

The Tree

By

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***Free*editorial** 

The Tree

Chapter One: March 14, 2009

Aiken Somerset looked around, blinking away the rain from his eyes. There were red and blue lights flashing through the trees in the direction of the street, and he hoped that no one he knew needed the ambulance. He craned his neck to look at the familiar specimen of *fagus grandifolia*, smiling at the sight of buds forming along the outermost twigs. The rain may have been close to freezing, but his tree knew that spring was just around the corner.

He looked down again, and his smile faded. It had been the first time he'd ever received anything from the hole in the enormous beech tree's trunk. Before, he had only ever deposited gifts. But things were changing all around him, and he supposed that it would be silly not to expect the rules of the tree to change a little, too.

"Sir?"

Aiken looked up and waved at the two police officers walking across the sopping wet grass and mud towards him. It really was a terrible day for them to be out and about.

"Good morning," Aiken said. His fingers clenched more tightly around the bit of metal he was holding, pressing it into his palm. The woman was wearing an exasperated expression, but the man smiled kindly at Aiken.

"A lot of people are looking for you," he said. Aiken frowned.

"But I left a note..."

"Sir, you're not supposed to leave the...the facility," the man said. Aiken grinned.

"You mean the old-folks' home? Between you and me, I could use a change of scenery. Been there all winter and I still feel like I have babysitters."

"It's for your own good, sir," the woman said in a flat tone, walking up to him and taking him by the arm. Aiken sighed and let her. It was probably a good idea to go back inside, even though he was wearing a raincoat. He used to be able to stand all sorts of weather without getting so much as a sniffle, back in the day. But he supposed that it was **all** "back in the day," now. He coughed to one side, and the woman hastily removed her jacket.

"No, no," Aiken protested, but she slung the heavy coat over his

shoulders. He started to take it off but stopped with a wince as his bad shoulder gave a sharp twinge. Besides, he could feel the marked change in warmth from the addition of the extra coat. His “waterproofed” jacket was not as proof against water as he would have expected, given its price tag.

“Thank you, young lady,” he said stiffly. He’d started calling everyone “young lady” or “young man” the moment he entered the nursing home. It was his revenge, though unfortunately, most people seemed to take it in stride or even thought it endearing.

“We’ll have you back soon, sir,” the male officer said, taking Aiken’s other arm. Aiken automatically clenched his hand tighter around the tree’s gift, but the man didn’t look interested in prying it from his fingers.

“I suppose it wasn’t a very good idea to take a walk this morning,” Aiken relented, feeling the unspoken accusation in the air.

“A little wet,” the man agreed. The woman was silent, and Aiken suspected that she was angry with him. Maybe she was one of those people who thought that old folks should be locked up in a padded room somewhere, safe and sound. He looked over his shoulder. His tree still stood there, solid as ever, its branches spread like an invitation for a returned embrace.

Later, the old man silently promised and meekly followed his captors back to Wynwood Estates, the self-proclaimed “senior community of choice in the Northeast.” He’d read all of the brochures that his son had cared to throw at him, and for a while, he had felt fairly happy there. No lawn to mow, no garden to weed, no plumbing to attempt to fix, no major appliances to go awry... It had been nice. But the days began to run together like melted wax, losing their brightness, their color, until one was as drab as the next. Aiken was never meant for a life without challenge. Hell, he was never meant for a life where his every movement was noted and often restricted for “safety’s” sake. So when he’d looked out the rain-streaked bedroom window that morning and spotted the familiar tree standing by the far border between lawn and forest, he had to seize the opportunity to sneak out and greet it. After all, it came all that way just to see him. Bad manners to not at least say “hello.”

Now look where it got him. Probably mandatory Monday bingo games and *Leave it to Beaver* reruns for a month. A man could perish from such abuse.

They brought him inside without mishap, where he was delivered into the gently scolding care of the nurse, who wrapped him up and dried him off and forced heat back into his body. For the first time, Aiken was glad of the 85-degree setting on the thermostat; the cold had snuck up on him. The lady

officer got her coat back, and he thanked them both as they turned to leave.

The man patted him gently on the shoulder.

“Make sure you don’t wander off again,” he said. Aiken’s previous goodwill towards him instantly turned to rancor.

“*Young* man, maybe it wasn’t the best day to go for a walk, but I was certainly not ‘wandering’ anywhere. I had a specific destination and goal in mind, and I fulfilled both. Thank you for your assistance, but you may return to your duties now.” He tried not to notice how the nurse rolled her eyes at the officers in commiseration. Aiken felt that, along with calling people “young lady” or “young man,” he had the right to be rude when he wished. Unfortunately, this led to further patronization. At the moment, he wasn’t sure if the benefits outweighed the drawbacks.

The officers left, and Aiken was warmed back up and sent to bed under heavy surveillance. But since the aide assigned to watch him was reading a paperback novel, he was free to finally unclench his hand (which he had carefully kept out of view throughout the warming-up process) to gaze upon the tree’s gift to him. It was a key, and one he recognized down to the scratched letters, “AS.” It had been his last gift to the tree, given five months ago.

Through the streaming rain, he could just make out the familiar silhouette of the beech tree: solid and comforting and waiting.

Chapter Two: October 22, 2008

Aiken looked hard at his son, who was bringing out the very last box from inside the house. Ash appeared to be exhausted, but Aiken couldn’t work up the pity to spare for him. It was harder than Ash seemed to think, moving out after half a century of living in one place.

Ash didn’t have his father’s homebody personality. In fact, he had gone to California for college, and had he not met his future wife in New York over one of his holiday vacations, he might have stayed there. But thank God that Marilyn had the same sense of place as Aiken did, and she had made it clear that she wouldn’t go haring off across the country. Aiken sometimes thought about not being able to see his two grandchildren, which would have been the case if Ash had gotten his way. It had been luck, pure and simple.

Of course, in the end, luck always runs out.

Ash had first brought up the idea of a retirement home to Aiken three years ago and had gradually increased the intensity of his remarks, as well as the number of observations about the house falling into disrepair. When Aiken had finally agreed (partially in an effort to avoid Ash's inevitable attempts at persuasion, which never did much for Aiken's ego, and partially in recognition of the fact that his son had a point), Ash had launched into immediate action, securing a buyer for Aiken's house and a room in a retirement home close to where Ash, Marilyn and the kids lived.

Now he watched as Ash closed the front door of Aiken's home for the last time, locking it and jiggling the handle to make sure. Ash then turned and started back towards his father.

"All set," Ash said, handing Aiken the key to the house. Aiken had given Ash the spare to pass on to the new owner, but he had flatly refused to hand over the original. It was his, even if the door it unlocked would no longer be.

