Sap

My whole life, I tried to keep off the ground. I know that sounds impossible—presumptuous, even, for a human. There are some creatures that really do live their whole lives up in the forest canopy, or that spend years in the air or on the water. Not so for people, especially not my family. But I have to say I did a pretty good job of staying aloft for quite a good portion of my life.

Everyone has expected me to die every day of my life since I was born. I always knew I'd survive childhood, but no one believed me. At first I was just too stubborn. Later, I knew I'd keep living because there were just too many trees to climb. That's what trees did for me. They gave me a place for myself off the ground—and out of it. Human or not. Until very recently, in fact. Just moments ago.

I blame the groundie. He's my least favorite sort of person, this particular groundie. The kind that isn't sure he's good at his job and so isn't. Who relies on rules to do a good job instead of confidence. I've always wished I could work by myself. If I could have been left alone, I would still be up there.

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I'm still thinking about climbing, though. While I still can. Thinking about the best trees to climb (because some are better than others), or at least my favorites. As a child, it was a tree of heaven, specifically the one in my back yard. I know that's a controversial statement for any arborist to make, but how was a child to know? It was an easy starter tree with its low branching trunk, and I was small and lithe and could get up them without breaking the slender branches.

It scared my parents, of course. They didn't even think I should ride a bike. They were under the impression I was fragile. I can't blame them entirely, considering the trouble

they'd received from me started *in utero*: infections, preeclampsia, all those sorts of things. And then when I was born they diagnosed me with cystic fibrosis. My parents and doctors told me, more times than I needed to hear, that I had a genetic mutation that made my tubes and organs produce a very thick sticky mucus instead of something that should have been watery. That mucus causes trouble, because it traps bacteria, especially in the lungs, and makes it hard to breathe, and just gets in the way of bodily functions in general. I never cared for the word mucus. I had a much simpler explanation for myself: I was full of sap.

My parents named me Eli. Not short for Elijah. Eli is Hebrew for "exalted one." And that's how my parents treated me from day one: with fear and reverence. Not that I asked for either one. Out of five children, I was the only one not born annoyingly healthy—able to eat and drink and do as they please, and complain endlessly of their small trials. When I was born, the doctors told my patients that I would live, at best, into my thirties, and they never forgot that I could die much earlier than that. Yes, I haven't done too poorly for myself, considering my parents thought I'd be in the ground a long time ago, in the family plot.

I always hated that plot. Not only did I have to visit it for the funerals of several grandparents and aunts and uncles, but my parents always dragged us there on obligatory trips to visit them and, I don't know, talk to them through the dirt. Some ancestor had chosen the oldest, ugliest part of the cemetery, with patchy grass and not a tree in sight. My parents have always been very devout people, and I'm convinced it's because heaven is their escape from that graveyard plot in the same way that trees became mine.

Religion never did it for me like it did for my parents, and some of my siblings too. Even as a child, I imagined the afterlife to be a darker, dirtier version of my childhood: crowded and suffocating. All the talk of heaven—especially in the context of me getting there, and soon—wouldn't bother me so much if I could just be cremated. Maybe even buried in an empty hole or thrown into the ocean. If I could be laid to rest in a way that would

do some good for the living things around me. But we Jews don't generally condone that. Instead I get to rot in a useless, hermetic box. And even though I'm the youngest, it's guaranteed that someone in my family will be around to bury me in it when I die.

My parents raised five children and three dachshunds, and played frequent hosts to an endless rotation of extended family. One would expect such a family to own one of those nice two-story houses you see all over Delaware. But instead, my parents bought two adjoining plots in Minquadale Village with mobile homes on them, commissioned some idiot to connect them with a hallway, and called that home. H like house, my siblings used to say about the shape it made—like home. H like hell I used to think. H like help.

One October when I was a child, around the High Holidays, the family went to the cemetery to pay its respects. Or rather, my mother and father paid their respects, and we children tried to play games or wander off. It was October, and unseasonably hot and humid, and out in the open like that it was smothering. While my family recited, "With His wing He will cover you, and under His wings you will take refuge," I stared at the gravestones, all named Somebody-Or-Other Stern.

