

## Cottonwood

It was bigger in those days, of course, with great copperhead leaves and knotty old-man roots that snaked and plunged, driving their noses into the earth to emerge again, in another place, like the tentacles of a kraken.

As with most boys of that age, climbing was a subconscious thing, a lingering Miocene urge. A wire fence tacked to the trunk provided a foothold into the tree's lower limbs, a siren's song I could not resist. After hauling myself over that great first limb, I scrambled upward, skipping from branch to branch—a pirate in ship's rigging—until the limbs grew too thin to support my weight. From that crow's nest, I surveyed the map laid out before me: a tidy neighborhood dotted by tidy houses, dead-ending at the untidy sprawl of my parents' farmhouse. In our back lot, a half-charted pasture slowly consumed the wreckage of a tumble-down barn. Several cars in various states of repair and disrepair cluttered the driveway. And below me, the dogs sprawled in the dirt languidly. On the other side of the fence, however, the neighbors' grass was meticulously watered and clipped, a smooth sea unbroken by such choppy detritus of dog holes and old toys and weedy outcroppings. But the true draw of the neighbors' lawn was an in-ground swimming pool—skimmed daily, used rarely—that sparkled under the summer sun.

From my crow's nest, I spied on the neighbors. Though my parents brought over cookies at Christmastime and invited them to walk in our back fields, I hardly knew the

girl and her father who lived there. The father I mostly only ever saw skimming the pool or mowing the lawn. Nearly every afternoon that summer he cranked up a shiny red mower and rode back and forth across the lawn for hours, staring into the distance, chewing on the tips of his salt-and-pepper mustache. Only after he had shaken out the clippings and pulled the mower into the shed would she appear, slinking out a slider on the back of the house to lounge in the fresh-sheared grass or slip into the pool. I wondered how that grass felt under her bare feet, so clean and soft and trim. Or how the cool water felt slipping over her skin. When she swam, her long blond hair streamed out behind her, swirling in her wake like golden phosphorescence.

That summer the heat was nearly intolerable. My parents denied me sanctuary in the air-conditioned kitchen, shunting me outside where the beating sun made it too hot to climb or play. My only relief was to lie in the shade of the cottonwood with Jake and pant. The tree soared overhead, an enormous green wave that never broke. As I stared up into its hypnotizing shivering, I imagined myself submerged, fallen from the rigging. The entire world grew muted, filtered through thick water. But chlorine burnt my nostrils and I coughed and surfaced. Across the fence, the neighbors' pool glittered like an oasis under the blazing sun.

The first time Jake tunneled into their yard, my mother sent me to fetch him. The neighbors had called and complained while we were eating lunch. I came around their yard from the front, like my mother had told me, and caught Jake rolling in the grass, tongue lolling from his mouth in a stupid grin. Leaving him to enjoy his roll for a moment, I wriggled my toes in the soft ground. Nearby, the pool sparkled. But the slider screeched open and the girl's father, all chest and churlish, yelled out, chiding me about

responsibility and respect and my family's lack of it with our filthy backyard and trespassing dogs. Grabbing Jake's collar, I slunk around the house and retreated into our yard and it was back to shade and panting and dirt for us. With longing looks at the pool, I filled in Jake's tunnel with rocks.

Days stretched out into doldrums. Afternoons were interminable, the shuddering stillness broken only by the crank of the mower engine, the drone of Japanese beetles, and the rare splash of the girl diving into the pool.

Several days after Jake's great escape, the slider opened and she sidled out. She lay in the sun for a half an hour, she brushed her hair with her fingers, she laughed at something on her phone. It wasn't until she had nearly reached the tree that I realized she was slowly, coincidentally, approaching the fence.

"My father says you shouldn't be allowed to have pets if you don't know how to take care of them," she said.

"Jake's a good dog." Hearing his name, he lifted his head from the dirt and panted at me.

"I wasn't talking about the dog." She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes.  
"My father says I shouldn't talk to you."

"Why are you then?"

"My father's not home."

I scratched Jake behind the ears, making his leg thump in the dirt.

"So are you coming or not?"

"Coming where?"

“Swimming.” Turning, she said over her shoulder, “Meet me back here in five minutes.”

It only took me three to change into my bathing suit, scoop up a towel, and yell to my mother that I’d be next door. But the girl wasn’t back yet when I returned to the fence. I pulled my toes through the dirt, drawing indiscriminate patterns, and wrung my towel. Jake watched me from the top of his eyes.