Aiken curled his fingers over the key and started off towards the backyard. He heard Ash groan theatrically behind him, but he ignored him. There was just one last thing to do before he left.

"Dad, come on; the kids wanted me to take them to the movies today," Ash pleaded, trotting to keep up with Aiken. Aiken shot his son a look that, despite the fact that Ash was forty-nine years old, could still cow him into silence. It was Aiken's last and greatest weapon, and he used it now to great effect.

"This is my house—for a little longer, anyway—and I intend to honor an old tradition one last time before I leave it," Aiken said with dignity. Ash sighed but followed his father to the center of the backyard, where the old beech tree grew.

Aiken had once estimated its age at around four hundred years old, and he thought that might be a conservative estimate. The bole was enormous, composed of several fused trunks. The new owners of the house would undoubtedly want to remove the tree, given its proximity to the house. It would be a tragedy if they did.

Shaking his head, Aiken approached the tree and laid his hand flat upon its side.

"Hello again, my friend," he said quietly, so his son wouldn't hear. Ash snorted behind him, letting him know that he'd heard despite Aiken's precautions.

Aiken sighed and decided to ignore him for the time being.

“A gift,” he told the tree, and the dead leaves clinging to their twigs rattled overhead. Aiken smiled and laid the key inside the gap between the fused trunks, giving the bark one last, fond pat.

“Goodbye,” he said. He turned and walked back to Ash, who was tapping his foot.

Behind them, the leaves rustled.

Chapter Three: July 15, 2009

Aiken coughed into his handkerchief and resumed his bored expression as Grace told off the aides for the third time that day for not giving her breakfast. It didn't seem to matter that she'd eaten rather a lot for such a squat woman not three hours ago at breakfast, and now it was noon: nearly time for lunch.

He shook his head slowly. The worst part about it, besides Grace's querulous squawking, was the fact that there was nothing new about this sort of scene. If it wasn't Grace forgetting she'd eaten a meal, then it was Brian muttering to himself when everyone was trying to enjoy peace and quiet, or Harold-the-retired-and-more-than-a-little-senile-postal-worker making special deliveries of scribbled-upon paper to each resident numerous times a day. Aiken occasionally wished that the real postal system was as dedicated, and that Harold was less so. The papers tended to build up by the ream if Aiken forgot to block up the bottom of his door with a towel.

Aiken wondered if Ash was going to stop by later and found himself hoping that he wouldn't. The kids had long since learned to excuse themselves from the visits to see Grandpa, and nowadays even Marilyn pleaded a heavy workload to opt out of the whole affair. That left Ash, who seemed to have it firmly in his head that Aiken was spending most of his days staring out the window, looking for his son's car to pull into the parking lot.

To the contrary, Aiken found enough to do with his ample spare time. And, to his credit, he only looked for Ash's car on the very worst days, when time itself seemed to quit moving forward, holding the residents of Wynwood hostage in their individual miseries.

Of course, time didn't *really* stand still. Aiken still had enough brain cells alive and kicking up there to know that no power in the world could halt

time. They had just carted Mrs. Berrigan (“Mrs. Berrigan,” to her friends) out on a one-way trip.

The sordid details circulated the building with surprising swiftness, considering that many of its residents were confined to walkers, wheelchairs and beds. Apparently, Mrs. Berrigan had been in the sole company of a certain ninety-year-old Frank Thiessen at the hour of her timely demise, activities unknown. Aiken hoped she’d left life on a good note, for her sake. If his Holly were still alive, Aiken knew that that would be the way he’d want to go. His wife’s face would be a good last sight, he thought. Oh, well.

He rubbed his chest slowly, the old pain rekindled by the memory of Holly’s familiar features. He stopped the motion before one of the ever-watchful aides could think he was having a heart attack. Sighing, he rose from the armchair.

Making his way past Grace, whose voice had just risen another octave as she accused the placating aides of starving her, Aiken headed for his room. It was about time for Harold’s noon delivery, anyway. Early on, Aiken had wondered if Harold were hiding secret messages in devious code. Aiken had spent a great deal of time poring over the pages of seemingly random shapes that were slid beneath his door.

He imagined cracking the code, revealing Harold’s personal and invaluable war memoirs, or perhaps a confession of an unsolved crime, written over and over and disseminated boldly to the small world that was Wynwood Senior Facility with no one the wiser. But if there was a code, it was beyond even Aiken’s clever (well, **once**-clever) brain to decipher. Harold’s scribbles seemed to be just that and were a tripping hazard besides.

Aiken had indeed missed the 12:04 p.m. delivery, as was evidenced by the piece of paper lying on the floor just inside of his door. He leaned down with a slight groan, picked up the paper, and glanced at it. Still meaningless scribbles.

He set it aside and went to the window, which was partially blocked by a small terrarium. He inspected the potted orchid inside, which hadn’t yet bloomed this year in spite of Aiken’s best efforts. His job as a professor in horticulture at Farmingdale State was a reflection of his lifelong fascination with plants, rather than the cause of it. He had graduated from Cornell with a Master’s degree in the subject and could even boast that most of the information currently known about the rare orchid *Cyrtorchilum macranthum* had its roots in his own research, conducted in South America as part of his Master’s thesis. It had been there where he met Holly, an American teacher working for a year in Peru.

She had frequented the same bakery where Aiken habitually bought his breakfast. One day, she had approached him to ask where he was from, having heard him order in halting Spanish. It was strange how wonderful it felt to meet another American in this foreign land. They'd begun to chat, each recognizing in the other a kindred spirit. Aiken had not known from their first meeting that he wanted to marry her, but it didn't take him overly long to figure it out.

He had finished his research before she finished her year of teaching, but he managed to work up the courage to ask for her address before he left—evidence that he was indeed starting to gain a little sense in spite of his great learning. She had scribbled it onto the receipt for that last shared breakfast, blushing all the while. Aiken would have liked to have held onto that receipt, and indeed he'd kept it for many years after, but it had eventually become lost, as those things tended to do.

Aiken had presented his thesis and, after graduating *summa cum laude*, he bought a plane ticket to Minnesota, packed his more important worldly belongings into two suitcases and set out to find her.

He could still clearly remember the day he succeeded, which was a minor miracle for a brain that had been leaking memory like a sieve for some years now. She had looked confused when she first opened the door and found him on the stoop, as though she were struggling to place him in this context. He probably recalled that moment so clearly because her expression of unflattering blankness had scared the holy hell out of him. His mind had filled with doubts—had she forgotten him in the year they had been apart? Had she intended for him to find her, or had it just been guilt that had made her decide to give him her address when he asked for it? He stood in her doorway with bird-sized Minnesota mosquitoes whining around his head as he wondered if he had made a horrible mistake.

