while before we could start moving, traffic was getting heavier.

"Do you remember this song?" she asked, referring to the music barely audible from the car speakers.

"Sure, Rockin' Robin. I've got the 45, remember," I said, turning it up slightly. I wondered if she was thinking about all the times she tried to teach me the bop to this song. The TV would be turned down, the wicker trunk pushed up against the couch, and we'd pull each other around the open space. We'd laugh and laugh because I never really learned the steps. I would just mock her composure, swinging and twisting to the whistling in the song.

In the stores, she walked behind me through the aisles with her hands in her pockets. Sometimes she would ask what it was that I needed and then try to help me find it. Other times she just talked about work, the kids in her class and the problems she was having. Walking out of a store, she would apologize for not being able to buy the thing for me. But I told her to forget it, that I was used to being on my own now.

"You've been on your own for a long time," she said. "I can't remember the last time we went shopping together."

"What about Christmas?" I said.

"That's different," she said, and I remembered last Christmas. Their credit cards were taken and destroyed at one of the stores, and there were presents that had to be unwrapped and returned.

In the food court of the mall, we ate fast food and listened to the crowds of people and the rain echoing on the sky-lights overhead.

"So how are things going?" I asked.

"There are ups and downs."

"How are things with you and Dad?"

"OK"

"I mean...are you happy?"

She paused, putting her french fry down, and said, "Well, no. But that's because of things that are going on now. If you're asking if I'm happy with your father, well you can't separate the two. When you have to sell your house and give away your cats and you've lost all your credit...these things don't make you happy, when you're together or alone." She was looking at her cup,

stirring the ice with a straw and touching her fingers to the drops of water collecting on the outside of the glass.

"Did you think it would ever be like this? I mean when you were my age and just dating Dad, did you think things could get this way?"

"Before we were married, I told your aunt Alice that your father and I would have one problem and that was money. But all this seems to just be bad luck on your father's side. He's a smart man, you know that. He just hasn't had any luck with jobs. And now we're almost fifty. People start planning to retire at this age, and your father doesn't have any retirement plan, and what I'll have won't be enough to live on."

I wanted her to look at me when she spoke, include me in the future that she stirred around in the bottom of that glass. I wanted her to tell me something more, use another word besides "luck" to describe what was happening to them. I wanted to know what was really going on, what I could do to help.

She stood up and walked over to the trash can to dump what was left of her food, and I joined her silently. We went on to a few clothing stores, and she would hold my purse while I was in the dressing room. She would hold the clothes that I was uncertain about and follow me back and forth to the mirrors.

"Have you decided where you might study abroad?" she asked. I was modeling a large sweater. "Because if you're going to Kenya, you won't be needing that."

"True," I murmured at my reflection.

"But if you end up going to France, you'll need it. Your father said that when he was stationed there, he wore that big down coat of his all the time."

"I think I'll be going to Kenya. Too many people I know are doing French programs," I said and walked back into the dressing room.

The roads were steaming from the afternoon shower. I put my window down and listened to the rushing of water against tires as cars passed. I rested my elbow on the door, letting the drops of water blow from the side of the car to my goose-pimpled arms. The changes around town that Mom had pointed out seemed minor. The parking lot pavement was a little darker and smoother, the gas station signs a new green color. But each place was generally the same. That's how the town wanted it. Many of my older friends were coming back after college and buying houses in the very neighborhoods in which they grew up. People were recycled here just like the roads and signs. They would say, "Tradition holds this town together." And I would argue that we should open our minds, try new things, learn what we couldn't at home.

It was beginning to shower again. I rolled up the window, turned on the lights and windshield wipers. The rain pelted harder on the car echoing loudly inside as I slowed with the traffic.

"Do you ever want to get out of this town?" I asked. We had been quiet for sometime, lost in our own thoughts."

"I like it here—both your father and I do." She was looking out her side of the car, following with her eyes each building we passed. The window was

fogging and she wiped away the mist with her hand, just blurring the view between the streaks of water.

"It's just sometimes...sometimes I see how my life is just like my mother's. She never got to go anywhere, never got to travel. She lived in the same house almost her whole life and never got a chance to decorate it until she had the insurance money after Daddy died. I've never been able to decorate a house, and it makes me so mad to see your father finally working on the place just so we can sell it. And I never got to travel."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wondered if she had seen herself as a follower, one who easily fits into the molds placed before her. It seemed there was such little control over our lives. I realized that she had spent all her energy for the sake of others, never herself, and I wondered if she had chosen this life or if it just happened to us as we found our place—our spouse, our town, our home.

When we got home, I went upstairs and lay down. It was getting dark outside, and I could see in the window's reflection that over my head were all the things I'd hung on the wall during high school. I had forgotten about the giant collage of photographs, tickets to dances, dried flowers and strings of beer tabs. The warped glass in the window made these things melt together like the leaves and pine needles in the afternoon. On my desk lay the application untouched since the beginning of the day. I looked at the clock; it was only 8:20, but I was tired. I reached over to my grandmother's old lamp and turned off the light. Lying on my back, arms crossed behind my head, I looked across the room to the window again. The panes of glass glowed with the night's light. The trees looked different, just silhouettes moving slowly with the evening breeze, and there was still that twinkle from the rippled glass so that the trees would lose their shape, the branches splitting and blending into one another.

I heard the wooden boards of the stairs creak and the quiet brushing of socks on the carpet. There was a gentle knock on my door that bushed it slightly ajar.

"I'm awake," I said as I leaned to turn on the lamp. Mom was standing in the doorway with a children's book in her arms.

"Why are you going to bed so early?" she asked. "I'm not really. Did you come up to read me a bedtime story?" I smiled. She sat down on the side of the bed, and I did feel like a child. I pulled the covers tight against my chest.

"I wanted to show you a folktale that I read to my class the other day," she said as she flipped through the book, running her hand down the long, smooth pages. "You must see the picture first." She opened the book wide and held it up between us. The illustration was of a little gray mouse sitting on a cliff and looking out at the sun setting on the ocean's horizon. The sky was colored with bright oranges and yellows, with the purple night coming in from the corners of the page. She brought the book back to her arms and began reading.

The story was about a mouse who longed to see the ocean, but lived very far away. His parents told him of the danger of the voyage in hope that he would choose to stay, but the mouse was determined. He traveled alone and was chased and hunted by hawks and snakes and other beasts that the mouse

had never seen before. Tired and wounded, he completed his journey and looked out over the immensity of the ocean, all ablaze with the sun's colors. It had been worth the entire struggle, yet the little mouse wished his parents could be there, too, to share his happiness.

She squeezed the side of my arm and stood up, nodding her head as I reminded her of the details of my next day. I told her I needed the car to visit friends. She reminded me of an appointment I had with the dentist, then she turned off the light and closed the door tight behind her just as I had always requested of her when I was in highschool. I lay awake still after she left and thought about the day and the application I had forgotten. The shadows of the twisted branches spread wide along the ceiling, and it again felt as if I were in the tree house, wrapped in the soft pine needles that sparkled through the glass. It was warm and quiet in the room, and I felt as if I could sleep forever. But I reached to turn on the lamp and left the bed, walking to the desk to finish what I had already begun.

-Katy Rudder '93