When she finally appeared again, she had changed into a white tank top, loose around the shoulders with deep cutouts, the kind my older sister used to wear to the beach. It hung to her naked thighs.

“Well, come on,” she said and catwalked towards the pool.

Where it was stapled to the trunk of the tree, the fence bent and sagged, permanently disfigured by the innumerable times I had climbed it. But now, instead of pulling myself up into the branches, I looped my leg back down the other side. The motion felt unfamiliar and awkward, though only for a moment. Then I was down and sprinting across the grass.

“Stop,” she commanded as I reached a scorching concrete patio surrounding the pool. I hopped from foot to foot as she slowly stripped off her top, daring my eyes to leave hers. But all I cared about were the beckoning waters behind her. “Do you like my bikini?” she asked. “It’s the first time I’ve worn it.”

I didn’t care about her stupid bikini. Chlorine filled my nostrils. My feet were burning.

“You’re being rude. I asked you something. Do you like my bikini?”

I begrudgingly studied her bikini. It was small, tied with strings around her neck and back, and off-white—the color only adults wore, the color they liked to paint their walls. A color much lighter than her skin. Her chest, I noticed, was already quite large.

“Yea, it’s a great bikini. Now can we go swimming?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“First you have to watch me dive. I’m the best diver in my class.”

She strutted to the diving board and scaled it. She bounced a few times and her already-quite-large chest bounced with her.

She leapt, twisted in the air, and entered the water.

Plopping myself at the end of a deck chair, I pulled my scorched feet under me and waited.

She surfaced and paddled to me, throwing an arm over the pool’s edge when she reached it. A lanky leg sprouted from the water and jettisoned her upwards. She stood before me, water dripping from her hair onto my thighs.

“So?”

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I didn’t swim that day. I watched her dive, the intoxicating smell of chlorine taunting me, until twilight fell and her father called her in and she sent me away.

The following day, Jake and I waited at the fence hoping she’d appear. When she did, it was to inform me of her latest mandate: “Today you can watch my underwater handstands.”

“What about your father?” He peered out at us from behind the slider.

“What about him?”

Leaping the fence, I trotted after her to the pool. Just like the day before, she dove and swam to the side where she had bidden me to wait. “Here,” she said, patting the side of the pool, “dip your feet in.” But seeing my feet, she frowned. “Wash them first. There’s a hose off the shed.”

I scrubbed the dirt off but before I had gone a dozen steps, cut grass had already gathered on my wet feet. I gazed from my feet to the pool, where several limbs pinwheeled through the water with a splash. Running back to the hose, I washed again before tiptoeing across the lawn. Even then clippings coated my toes, but I thrust them into the water before she could notice. Green slivers bobbed out around me incriminatingly. I splashed them away. The water licked at my calves and the heat of the day, of the summer, siphoned away through my feet.

“Now,” she said, brushing damp hair from her face, “watch this.”

At twilight, when her father called her in and she sent me away, I resolved that the next opportunity I had, I would jump in the pool, no matter what.

So the next day I waited in the cool of the tree until the slider squealed. With a quickness that was becoming habit, I was over the fence and halfway across the yard before I realized that she was leading me beyond the pool.

“Aren’t we going swimming?” I asked.

“Shut up.”

She wore the same white tank top and—I can’t say if I noticed it then or it is merely a suggestion of the memory of what was to happen—an azure bikini bottom, so it seemed as she walked that the sky and clouds had been inverted. She led me to the very

edge of the yard and pushed through a hedge of pines to a narrow alley hidden between the trees and the fence bordering the next yard. We sat on the pine-sticky ground and looked around. Though we could see her house and the pool through the branches, no one could see us.

“This would be a great place for a fort,” I said.

Reaching out, she plucked at the strings of my bathing suit.

“What are you doing?” I asked, brushing her hand away.

“Don’t act like you don’t know. Here.” She took my hand and placed it on her thigh, just where her white tank top ran out of hem. She held it there and I couldn’t pull it away. Her heartbeat pulsed in her thigh. She pulled my hand along her leg and at some point released it, though my hand kept sliding of its own accord over the soft hair, almost imperceptibly clear, and under the hem of her top. I didn’t know what I was doing, but what I was doing didn’t require knowing.

In as long as it took for a hand to tighten, my innocence flapped away, flushed out from behind the pines. I knew what I wanted. Not exactly, but I knew very clearly that it had to do with her, with suffocating myself in her, drowning in the scent of her hair, the warmth of her skin, the pressure of her body.