But then she smiled, and the beauty of that smile outlasted the decades, outlasted her...and stayed with him now.

Aiken found himself thinking about Holly a great deal lately. She had died six years ago, and in that time, he had begun to heal—or forget, if those two things were at all different—but now the loss was seeping back in. He dreamed of her often, of the fights they used to have, of the time she threw a shoe at him and told him that she wanted a divorce. Things had gotten better, and she told him years later that she never really meant it, but still Aiken could feel that same sharp shock of panic every time he thought about her saying those words. The bad times haunted him nightly, and sometimes he gave up on sleeping at all.

Last night had not been too rough, though. Aiken reached into the terrarium and gently touched a thick leaf of the orchid. Her orchid.

He squirted a few bursts of water into it from the spray bottle he kept on the table and gave the green roots a quick check. All was well. Aiken glanced out through the window at the summer-beaten landscape outside. The noon sun burned overhead, causing shimmering heat to rise from the walkways. There had been a notice posted on the doors, telling the residents that no one was to venture outside today due to the heat.

Aiken smiled as he saw the unexpected shape of the massive beech tree rising from the expanse of desiccated grass, its living branches in full leaf, the boughs ever spread in a gesture of welcome. He hadn't seen it in a while and had had plenty of time to ponder the question of where the tree went when it wasn't gracing the retirement home's lawn. It had moved closer to the building than it had been in March, he realized as he headed for the back door.

It was hot outside, he soon realized, but not intolerable. And it wasn't as though he meant to stay outside for hours. He'd be back soon enough, with no one the wiser.

The tree was waiting, and its shade welcomed him as he limped out to greet it. His right knee, which had been injured a long time ago and subsequently repaired, had begun to act up of late. He suspected it had something to do with the fact that he didn't do a damned thing all day, but the doctor didn't seem to support this theory. To the contrary, Aiken was told to stay off of it when possible and do some ridiculous little exercises instead of using it like a normal person.

Aiken never did believe in that sort of foolishness. So he might be limping, but at least he was retaining a fragment of his dignity. Or that was his intention, anyway. His coughing fits were a different story. His lungs still hadn't forgiven him for that last time he'd gone to the tree on the cold, rainy day in March. He'd gotten sick, but it had cleared up. Mostly.

He reached the tree at last, stepping with relief into the shade and limping up to the massive tree trunk. He laid his hand upon the bumpy bark in greeting, as always. Then he reached into the gap in the trunk and drew out something that made his poor, abused heart give a heavy thump in his chest.

He looked down at the packet of letters and made a soft sound of pain. Aiken knew that he should be heading back towards the air-conditioned interior of his prison, but for now, the shade of the tree was enough. He leaned against the tree trunk for support as he turned the packet over. Written in Holly's untidy handwriting on the topmost envelope was his name.

Chapter Four: July 22, 1994

Aiken held the letters during the entire service, sweat soaking into the paper in finger-shaped stripes. Every so often, his hands would tremble hard enough to make the papers rattle. Beside him sat Ash and Marilyn. The air was thick, redolent of the flowers that seemed to be everywhere. There were many subspecies of *Rosa* and *Lilium*, with a few representatives from the genus *Tulipa* thrown in for good measure. Their perfume was making him slightly nauseated, though perhaps that wasn't their fault, after all. He could hear Marilyn crying quietly, but Ash looked as numb as Aiken felt.

The service seemed to both go on forever and end between one blink and the next. Aiken found himself standing outside being consoled by people he hardly recognized. Ash was doing all of the greeting and thanking, while Aiken stared at the shiny black hearse that had swallowed whole the casket containing his wife. His Holly.

Time did another funny leap, and Aiken found Ash's hand upon his shoulder as they both stood over the pit in the ground. It had obviously been dug by a machine. While the priest said something largely irrelevant to the task of putting his wife, his Holly, in the ground, Aiken remembered how Holly had dug the grave for their old dog Juniper when he had died. Aiken had tried to take over the hard task, but Holly—crying as she chopped at the thawing ground with the shovel—told him that it was important that she dig it. Juniper had been her dog. She said that digging his grave by herself was a way of paying her respects to him for his lifetime of loyalty and love. Aiken hadn't really understood it, not then. But now, staring down at that raw hole in the ground, its sides precisely straight, he felt like maybe she had a point. Aiken would have dug until his hands were blistered and bleeding, dug until his aging body gave out, if it would have lessened the intense loss that was drowning him.

Aiken looked up when Ash handed him a rose and gave him a small push forward. Aiken shuffled forward to the mahogany coffin, its sides so polished he could see his reflection in it. His face looked distorted and lost. He laid the flower upon the casket and shuffled back to his spot, still clutching the packet of envelopes against his chest. Each mourner set his flower upon the casket, the priest made another bid at graveside words of wisdom, and the service ended.

Everyone else left, but Aiken, Ash and Marilyn stood in silence as the

workers moved in. The men lowered the coffin down into that sharp-shadowed hole dug by strangers and machines, and then Ash finally took Aiken by the arm and steered him towards the limo that awaited them.

On the ride back to the house, Aiken looked down at the envelopes in his hand. They were the love letters that he and Holly had sent to each other over the years. Some were letters of apology given after a particularly bad fight. Some were cards given on the big occasions, like anniversaries and birthdays. Some had been written for no particular occasion at all. The last one, written by Holly before the illness twisted her penmanship into complete illegibility, was at the very top. Aiken stared down at it, his mind filled with the words it held.

“Kenny,” it read...

Kenny.

I’m glad I gave my address to the crazy plant man I met in a foreign country all those years ago. My heart must have been in love with you before my brain caught up. I just wanted to tell you that you were a huge pain in the butt sometimes, but I loved you anyway for all of those years. I still do, and I will even after I’m gone. Hang in there, Hon. I’ll see you soon.

Love, Holly

Aiken tried to smooth the top envelope where his sweat had warped it, but it was no use. He took a long breath and let it out again. It was the last reminder of his Holly before the disease took her from him. She hadn’t died right away. It had been a hideously slow process, with hopeful prognosis followed by bad news in a relentless pattern that would make even a strong man brittle. Every ring of the telephone had been a separate torture, every test they gave her made his hope die a bit at a time. And then they told her that It would come soon, and It did. And here he was, holding the last bit of Holly and wondering how it had all come crashing down so quickly.

The limo stopped, and Aiken had to concentrate to remember what came next. Then Ash was helping him out of the car and steering him towards his house, which was full of people he didn’t know well and didn’t particularly want to see. Aiken pulled back from Ash and shook his head mutely.

