

The Climbing Tree
For Mary Glen Joy

Tree leaves sway in the wind as a sunray filters in through the green canopy. They waltz to the musical lilt of children's laughter as a young boy and girl, about two, happily chase each other around the base of a large oak tree. As both disappear around the back of the tree, a rift in time shakes the leaves and molds the trunk as it grows older, and with it, the boy and girl emerge from the other side clearly influenced by the hands of time. Now around elementary age, with newfound knowledge and wisdom of the world, the boy uses his acquired height and lengthy limbs to scramble up the tree away from the reach of the girl's outstretched hand. The girl attempts to follow him but can't. The boy sticks his tongue out at the girl, and she angrily stomps away and sits down at the base of the tree, a nod to the slight immature defiance still lingering from her inner child. She unleashed her rage on the grass, plucking and pulling as if she could remove the boy's advantage of long arms and legs just as she had severed the long blades of grass from their hold in the soil. Jolted out of her fantasy, the girl begins to realize the sensation of incessant tapping on her shoulder. She turned her head, and there were those hated long fingers, connected to their wretched long arm, attached to...the boy's not-so-wretched face, she supposed. Leaning over her like this, his hair fell over his eyes, and he was smiling like he was trying to stifle his laughter. Unfortunately for her defiance, she couldn't help but smile back and take his hand. Carefully, those long arms became her ally as they lifted her up into the first branch of the tree. The girl scanned her surroundings: a large field (a battlefield that perhaps boasted the world's greatest heroes fighting for a courageous cause). This shining waterfall sprayed against the sky, spreading rainbow colors across the grass. Her eyes swept around and landed on the boy, smiling triumphantly up at her. A gleam catches in her eye, and she begins to steadily climb the higher limbs of the tree, its trunk her anchor, and its leaves wrapping her in a

protective hold. She knew she would not fall. The boy was less convinced of the tree's kind nature, and he called up fearfully, but the girl did not turn back. Taken by the defiant nature that mirrored the girl's, he recognized the challenge, the competition, and hurriedly sped up the branches. A girl couldn't usurp his outstanding achievement, after all. But as he made his way up the long trunk, he realized the girl wasn't interested in usurpation or gloating. In fact, the girl was nowhere to be found. Instead, the boy saw that as he climbed higher, the breeze grew more robust, and he could've sworn that he faintly heard a seagull's cry. A boastful flag sprouted from the tippy top of the tree trunk, with a skull emblem rippling among the fabric. With a mighty ARGG, the girl swung around from behind the tree trunk/ship mast illusion, fully decked out in pirate's garb, complete with an eye patch and hook hand. And so it was. Time's hands slowed for a moment, and the boy and girl bent life to their will. Some days, the girl was a princess in need of being saved by a dashing prince. Other times, they journeyed to the jungle, and their tree became a thick canopy of hanging vines and exotic flowers. Among the branches of the climbing tree, the world was theirs to mold and shape, and it shielded them as they grew with time.

Older now, as preteens, the tree no longer morphed into ships or jungles, but it still remained their escape. They enjoyed new freedoms, no longer confined to the sun's schedule, and their newfound favorite time within the haven of the limbs was under the light of the moon. Dimly lit, the boy would share ghost stories with twists, turns, and endings that jolted the girl with such fright that she felt she would almost topple right off the branch she sat on. But as it was as children, she knew she would not fall. However, it was no longer only the leaves she could count on; she found that every time she jerked back, those long limbs (that had gotten significantly more muscular, not that she was looking...) were there, strong hands gently gripping her shoulders to anchor her to him. He holds her as they laugh together, sharing more

stories and secrets. Things they would only dare to tell each other. The tree leaves fall in the winter and reemerge in the spring, and the boy and girl hold hands with time, using their shared stories and experiences to grow up together. They do most of their growing within the safety of the tree; one time, the girl was rambling on about some girl in her class who seemed to think she was better than everyone else. She leaned down to look at the boy on the branch below her, who had gone silent. She was met with the goofiest grin, a simple "you're cute when you're mad," and whipped cream to the nose. She playfully frowned and feigned anger at this "insult," but her stubbornness couldn't laugh when that smile was so convincing. And as it usually went, the two burst out in laughter. Many of their days ended on their special branch. One that was just high enough to have the perfect view of the horizon but still close enough to the base of the trunk that it was sturdy and hadn't yet transitioned into the thin decorative branches of the upper regions of the tree. Together, they would sit and enjoy each other's company as the sun dipped below the earth, splashing pinks, and purples, and oranges across the blushing sky. Sometimes, the boy would face the girl and study how she admired the earth. Occasionally, she would glance in his direction and then quickly look away, her face slowly mirroring the color of the painted sky.

Time continues to pull them along, and they are introduced to new challenges of high school, the stressors of schools, and testing. The girl had always had more of an affinity for those sorts of things than the boy. Now, their time in the tree was mostly spent with her attempting to explain concepts or problems to the boy and him trying to get her to stop focusing on school and... well, focus more on him. Still, he would never say that out loud. And even though their backpacks and notebooks followed them up into the branches, the boy and girl still felt like it was their special place away from all the annoyances of life. The girl knew those girls in her class with perfect faces and cute laughs would never risk their new mani-pedis on the rough

branches of the tree. They could hold their noses high above her at school all day, but she knew heights taller than any nose sitting atop her tree, sitting with her boy. And as grating as it was hearing his teachers lecture him all day, suddenly, when the girl talked about math problems and English, it was like a beautiful song he could listen to all day. But even if the tree could save them from the plagues of evil teachers and mean girls, it had no power over diseases that grow within. The minute she got back from the hospital, she raced to the tree despite her mother's tear-stained face telling her she needed to rest. Sitting atop their branch, their special branch, was the boy waiting with concern. He knew she had left in the middle of the day unexpectedly, but not much more than that. Breathlessly, she sat beside him and cried on his shoulder, and he held her. The sun set as she told him the news, and he felt the pinks, and purples, and oranges burning in his eyes as they reflected on the water pouring out of them. He couldn't help but think about their last sunset together.

A hand gingerly places a photo at the base of the tree. It pictures a girl and a boy laughing together; they sit on a branch that isn't too low but not too high and are shielded from the world around them. The boy sits on the grass, looking at the face that used to love the world so much, and a tear falls from his cheek. Dressed in his Sunday best, he sits on that same branch, and the sun dips below the earth, splashing muted pinks, and purples, and oranges onto the unforgiving sky.

A weathered photo is nailed to a wooden cross anchored into the soil at the tree's base. A brown flower sits at the base of the photo, and a calloused hand places a new, vibrant flower in its place. A smaller hand, untouched by the world, takes a tiny dandelion and place it next to the larger flower. The boy smiles at his daughter as he bounces her on his shoulders. The toddler smiles a toothless grin. The boy straightens and walks around the tree, newly decorated with a

lime green ribbon, calling towards his son to be careful. He knows he needn't worry; he can see the leaves swaying in the wind, wrapping his son in a protective hug. His daughter giggles at her older brother, and something catches her eye. She sees a girl in the rustles of the leaves, just like the one in the photo, sitting on a branch, smiling back at her. The little girl waves as her dad runs around the tree, trying to catch his son as he runs among the branches.