"Where do you think they'll stick you?" my oldest brother Jacob asked under his breath, nudging my shoulder.

"Not here," I muttered.

"Yeah, right. I bet they'll stick you right there." He pointed at a narrow space between my mother's parents, Leah and Levi Stern, who I had heard too many stories about. I imagined being nestled between them, suffocated by the smell of old people and the sound of bad jokes.

When the family got home, I was still sweating. Mom became flustered, worrying that I had lost too many calories. She hurried me into the kitchen and started cooking up a box of mac and cheese for lunch, and put out the George Foreman for bacon. Ella and Ben,

my youngest older siblings, came into the kitchen and got excited. “This is for Eli,” Mom said. “There’s peanut butter and bread in the fridge for you, and you can make it yourselves.”

“Why do you always get the good stuff?” Ella asked me, and I shrugged.

But Mom said, “You know Eli has different nutritional needs,” adding, “and God will keep his soul.”

“What if I have different nutritional needs,” Ella said, “than just PB&Js?”

Mom ignored them and carried the bowl towards me at the table, muttering, “guard your going out and coming in, from this time—” which is when Dalia the dachshund waddled into her way and she stumbled and the bowl slipped out of her hands. I already wasn’t hungry from the heat and the tombstones, and I became even less so watching the dogs lick macaroni and cheese off the floor while everybody started yelling, so I got up and ran out of the room.

Outside in the yard, I could still hear them through the open windows: everyone yelling at the dogs, and Mom yelling at my siblings, and someone still yelling about peanut butter.

We had a big old tree of heaven behind the house. My parents, having not a horticultural bone in their body, had not thought to cut it down to stop the rapid spread of its many seeds. Like many people, they liked the flowers but hated their smell. Not much else grew in the yard, probably in part because of the chemical the tree produced to ward off competition. Suddenly, looking at that tree, I thought that if I could just get up high enough, I could shed both the heat and the sounds of my family.

It came so naturally. I put my foot on one of the lower branches, pulled myself up with another, and climbed the tree as easily as if it were a ladder. The branches bent slightly but took my weight. Up high, I found a place where I could lean back and look around. The pinnately compound leaves with their red-brown twigs swirled and bounced. The aged

red-brown fruits swung. Of course I could still hear the shouting in the house, but it was enough distance to let me feel I was in a different dimension than all that.

Ailanthus altissima—which I've also heard called stinking sumac and varnish tree—is invasive, though its foliage looks similar to native trees from a distance. I can relate to them that way: looking enough like others to blend in while maintaining enough hostility to keep yourself from being crowded out.

It was a little while before they all realized I was gone, and my mother came out into the yard. It was another little while before she found me. I watched her sort through the possibilities: under the little porches, on steps, in the car. It was a long while before she thought to look up. When she did, and saw the underside of my shoes, her fright, as it often did, was converted into action.

"Eli. This is not okay. Come down right now." My only movement was to stroke a yellowing leaf by my face. "Can you hear me, Eli?"

"Yep."

"Then come down," she said, and her tone shifted as a breeze came and bent the branches a little. "We've got more macaroni. I'll make you lunch." And as a car drove by on the street and I still didn't move, her fear took over and became prayer: "God will keep you from all evil; God will keep your soul. God will guard your going out and coming in, from this time on and forever." And I could hear most, but not all, of her psalm.

Not everyone can climb a tree of heaven. They're easy enough to get into with their low-branching stems, but their limbs are so thin only someone as light and lithe as me can climb them. Still, they can, with time, grow quite tall. So tall, in fact, that after that first time I was an instant convert to tree climbing. I climbed nonstop. I would climb so high into the trees on the playground that teachers would panic. I would run off to the park and climb a new tree every day. I had a few close calls, to be sure. Once, in the park, with no one else

around, I slipped off a branch so that I was hanging feet-down by my hands. When I finally hooked my legs around the branch, my sweaty hands slipped off so I was hanging head-down by my legs. When I finally climbed back down, I laughed all the way home.