“Dad...” Ash began, but Aiken had already turned and was heading across the dry grass around the side of the house. He could hear Marilyn telling Ash to let him be, and he reflected upon how like Holly she was. Wise in a way so subtle that many might miss it.

Aiken trudged across the lawn towards the giant tree that crowned the

backyard. He paused to look up at it for a moment, appreciating the way some of the branches were touching the house. He knew that they should be trimmed, but right now, struck by the idea that the tree was connecting itself to his home through that delicate touch, he found them comforting.

He walked up to the crack in the trunk and looked down at the packet of letters in his hand. He lifted them to his mouth and kissed the shaky lines of her handwriting. Then he dropped the packet into the tree, lowered himself to the ground and began to sob.

Chapter Five: November 5, 2009

When the cold came to Wynwood Estates, a pervasive feeling of dread descended upon each resident like an unbearable burden they carried in their bones. The cold took those too frail to keep it at bay and gnawed at those too stubborn to give in and die. Aiken had always hated the autumn. It was a time of change, of dying, of loss. The plants retreated deep within themselves, and green was wiped from the land. Perhaps this was why he had always held a special respect for pines and the few deciduous plants that kept their leaves year-round. They had found a way to thwart the cold, to keep their chlorophyll-colored leaves even in the coldest, darkest months.

Aiken was not looking forward to the approaching winter. His cough, which had never quite gone away from that spring's illness, was growing deeper: a constant presence following him through each day. It was in this time of cold that he most missed Holly. She, like her namesake, had found a way to stay fresh and vivacious during the dead months. She had shared that vivacity with Aiken, making the dark days tolerable with the distant promise of spring.

Seasonal depression, it was called. Aiken dreaded it. As soon as the days shortened in earnest and the world began to prepare for the imminent time of snow and freezing, he felt himself begin to slip down into that darkness, step by step. And now, there was no Holly to brighten the days. Holly was dead. He had only himself, and even his own body was failing him. What did that leave?

Aiken was sitting in his chair in his room, staring at his reflection in the window. Outside, snow beat softly against the glass, ice-moths fluttering, whispering to be let in. He could feel the cold draft from the window pooling about his feet, numbing them, but he did not get up to move to a warmer spot.

He could not summon the motivation.

On the table beside him stood the terrarium. He glanced at the orchid within its glass bounds. Aiken had not bothered with it in quite some time, but the girl who came in every week to read to him—to complete some well-intentioned community service project, as Aiken understood it—would water the poor thing after her visits. It was enough to keep the plant alive, but not enough to allow it to flourish. Aiken wished the poor thing could just die. Instead, it lingered, its leaves limp and most of its roots gnarled and dried, bent at crazed angles in search of water they could no longer absorb.

Aiken turned his head at the knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said, despising the creakiness of his own voice. No wonder everyone here treated him as though he were a fragile elderly man. He had become one without meaning to.

“Mr. Somerset?”

Aiken sighed. It was that girl again, armed with the same book she always brought. Ever since she had started visiting in September, she had brought works by Henry David Thoreau. Aiken found it all too sentimental for his taste, but she seemed to enjoy it. Aiken supposed that it was nice to have a visitor, so he never complained about her poor taste in literature. He would gladly take a nice, brainless suspense novel anytime over this...not that he read much anymore.

“Hello, Mr. Somerset,” she said. “I’m here to read to you.”

Aiken snorted and turned back to the window. He heard the door close and footsteps crossing the room.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Somerset?” she asked.

“As well as I look,” he snapped. There. He could be grumpy if he wanted.

Another of the few perks of old age.

“You look good today,” she countered. Aiken swiveled the armchair to face her, certain that there was an intimidating scowl upon his face.

“I *feel* terrible,” he muttered. She pulled up the second chair and slung her damp jacket over the back.

“I’ve got a new book today. It’s called, **Walden**,” she said, sitting down. Aiken didn’t respond. Apparently, he didn’t need to, because she opened up the book and began to read.

“ As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness weakness...”

Aiken closed his eyes and did his best impression of being asleep. His acting was a bit too realistic, because he awakened with a start some time later, surprised to find the girl gone and an aide in the doorway.

“Mr. Somerset? It’s time to get ready for bed now.”

Aiken squinted at his wristwatch. Indeed, the hands indicated that it was around nine-thirty. He looked at the plant in the terrarium. Water droplets beading the glass walls indicated that the girl had watered the poor thing, granting it one more week of life. Aiken wished he could make up his mind whether it was a mercy or torture for her to keep the thing alive.

As his glance turned away from the terrarium, it snagged upon a strange shape outside. He frowned.

“Turn off the light,” he ordered the aide.

“Mr. Somerset...”

“Turn off the goddamned light for a minute, won’t you?” he barked. Aiken heard a theatrical sigh from behind him as he stared intently out the window, but the light turned off. There, amidst the whirling dots of the falling snow, was a dark shadow. A shadow in the shape of a great beech tree.

“All right. You can turn it on now,” Aiken said, still staring out the window. “I’m ready to turn in for the night.”

He suffered the aide’s assistance in the taxing ritual of preparing himself for bed. He couldn’t quite remember when it had gotten so hard to undress himself, or brush his teeth, or just **stand**. He had a walker now. While it gave him much-needed stability, it was also just more proof of his growing inability to exist as an independent human being: one more step towards the grave.

And from the grave, there was no return.

He obediently lay in bed as the aide settled the covers around him. This time, he managed to stay awake in spite of the luring warmth of the covers. When the sounds of activity outside his door had ceased and the building went still, he pushed the covers back, slipped his feet into his loafers, and stood. He put on his winter jacket over the flannel pajamas and even wound a scarf around his neck. Armed with his walker, he opened the door quietly and snuck out the door of his room.

Aiken had ample time to mentally thank whichever aide had stuck tennis

balls on the bottom of the walker. His progress was almost silent. There was an aide on duty at the front desk, but instead of passing him, Aiken turned down another hall towards the neon red “Exit” sign, its glow reflecting down the waxed tile floor.

He was a little out of breath by the time he reached it, but even so, he thought that he was doing pretty damn well for a man in his condition. His heart was pounding painfully, however, so he gave himself an extra moment to recover. While he stood there, trying to slow his breathing, he noticed a sign on the door that read, “Caution: Alarm Will Sound When Door is Opened.”

“Thanks for the warning,” he whispered, and pressed against the bar that opened the door.

Even knowing what would happen, Aiken jumped when the alarm began to blare out through the hallway, but he pushed the door open and stepped outside into the blast of cold and snow. He stood for a moment, shocked by the ferocity of the night, but knowing that he didn’t have much time, Aiken rallied his nerve and stepped into the shin-deep snow, forcing his walker through the deep but fluffy stuff. The snow packed between his sockless feet and the sides of his loafers, but all he felt was a distant discomfort.