“You like it?” she asked.

“Yes.” Yes. “What do I do now?”

She had laid her hand on my leg and now she drew it away. Mine she pushed off her thigh.

I reached out again.

“Nothing.” Again she threw it off. “I didn’t like it much.”

But I did, I liked it, much. In a way that I couldn't describe, didn't know that I even realized at the time. Some urge took me, some primality. If I had conscious thought, it had abandoned me. Once more I tried to fit my hand over her thigh, fingertips brushing that fine fur. But she pushed me away and disappeared between the pine palisade.

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The next afternoon I didn't see her. I waited in the cool of the tree as her father trimmed the grass, staring at me like he meant to drive the mower through the fence and over me. When the mower turned, I stuck my tongue out at his back.

The following day I waited again and the day after that until I heard the buzz of the mower in my dreams. That week I learned many things: about biology, love, disillusionment. It was as though I had peeked behind the curtain and seen the chaos. The curtain of the spectacular. The curtain of the trees. The curtain of her shirt's hem. I did nothing that week but pine for a return to that neverland, that no man's land, between her yard and the next, and touch her skin.

Jake would get there before me. It was another smothering day and my mother and I had been out shopping. When we got home, I went directly to the fence to wait, but Jake wasn't in his normal spot below the tree. I didn't need to search for him in the bushes or the garden though; the pile of fresh dirt thrown up behind a new hole under the fence told me Jake wouldn't be in our yard at all.

Calling out for him, I heard a weak bark from the swimming pool. I leapt the fence and sprinted across the emerald grass, ignored the scorching concrete patio, and threw myself into the shallow end. Jake's eyes were wild as he paddled to me, his tongue lolling in the water. I swept him up in my arms.



“You’re ok, boy. You’re ok.”

But even as I carried him to the ladder, he kept swimming, his paws pumping furiously. His nails caught the flesh of my thigh and scraped down my chest. Blood bloomed in the water but I did not cry out, only pushed his rump as he scabbled up the ladder.

“Come on,” I said, pulling myself out after him, “we’ve got to get out of here before they see us.” He panted at me happily, gave a half-hearted shake, and lay down. “No, come on, get up.” I tugged at his collar and tried to scoop him up, but he was too heavy.

“What are you doing?” I hadn’t heard the slider, hadn’t seen her approach. I looked around but there was no place to hide, only sparkling water and emerald grass. I felt exposed, like a mouse in a fresh-cut field.

“Did I say you could go swimming without me?”

“No,” I said, trying to cover up the gashes in my leg. Red-tinged water dripped between my fingers and down my knee. My thigh had started to burn. “We didn’t mean to. Sorry.”

“You need to train your dog better.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“My father will have to clean the pool now. I won’t be able to swim for days.”

For a moment, I forgot about my bleeding leg. “What were you doing all this time? Why didn’t you help him?” Squatting down, I pulled hard on Jake’s collar and he wobbled to his feet. “Come on, boy,” I said, shooting her a sour look, “Let’s go.”

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The day after I didn't feel like waiting for her. Instead, I moped around the kitchen, lying under the table in the air conditioning and reading books—a luxury my mother didn't usually afford.

By the third day, however, my wounds must have been healing well because she booted me out of the kitchen and told me to go play outside. Even then I had no intention of returning to the tree until I saw her standing at the fence, toeing the pile of rocks I had used to fill Jake's second tunnel.

She wore cut-offs, red and fringy and very short, gold earrings, and a white blouse. Mulberry bruises, I remember now, ringed her arm and pinched her neck, though I didn't note them at the time, absorbed as I was in her the armholes of her blouse that hinted at a peach bra.

Something quickened in my chest.

“Do you want to go behind the trees?” I asked.

“No.”

The untrimmed fringe of her shorts scrambled her legs hairs, bending them in all the wrong directions. I wanted to reach out, rip the strands away, and smooth the hair.

“Do you want to go swimming?” I asked.

“No.”

“What do you want to do then?”

“I've never climbed a tree before.” She leaned against the fence. Her neckline dropped, exposing her bruise and her peach bra and the top of her chest. “Show me.”

I don't know what made me do it, if I had been thinking about it for days or if I hadn't thought about it at all. I found myself leaning forward, like I had seen a million others do, and reaching out for her lips.