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The groundie's name is Evan. I prefer not to call him anything but the groundie, just to put some distance between us, but given the circumstances—given that he is not only present but partly responsible for what happened—I suppose I'll give him that. I won't say it though. I couldn't if I tried.

If I could just stay here it wouldn't be so bad. My arms are wrapped around the trunk. I can feel roots under me. Nearby are cut branches, fragrant and feathery, and I can almost imagine I'm not on the ground at all. If I ignore the warning signs from my body, fight the animal panic in my brain, I can almost imagine I'm up on a limb. These sensations—the feel of the bark, the smell of the sap—these are the reasons I decided to become an arborist. It was the sycamore that really convinced me. One of the best trees to climb, if you can get off the ground.

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Which I could, once I was trained. That was years later, after wheezing and coughing my way through high school, patiently plugging through class and then climbing taller and taller trees. At community college, I pursued my degree righteously. I learned to tie a Blake's hitch and an alpine butterfly. I learned to say *bowline with a Yosemite finish* and *open moving rope system* and *tied, dressed, and set*.

I had never been able to climb a mature sycamore before, because of how high their first branches usually are, even when they divide into secondary trunks close to the ground. I'm talking about the American sycamore, *Platanus occidentalis*, the planetree. A native with bright white bark and pale green palmate leaves, and branches that squiggle like a bonsai's.

I hardly remember school. It went by so fast. Everything I was taught felt like I'd already known it somehow, and they were just reminding me. But I still remember the first time I used Double Rope Technique to ascend into a sycamore. Like most mature trees of this species, this one was nearly 100 feet tall and probably six feet around. The bark was smooth and cool. The breeze passed through the leaves in such a sweet, filtered way that, though I had to descend for the end of class, I came back at night. It was in a park in Newark near the university. I ascended the tree again, as high up as I could, and around me, in a full moon, the white bark glowed.

Of course, this was before I had my own place, so not coming home that night raised every possible alarm. My mother cried when I opened the door. I didn't tell them where I'd been; if they thought school was involved, I feared they'd find some way to intervene.

At any rate, my next step was clear: I used the little bit of money I'd earned from summer jobs to sublet a room in Newark. This was better for me and worse for my family, of course. Not being able to watch over me was a nightmare for them. They were convinced that something was going to happen to me. But I felt invincible. I felt that I had learned from trees: to live for longer, grow for longer. If a tree loses a limb or gets an injury or an illness, they have clever ways of healing themselves. Trees are resilient.

People always told me that my condition would make it difficult—impossible, even—to live a normal life. But I've seen trees in far worse condition than me. I once saw a spruce topped to make room for a telephone wire. Sure, it was going to die sooner. And sure, it was oozing mosses and lichens that were taking advantage of its weakened system. But it was going to take in sunlight every day like any other spruce, even put out cones if it could.

I quickly discovered, however, that I was not like other arborists. *Bros* is the word I would use to describe them. There to grow muscles and use chainsaws and rattle off the names of knots and pulleys. I was closer in temperament to the consulting arborists—the

people on the ground who assessed the trees, made recommendations, and, if necessary, made referrals to the people with chainsaws. These people were often in it for their love of trees. They were like doctors, full of knowledge of species and diseases. But I wouldn't be caught dead in that job. Then there were the groundies, who worked with the climbers but stayed on the ground to handle ropes. Clearly no interest there for me. I was unlike all camps. I was there for my own reasons.

Straight out of graduation I was hired by Wriggley and Sons Tree Service. It was a brand new business started by two brothers, Jake and Thomas. There was no Papa Wriggley on the scene; the brothers just liked how the name sounded.

Jake and Thomas sold climbing equipment on the side and insisted their employees buy all their gear from them. Something about representing the brand. So be it, I thought. I knew I was a better climber than both of them combined. They wouldn't have had to hire all those people and sell all that gear if they had been good at their jobs.

I would rather have climbed by myself—my prior experience put me at basically an expert level even before I knew how to use ropes. But it's tricky to find work that way, especially straight out of school. So I grudgingly cooperated with the other two people the Wrigley brothers hired to make up their team. They were two of my classmates.