Ahead, in the swirling patterns of black, white and grey, he made out the shape of the tree. It stood closer to the building than it had that summer, which was fortunate. Aiken wasn’t certain how far he could go before either the aides caught up with him or he fell and broke some indispensable bone or another. So he forged ahead, his entire body shivering with the raw cold.

The tree’s black shape solidified before him. Someone inside the building threw on a spotlight, and the tree came into sharp focus. Its bark glinted with a shell of ice, and the dark knothole was like the only sanctuary in a world full of snow and wind.

He reached forward a numb hand and forced his fingers to close around the small object in the gap. He pulled it out just as the first aide reached him and took him by the arm, turning him forcibly back towards the building that now leaked light across the covering of snow from many of its windows. As Aiken was rushed back inside, changed into dry clothing and wrapped in blankets, he felt the object in his hand only as a shapeless lump that his fingers clenched with more frozen immobility than strength. It was only when he had been warmed up sufficiently to feel his extremities again that he was able to relax his hand to see the tree’s gift.

Against the blue-mottled backdrop of his palm, the worn, gold ring gleamed as though possessed of a fire he could no longer feel.

Chapter Six: April 1, 1980

Holly and Juniper, their aging, bristle-furred mutt of baffling genetic heritage, were out for a run, and Aiken was alone with the empty house. It hadn't been a month since Ash had gone away to college, and already Aiken and Holly were wandering around like lost souls, looking for ways to fill in the gaps left by the departure of their only child. Juniper certainly didn't help: he spent long hours laying outside Ash's bedroom door, a tennis ball pathetically positioned near his nose. Aiken had tried to engage the dog in a game of fetch upon more than one occasion, but Juniper had given him a look of canine contempt and had resumed his position. Holly had reassured Aiken that the dog would get used to Ash's absence, but it looked like Juniper was settling in for a good, long sulk. Ash's departure had left a gaping hole in the family, and now the mood of the house was subdued, if not in outright mourning.

It hadn't started off that way, of course. For the first week, Aiken and Holly had celebrated their new solitude and privacy with all of the enthusiasm two middle-aged soul mates could muster. However, lately they had begun to spend more and more time separately. Holly went to the gym or took Juniper for long walks, and Aiken had research to conduct for a book he had been writing on the propagation of orchids. Holly cooked gourmet meals for a week in a fit of profligacy, but by that following Saturday, they were ordering Chinese takeout. The silences and spaces between them grew and grew until a month had passed and they were eating at separate times. It was as though Ash's departure had dissolved some invisible glue, leaving his parents with a weakened bond.

Aiken was sitting at his desk, but he found that his powers of concentration were utterly lacking. Finally, he tossed his fountain pen aside and rubbed his eyes. His doctor had suggested glasses, but he had been dragging his feet about going to the ophthalmologist. Glasses would be just one more thing for him to misplace and replace. Also, it would be an admission that he was starting to get on in years, and there was enough proof of that already without him having to go looking for more.

Aiken rose, stretched and went to get some tea. While he was standing at the kitchen counter, he heard a whining at the front door. He went to open it, admitting Juniper. He looked up, knowing that Juniper's arrival meant that Holly was close behind, and sure enough, he saw Holly making her way up the

walkway, hands braced on her hips, still breathing hard.

“How was it?” he asked.

“It was okay,” she said passing him and heading for the kitchen. He followed, heading to the refrigerator and taking out the water purifier. Juniper immediately undertook the same intense sniffing regimen he followed every time he re-entered the house. Holly and Aiken watched him head up the stairs, his nose tracing the air close to the floor.

Aiken handed her a glass of water, and she smiled at him.

“I bet you got a lot done today. It was nice and quiet in here for you,” she commented, taking a long swallow.

“Though I’d never have believed it when Ash was younger, there *is* such a thing as too much quiet,” Aiken admitted, setting the kettle on the stovetop. Holly gave him a sad smile.

“The house used to feel a lot smaller,” she said.

“He’s only five hours away, for God’s sake,” Aiken said, suddenly annoyed. “We can go see him any time.”

“He would just love that,” Holly commented dryly, taking a sip of water. “I can just picture us standing outside his dorm, waving up at him and saying things like, ‘I love you, Sweetie,’ and, ‘Mommy and Daddy miss you very much, Ash Somerset!’”

“Why don’t we?” Aiken said suddenly. “We can go up and just see how he’s doing. It doesn’t have to be a surprise. I’ll call him right now. I’m sure there’s something he’s forgotten at home that we can bring up to him...”

Holly blocked his progress to the telephone on the wall.

“Not so fast. He just left a month ago, Kenny. Give him a little time to settle in before making the offer to visit. He sounded happy on the phone. If he really wants us to come up, we’ll make the trip. But we’re not going to barge in on him while he’s so busy with classes.”

Aiken snorted, but he turned away from the phone, going instead to the cabinet for the box of tea. Upstairs, they both heard Juniper, who had obviously finished his search for Ash with negative results, give a loud sigh and lay down on the floor outside Ash’s bedroom door.

“I’m sure that classes aren’t the only thing he’s taking,” Aiken muttered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Aiken rounded on her.

“Don’t you know what those kids do at college? I certainly know enough from teaching them for so long. They drink and do drugs and have sex. Sometimes, they squeeze a cramming session in among those things, but otherwise, that’s it.”

Holly turned away, covering her mouth. Aiken, relenting, reached out to touch her shoulder.

“I’m sorry if that came as a shock...”

Her shoulders were shaking. Aiken rubbed the space between her shoulder blades comfortingly.

“I’m sure he doesn’t have enough money to buy the bad drugs,” he said, hoping he was right. And then he realized that the noises coming from Holly were less like sobs and more like stifled laughs. “Are you laughing?” Aiken demanded, withdrawing his comforting hand. Holly broke down completely, doubling over with unmistakable laughter. “I’m serious!” he insisted, now folding his arms. She turned back to him at last, her expression fitting into the pattern set by the laugh lines that had etched themselves into her face over the years.

“Oh, honey, if only you could hear yourself. It’s really entertaining. Please, go on. Tell me more about college.” She broke down into laughter again.

“This is serious!” Aiken said, trying to keep his temper.

“Oh, yes. Absolutely.”

“Holly!”

She shook her head, still smiling. “You’re just like your parents, you know?”

Aiken switched off the kettle and left without making his tea.

“Kenny, wait a minute,” Holly called out behind him, but he ignored her. Anger buzzed around inside of him like an angry wasp.

Outside, it was a mild spring day. Aiken headed off down the street at a pace set by his frustration, his mind in turmoil over Holly’s blasé dismissal of his fears. What if his son was making choices that could destroy his life? What if Aiken had failed him by allowing him to go to a school so far away from his parents’ protection?