She pulled away and I stumbled into the fence.

"What are you doing?" she snarled before her face opened in laughter. "Don't be stupid." Blood surged to my hands. "Now," she said, placing a foot in the fence, "if you're done playing games, show me."

The fence wobbled but held when she pulled herself up, grabbed the lowest branch, and hoisted herself into the tree.

With fingers still clumsy from embarrassment and anger, I followed.

"You've never climbed a tree before?"

"My father thinks they're dangerous."

"Your father thinks everything is dangerous."

"He's probably watching us now. I don't care. I hope he's watching." When I joined her on the fat lower limb, she placed a hand against my chest to check her balance, forcing me to sit to keep from falling. Still, the lick of her fingers sent shivers from the crown of my head down my spine and through my ankles, as if drawing all the hours of watching her and waiting for her out through my skin.

"You should sit," I said.

"I'm not a child."

My fingers clenched.

It started as a game, I swear. Just a stupid, jealous game. I only wanted to beat her at *something*.

“Fine then,” I said. “If you’re so good at climbing, why don’t we bet who can climb higher?”

“Fine.”

“It’s ok if you don’t want to, you’ve never climbed a tree before.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll still beat you. Go!”

I knew the tree. I knew its gnarled trunk, which branches were living and strong and which were rotten and weak. Which were within reach and which were not. But even all this knowledge did not stop me from looking up to see the red fringe of her shorts flash by my face as she climbed past me.

Faster I climbed and faster she climbed. We passed my crow’s nest and the branches grew thin and springy and unknown. The ground grew distant and inconsequential. A face appeared in the window at her house; so he was watching, after all.

“Slowpoke!” she shouted from several branches above.

I can still see her there laughing amidst the leaves, still hear the untamed joy of recklessness in her voice. On good days, I know I told her to stop. That she was climbing too high. That she had already won the stupid game and she should come back down.

Those are the good days.

“Only cowards stop,” she said.

I heard it. The crunch of a branch tearing. Her foot jerked downward. She might have held on even then, but the broken spar sliced into her thigh and she twisted out and away from the tree’s trunk.

First one the branch in one of her hand’s snapped and then the other.

She screamed. A girl's scream: young and scared.

Thin branches whipped at her arms and face before springing supply back into place. Others broke and fell with her.

I saw her face as she fell past where I clung to the tree; it was twisted with confusion and betrayal. Not as though she didn't understand what was happening, but as though she didn't understand why.

The screaming stopped when she crashed into the thick limbs below. Her body gave one final glorious twist and she hit the ground.

Jake got to her first. Licking her face and whining. Then her father, before I could even climb down from the tree. He burst out the slider like something eternal, something unstoppable, something more than human and less.

I don't know how he got over the fence. Maybe he simply crashed through it.

"Move," he said, aiming a white-socked foot at Jake's belly. Jake yipped, a high-pitched screech more terrible than hers ever was.

"Is she ok?" I asked, but her arms flopped limp as her father scooped her up and lifted her away. Her shirt slid down her abdomen and gathered up under her chest. The sun lit the near transparent hairs below her belly button. Blood dripped from her leg.

I went home.

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The next week was a whirlwind of questions and suits that pinched at my throat. Of course it's not your fault, they told me. Just a tragic accident. She was a jewel. What a shame.

I never lied when they asked me what happened. I didn't have to. Her father never even yelled at me. What were we other than two kids who didn't know any better? Yes, sometimes I ask myself: what were we?

When we left the service, my mother held my head to her chest. She cried until we got home. "Come inside," she said with a sniff, "we'll have some cookies." But I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want any cookies. I wandered across the yard to the tree and scratched at the dirt. My shoes were big and clunky and I soon gave it up. Only then did I notice a new hole under the fence.

All at once, the fence seemed enormous, taller than the tree and the tree taller than that again. I backed away and ran inside, burying my face in my mother's skirts.

"Jake got out again," I sobbed.

They fished his body out of the pool that night. Soon after, the girl's father covered it for good. Some years later he cut down the row of pines.

I married a fine woman; we have a child and I hope that she doesn't grow up too fast. Sometimes I bounce her on my knee and I see the thin, clear hair growing on her legs and I wish I had never become a father.

Those are the bad days.

Those are the days when I wonder how many tragedies are written off as accident because we are manipulative enough to hide our true nature. How much deceit passes as innocence?

Those are the days when I know that it should have been me at the bottom of that pool.