Charlie, the other climber, was a bro. Ripped and tanned. Never seen without his helmet and mirrored sunglasses. The two of us had a similar gusto for climbing trees, but not at all for the same reasons. Charlie was bigger and stronger than me, which gave me something to aim for: to be better than him in all things. And I was. Being jacked doesn't make you better at climbing trees.

The other hire was Evan, a timid kid. He had a fear of heights but loved trees anyway. He was still in school when he was hired, but the Wrigleys were alright with that since he was pursuing his degree.

Evan always tired me. His timidity made him hesitant, and tree work is all about self-assurance. Instead of using confidence to do his job, he relied on rules. Like a walking textbook with boots. I could never take him seriously for that.

Still, I was high on life for two years. I didn't eat or sleep enough. I took on dangerous jobs without a thought and executed them perfectly. I was so good that I started cutting corners on my setups. Nothing major, just using easier knots and simpler systems. Skipping backup ropes and load tests. I loved every second of it, even the close calls, like when the branch beneath me broke or the groundie pulled too hard on the rigging line. This was my superpower, after all. The ground couldn't catch me.

Then I got a lung infection. Worse than I'd gotten since I was a kid, maybe a fetus. I spent days in my little rented room just coughing up phlegm and sweating salt. I had, unfortunately, had to give my family my address so they could forward my mail and so forth, and after about a week there was a pounding at the door and then my mother's voice shouting at the guy I shared the house with. He told her, and my sister Ella who was also there, where my room was, and they swept in without knocking.

"Why didn't you call? My poor boy. Have you seen a doctor? You scared us to death." These were the exclamations that were poured over me in I don't remember what order.

I said, "I'm fine. I'm better."

Mom sat down on my bed, put a hand on the lump of my foot under the blanket, and said, "You're working too hard."

"You know exercise is actually part of my treatment. Why did you always skip that one?"

"You need to quit."

"What?"

"Quit this silly job. It's killing you."

I actually laughed. Laughed so hard I started coughing again, and my mother rushed to pat me on the back and my sister grimaced. When it was over, I smiled at them and said, “I would rather die.”

“Eli,” my sister said in the tone of someone watching a dog pee on the floor. My mother began to cry.

Then my phone rang. I answered, and Jake said, “Hey man. How—how—how you doing?”

“Fine. Better.”

“Yeah? That’s great, man.”

“At least become one of those consulting arborists,” my mother begged. I waved her off and stepped out of bed, nearly pitching forward. It was a relief to be on my feet. A bed is too much like a grave.

“We’ve got a job today at Old Man Sheffield’s place.”

“Great.”

“I mean, only if you’re up for it. We’ll be good, you know, if you’re still too sick.” I smiled. If they didn’t need me, they wouldn’t be asking.

“I’m leaving now.”

I put my phone in my pocket and grabbed my keys, and as I closed the door, my mother said weepily, “I'll say a Mi Shebeirach for you.”

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Poor Evan. He doesn’t have the constitution to handle being at the scene of something like this. He’ll blame himself forever despite doing everything by the book. He’ll blame himself for not having stood up and demanded that I use the correct technique. Well, maybe this will teach him to demand things of the world.

It's funny how worst fears can come true in unexpected ways. Not my worst fear—my family's. That this job would ruin me. They never expected me to crash, though; they expected me to waste away like the doctors said when I was born. Like this infected tree did before I started taking it out of its misery. The Eastern Hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis*, another one of my favorites to climb, and my first job at the end of my illness.

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Like big sycamores, mature Eastern Hemlocks are practically impossible to climb without gear because of their lengthy monopodial trunks. These conifers frequently live for over 500 years and reach 100 feet. They have a conic crown and short needles arranged on little stalks. Their tiny cones are as delicate as flowers. They are also frequently slotted for removal due to an insect pest: the hemlock woolly adelgid.

Adult adelgids are less than a millimeter in length, but can be spotted by their egg sacs, which look like tiny tufts of cotton glued to the undersides of branches. In a year, each adelgid can lay as many as 300 eggs. That means even a 100-foot-tall hemlock can be in big trouble if it gets infected.