By the time Aiken returned to the house, nearly an hour had passed, and

he had what felt like a whole hive of riled wasps now buzzing around his gut. However, Holly wasn't in the kitchen, and he didn't hear her moving around in the other rooms. Juniper gave him a pathetic look from his self-assigned post. Aiken looked out the window at the end of the upstairs hallway and found Holly sitting on the iron-wrought bench underneath the tree.

Aiken turned back to the dog and crouched down. Juniper thumped his tail against the floor, whining under his breath as Aiken stroked his head.

"We've all got to adjust, you know," he said. "I realize that you miss him, but you can't sit here forever."

Or maybe he could. Aiken was certain that if he could speak, Juniper would tell him, if you wait long enough, your loved ones will come back home. Aiken petted the bereft dog for a few more minutes before he sighed and went out to Holly.

She was bent over on the bench, rubbing her leg. When she heard him coming, however, she straightened up and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, well: look what the cat dragged in," she said. "Have a nice walk?"

"I apologize," Aiken said without preamble. Holly folded her arms, her eyes narrowing.

"Oh, yeah? What might you be apologizing for? You've got a lot of reasons to choose from."

"I apologize for losing my temper with you," Aiken said, refusing to rise to the bait. "I was upset over Ash leaving and took it out on you." Holly regarded him for a moment.

"Yes, you did. You aren't being realistic. I'm sure that Ash is having fun, but I am also confident that he is taking this seriously. He was a good student in high school, and there's no reason to think that he won't be the same in college. Besides, you know how he feels about his privacy and independence."

"It's been a month, and he hardly ever calls."

"Honey, you really have to relax a little. While I'm sure our boy isn't squeaky clean, I do have faith that we managed to instill in him a little common sense before we sent him off."

"College changes people, Holly."

"Absolutely. It gives us a few life lessons, and hopefully some extra knowledge. It's a stepping stone." She sighed. "He'll be home for

Thanksgiving, and I just know that you'll be complaining about how he leaves dirty dishes in the sink and clothes on the floor of his room and hair in the tub, and then you'll be telling everyone within hearing distance that you can't wait until he goes back to college."

Aiken was about to protest this unfair accusation, but then he realized that she was probably right and decided to quit while he was ahead.

"It's a nice day," he commented, refusing to be embarrassed by his own cowardice. She laughed, because she always did have the gift of seeing through him, and she moved over to make room.

"Yes, it is," she said as Aiken sat. They listened to the tree's new leaves rustling overhead for a while before Holly spoke again.

"You ever wonder what could have happened if things had worked out differently?" Holly asked, leaning her head against his shoulder. Aiken shook his head. She craned her head to look at him. "Really? Never?"

"Why would I? We're here, aren't we? Our house, our family, our life. Why would I ever wonder about anything else?"

"You know, you have a terrible imagination," Holly laughed.

"My imagination is perfectly fine," Aiken said, a bit stiffly.

"Oh, honey. What's one example of you using your imagination, other than when you were imagining what unthinkable things Ash's doing at college?"

Aiken rolled his eyes but tried to think of an example that would prove her wrong. He glanced up at the tree.

"I've always let my imagination run wild in regards to this tree," he said. Holly raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Oh?"

"Sometimes I think..." He ran out of impetus, but since Holly only looked interested instead of mocking, he decided to go on. "Sometimes I think that there's something odd about this tree. I've seen one like it before, maybe. But it feels familiar to me. Like...a friend."

Holly wasn't laughing, and her smile had kindness rather than ridicule.

"What else?" she asked.

"Well, you see that hole between the two parts of the trunk?" Aiken asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, when I was a boy, my grandfather had a tree on his land that was very much like this one. It had a hole in the trunk like this one, too. I used to write letters and drop them in.” He took another suspicious glance at her, but her expression hadn’t changed. Mollified, he went on.

“I used to think it was some sort of safe. I remember when I put my favorite toy in... Where are you going?”

Holly had risen and rounded the bench to examine the hole.

“I’m just looking,” she said. Aiken frowned.

“For?”

Holly slipped her hand through and felt around a bit.

“Well, maybe someone else put something in this tree, just like you did,” she said. She felt around for a few more minutes before her face fell. “Nothing here,” Holly sighed. She tried to remove her hand. Aiken saw her flush bright red.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded.

“I...I think my hand’s stuck!” she said. He raised his eyebrow.

“It can’t be. You managed to fit it in to begin with.”

“I’m telling you, it’s stuck!” Her voice had risen an octave.

“Okay, okay, calm down.” Aiken tugged experimentally on her hand. It did indeed seem to be stuck. “It feels like your hand is caught on something.”

“I don’t know...oh!” Her hand popped free. She looked as though she were about to laugh with relief, but then her expression became stricken.

“What is it?” Aiken asked. “Are you hurt?”

“My ring!” she gasped. “My wedding ring...it’s gone!” She held up her scraped hand to show him. Aiken took it in his own hands and inspected it.

“Certainly is,” he affirmed.

“Oh, God, we have to get it back! That’s my wedding ring!” Holly exclaimed, pressing her forehead against the trunk to look into the hole. “Do you have a flashlight?” Aiken went for one, and they shone it around the small space, taking turns looking for the ring. However, there was no sign of it.

It was nearly noon by the time they gave up. Aiken saw no recesses

inside the tiny gap that might have hidden the ring from view. It was gone.

“I’ll get you another,” he promised, patting her back. Holly wiped away a couple of tears.

“But that ring was so special. I can’t believe I lost it. I’m so sorry, Kenny.”

“Aren’t you listening? It’s all right.” He may have sounded sincere, but Aiken believed that he would be having nightmares about his bank account balance after making good on his promise to her. Gold rings did not grow on trees, though they could apparently be consumed by them, alas.

He walked her back to the house, an arm around her shoulder. As he held the door open for her, however, he shot a glance back at the tree. It must have been all of Holly’s talk about his imagination that did it, because he could have sworn the branches were waving gently at him, in spite of the fact that there was no breeze.

Chapter Seven: February 2, 2010

The days froze Aiken. He couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. His tree, its bare branches scraping at the windows, could not reach him. When Ash visited, Aiken could hear the quiet discussions between him and the nurses about Aiken’s “status.” They had given him a few days, then a few weeks, then months to live. After each guess fell short, Aiken felt a personal satisfaction. He’d go and live forever and **really** show them.

He’d stopped talking altogether a few months back just because he didn’t feel like making the effort to string words together any longer. Doctors had come to see him, and they’d tried everything they could dream up to get him to start talking again. He was diagnosed with everything from dementia to Alzheimer’s. Little did they know it was more or less sheer stubbornness.

He still ate, but ponderously, so that it often took hours to finish half of his meal. He had lost weight. His ribs became pronounced: a phenomenon that hadn’t occurred in decades. He didn’t walk anymore. Instead, they carted him around in a wheelchair, banging his elbows in the doorways and heaving him awkwardly from chair to bed and back again. Aiken wished he could just die and have done with it. However, his body still demanded that he live, so he was reluctantly forced to go along with it.

His hand had grown crabbed and frozen around the gold ring, which he

hadn't set down—not even in sleep—since he had taken it from the tree. He coughed often: a horrible, wracking cough that was the only sound he made nowadays. Most of his time was spent staring out the window at the frozen landscape as his mind turned over the past like a stream turns over pebbles, recalling each memory in minute detail and softening their hard edges. He thought about things he blamed himself for and things that had been done to him. He thought of people who had come into and out of his life. With no other tasks at hand than allowing the aides to move, dress, clean and feed him, Aiken found ample time to review his life with intense scrutiny.

He slept less, giving over the nights to thought as the branches creaked outside and scraped and scratched at the glass. And when at last he ran out of thoughts to think, he let himself drift.

They stopped putting him in the wheelchair altogether. He lay in his bed, pulling further and further away from the immediate sounds of the building and his fellow inmates, always clutching the gold ring in his hand so that it was the temperature of his skin. On the table across from him, he could see the orchid's leaves going shriveled and yellow and, one by one, dropping to the small stones that lined the bottom of the terrarium. A couple still stayed green, however: sustained by the book girl's determination.

One day, he noticed that the sunlight shone a little warmer. Also, he found that when he squinted, he could see new buds on the branches that pressed against the window. The orchid, too, was changing. A budded spike grew from the few remaining leaves, curving gently. Aiken contemplated this for a few more days before arriving to the conclusion that spring was coming, and soon.

Thinking had become an extraordinarily slow process, though very rewarding. He reached conclusions he never would have thought possible before, and he tapped memories he had never known he possessed. As a scientist, he knew that he should break his silence just long enough to share these revelations with someone, even if it were the girl who still came fully armed with her endless Thoreau. However, he didn't even know where to begin, and besides, he was far too tired to undertake such a task, so he kept his silence and navigated the waking dream with increasing familiarity and ease.

He stopped eating, feeling that food and the workings of his digestive system took too much from his furiously working mental processes. He had begun to relive the moments of his life that he was not particularly proud of, but with his new powers of concentration, he was able to change things in the memories. It was in this way that he fixed his past mistakes, making peace with childhood nemeses, then moving on to the runty boy he had once neglected to defend against a high school bully...and so on. He hardly

registered it when the nurse gave the news to Ash, who had taken to sitting silently in the armchair across from the bed for an hour every evening, that Aiken was dying and that it would be quite soon, so sorry.

“Dad.”

Aiken was lost in one of his innumerable mental apologies to Holly and at first did not hear him. However, the title brought him a step back from the memories, and he blinked voluntarily for the first time in what seemed like ages.

Ash did not appear to notice his father’s arrival. His head was bowed over Aiken’s hand, which he was clinging to. Aiken wondered if Ash knew how hot his grip was...or else, Aiken’s hands were comparatively much colder. He waited, feeling the oddness of inhabiting his own body after spending so much time away from it lately. It felt uncomfortable and claustrophobic, as though he were a snail that had outgrown its shell.

“I just wanted to say goodbye, I guess. I owe a lot to you. After Mom... after she died, I guess you and I just sort of got further apart. But I wanted to tell you now that I’m sorry, and I wish I’d made more of an effort. And that I’ll miss you. And...well, I love you, Dad.”

A tear splashed onto Aiken’s cover. He tried to take control of his hand again, just enough to squeeze back, but he had spent too much time away from it. All he could do was blink.

He suddenly noticed that the window was open and that fresh, bright air was spilling inside the room. The beech’s branches reached into the room, scraping at the ceiling, tracking against the walls and encircling the bed. Aiken wondered how Ash could fail to notice the soft, new leaves that brushed the back of his neck and his shoulder, but then again, people so immersed in life noticed very little at all.

One great branch in particular wrapped around the side of his bed and, like a friendly dog, sent a questing offshoot over the rails and nudged under Aiken’s hand. He turned his eyes down to look. There, nestled under his palm, was a crude wooden top, chips of paint still clinging to its dented sides. Aiken could smell the faint scent of pipe tobacco wafting from the object.

Aiken could feel his face shift almost of its own volition, the corners of his mouth curving upwards. He stared at the top as Ash sobbed against the back of his hand. The scent of growing things and undiluted sunlight filled his awareness, reminding him of a lifetime of spent winters and new springs. Aiken enjoyed sensation of sunlight against his face for another few moments before he turned to the waiting memory, brought to him by the reappearance of

the top. He stood, stretched, and glanced down at his son.

“I’m proud of you, you know,” he said. “Good luck with it all.”

Branches curled around him, brushing him with fuzzy new leaves. Aiken let go of something he hadn’t been aware he’d been clinging to, and using the branches as a guide, he stepped into the last memory.

Chapter Eight: December 25, 1941

“Kenny. Hey, Kenny!”

Kenny looked up from his new book. Wrapping paper lay folded to one side, just as his mother had taught him. It was too expensive to throw out.

“Yes, Grandpa?”

Grandpa Aiken was sitting on the couch. Mother was out in the kitchen, talking with Aunt Rosemary. The comforting smells of Christmas filled the air: coffee, a ham in the oven and the sweet scent of the pine tree in the corner. Kenny went over to his grandfather and pulled himself up onto the couch next to him.

Grandpa handed Kenny a small leather sack.

“I’ll need the bag back...it’s my tobacco pouch,” Grandpa said as Kenny inspected the object. “Go ahead; open it,” Grandpa urged when Kenny hesitated. Kenny knew that Mother probably wouldn’t approve of it, since Grandpa had waited until she was in another room before he gave this to Kenny. However, curiosity won out over obedience, and Kenny loosened the drawstring on the pouch and shook its contents into his hand.

It was a small wooden top that used to be painted with blue and green stripes, though the paint had mostly worn off. Kenny held it up, seeing the dents and scratches and inhaling the scent of pipe tobacco that always made him think of Grandpa.

“That’s something I got from my father when I was your age,” Grandpa said, glancing towards the kitchen before smiling down at Kenny. Kenny grinned back at him before sliding to the bare floor, crouching forward to spin the top. It danced across the wooden floorboards, wobbling a bit before losing its balance and toppling. Kenny scooped it up, then dashed over to his grandfather to give him a half-tackle, half-hug. Grandpa’s arms squeezed Kenny briefly before releasing him.