In addition to injecting a toxin into the tree, how do the adelgids kill it? By sucking out the sap, one tiny mouthful at a time. Over time, the foliage will turn from dark green to brown, and then the needles will begin to fall. It's a slow death. Even trees that survive the infestation will be weakened and often die from other causes.

I had climbed these trees before. There were two for this job. The infection had started on one and spread to the other. They belonged to this wealthy guy, Mr. Sheffield, who had a sort of estate on the outskirts of Newark. He had lots of trees on his land, and he loved them. We had been to see him many times to take care of them, even trying to treat these same Hemlocks. They were already too far gone to save, covered in patches of fuzzy white. It was time to burn the wood before the infection spread to other trees.

I got ready to climb one of the trees, and Charlie geared up for the other. I strapped on my spurs, something that's only used with trees that are dead or as good as dead, since all those punctured holes can introduce infection into the sap. It felt like putting down some prized pet, one that I had walked and fed before. The hemlocks were right between the house and the gazebo, meaning we needed a slide line to get the tops down without them landing on either of the roofs.

It was sad, in the way that putting anything down is sad. But my blood was up. I had spent over a week on the ground and I needed to get my feet off of it immediately. Beside me, Charlie was glistening, somehow already sweaty.

"Okay," Charlie said, checking one of his knots. It was like the gun fired at the start of a race. We were off.

"Wait!" Evan cried. I only stopped when Charlie did. We twisted our necks to look at him. "Where's your second point of attachment, Eli?" He hesitated, and when I didn't say anything, added, "And your cinching tie-in system?" All I had were my spurs, my helmet, and a single steel cabble lanyard wrapped around the trunk and attached to my harness at each side.

"Don't worry about it," I said, leaning back in my harness and starting to climb. Evan had the rules, but in my book, he didn't have the authority to enforce them. Charlie, who had the full workup, had no opinion on the matter.

I spurred my way up the long trunk. My lungs burned and my arms shook. I had to stop and pull my inhaler out of my pocket for a puff. As I inhaled, resiny conifer fragrance filled my nose and hit me like a drug. On the other tree, Charlie was like a bear strolling up the trunk. I gritted my teeth and spurred faster, until, finally, my head was above the level of his. When I reached the first branches, I started to cut, sending the bigger ones down on the slide line which Evan dutifully pulled and kept taught. Then I rigged up the top.

“Isn’t that a little too much tree, Eli?” Evan’s voice was small as a mouse’s on the ground. What he was suggesting was that I keep on climbing and cutting branches, and then topping a shorter length. Instead I revved my chainsaw over the sound of his voice and cut my notch.

I would love to blame Evan for pulling the rope too hard. But it’s just as likely that it was, in fact, too much tree—too heavy—or that I pushed it too hard or at the wrong angle. Whatever the reason, when the top dropped, it hit the tension on the rope hard and slingshotted back against the trunk. The aftershock on the rest of the tree was enough to shake my spurs loose from the bark.

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It’s sort of funny, really. I always thought the attention of other people would bring me down. I was poisoned against people—against their attention and especially against their advice. And it turns out that’s what really did me in.

The front of me is all scraped up I think. Some parts of me feel out of place. Where did my spurs end up?

It’s possible that someone could fix up a mess like this. But not well enough to climb trees again. Which means I’ll definitely die before anyone can try. I suppose it was presumptuous, after all, to think I could stay off the earth forever.

I can hear Evan running up. The homeowner is hurrying over too, and Charlie has come down from his tree. Oh God, how embarrassing. I can’t tell who’s speaking. For all I know it’s the tree, shouting in fear. And my mother’s voice is coming out of Evan’s body, as he leans over me, crooning, “Merciful one, restore him, heal him, strengthen him, enliven him. Send him a complete healing from the heavenly realm, a healing of body and a healing of soul, together with all who are ill soon, speedily, without delay; and let us say: Amen!”

They’re making such a fuss. Cutting cables and making phone calls. I wish I could tell them not to bother, that it was always going to turn out this way. I wish I could tell them to just leave me here a while, so I can smell the sap.