“Want to go outside for a walk?” he asked. Kenny nodded and slipped the top into his pocket.

He and his grandfather bundled up and left the hot, humid house for the crisp air outside. A thin layer of snow covered everything in sight, and Kenny spent a few minutes scraping his feet along the sidewalk to make twin tracks behind him. However, he quickly got bored and jogged to catch up to his grandfather. They walked across the yard and headed into the woods, the sound of their footsteps muffled by the snow. The sky was a sullen shade of grey, and it was dim under the trees. Kenny thought it was a little spooky, but he felt safe with Grandpa there. Somewhere in the treetops, a raven *crawked* and then fell silent.

“Are we going to the tree, Grandpa?” Kenny asked eagerly. He loved going to Grandpa’s house for holidays: partly for the way Grandpa gave him special treats that his mother wouldn’t, partly for the way Aiken felt in the country instead of where he lived in the Bronx, and partly because of Grandpa’s tree.

He loved that tree from the very first time Grandpa had taken him to see it. Kenny had climbed up and all over its broad branches, had napped in the soft grass at its roots and had bounced his rubber ball against its trunk. One summer, Kenny’s mother let him stay with Grandpa for an entire week. He and Grandpa had spent the time roaming around the forest, looking at the plants and animals and—most exciting of all—a whole skeleton of a deer. His grandfather had all sorts of stories to tell, too. There were stories about leprechauns and dragons and werewolves. There was also a story that struck Kenny in particular...the one about a tree much like his Grandpa’s tree, which could speak if one listened very, very carefully.

That was the story Kenny asked Grandpa to tell more than any of the others. He loved the idea of being friends with a tree and hearing it speak when no one else could. He started writing letters to the tree or drawing pictures on some of Grandpa’s precious paper (which, unlike his mother, Grandpa was more than willing to give to Kenny to use) and then slide them into the gap in the trunk. Kenny wasn’t sure if Grandpa was taking them out or not, but every time he put a letter into the tree, it wouldn’t be there when he next checked.

Kenny had learned early on that his mother disapproved of Grandpa the same way she disapproved of chocolate and the radio. Grandpa always had his own way of doing things. Like with the top. Kenny knew that his mother had expressly forbidden Grandpa from giving him any “frivolous” toys for Christmas, now that he was older, but Grandpa had snuck him one, anyway. Kenny knew that the right thing to do would be to tell his mother and hand

over the top. But he felt it in his pocket as they walked, his fingers running over the polished surface, warming it, and he couldn't bear the thought of giving it over to Mother. She'd be angry, and she'd maybe even forbid him from visiting Grandpa again.

But Kenny didn't want to be dishonest. Torn, he drew the top from his pocket and studied it.

"I used to spin that top for hours. I had watched my father make it in his shop and couldn't wait for him to be finished with it. It was my birthday present," Grandpa said.

Kenny nodded, but he still didn't feel good about it. The more he thought about it, the sicker he felt. Mother would find out about it somehow. She always did. She would take it away from him in the end, and he would have to live with the lie weighing on his conscience. If there was one thing his mother had taught him well, it was that lying was the worst thing he could do.

They had reached the meadow where the tree grew without Kenny realizing they were so close. He raised his head and saw the enormous tree, its branches outspread like Grandpa's arms when he was waiting for a hug. Snow lined each branch, dripping down in clumps as a slight breeze wove among them.

Kenny and his grandfather made their way through the long grasses of the meadow, which were bowed to the ground by the weight of the wet snow. Grandpa pointed out the little holes dug by mice that burrowed beneath the snow and grass. Then they reached the tree, and Kenny ran up and gave the trunk a hug like he always did.

Grandpa craned his neck back, taking off his cap and smoothing back the hairs still clinging to his balding head before replacing the cap.

"Grandpa," Kenny said, leaning against the tree as he looked down at the top in his hand.

"Yes?"

"I can't be dishonest. Keeping this would be dishonest."

Grandpa was silent for a moment.

"I see," he said.

"I really, really like it," Kenny hastened to say, "but Mother will take it from me, and I would of lied to her, which makes everything worse."

"Indeed."

Kenny saw how Grandpa's face had fallen, and he left the tree to throw his arms around his grandfather's middle. Grandpa hugged him back, then crouched down so that they were at eye level.

"I'm sorry, Kenny. I wasn't thinking. Your mother..." He hesitated. "The Depression changed a lot of people. She's doing what she thinks is best for you, and it's wrong of me to give you something I knew you'd get in trouble for having."

Kenny looked down at the top again.

"What do I do with it?" he asked.

"Well now, I don't know. It's a very special gift."

Kenny was silent for a few minutes. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the tree.

"Can I give it to the tree?" he asked.

Grandpa smiled.

"I think that would be a fine idea. In fact, it was made from a dead branch taken from this tree, so it's like you're bringing it back home."

"Bringing it home," Kenny repeated, enchanted by the idea. He turned and inspected the gap in the tree. It looked like it was just big enough to fit it through.

"Go ahead," Grandpa urged. He looked as entranced by the prospect as Kenny was. Kenny reached up and pushed the wooden toy into the gap. Then he turned around and hugged Grandpa.

"Thanks for your present, Grandpa," he said.

"Merry Christmas. You're a real good kid, you know?"

He ruffled Kenny's hair, and Kenny reached up to smooth it back down, laughing. Then Grandpa stood up slowly and reached out his hand. Kenny took it. Together, they started towards the edge of the forest again.

Barking came from the trees, and Kenny turned to find a big, bristle-furred dog bounding towards them in the snow. He thought the dog looked familiar, but he couldn't remember where he had seen it before. The dog acted like he knew him, though, and soon Kenny was fending off wet dog-kisses, laughing.

"His name is Juniper," his grandfather said.

"Maybe he's lost," Kenny said, rubbing the dog's neck, grinning as the

dog leaned into his hand, tongue lolling. The dog wasn't wearing a collar.

"No, he's not lost. In fact, he's yours," Kenny's grandfather said. Kenny looked up at his grandfather, unable to believe what he had just heard.

"But...Mother..."

"Juniper belongs to you," Grandpa said firmly, but he was smiling. "And he came a long way to find you."

"And you found me too," Kenny said slowly. He had the strangest feeling that he was remembering all of this, but it was somehow different than what he remembered. There was Grandpa, and the snow, and the top, and the tree. That all seemed right. But some pieces didn't feel like they fit. And yet, they too were familiar. This dog...Kenny *knew* this dog. And he knew Kenny.

As though to emphasize that thought, Juniper gave Kenny another long, enthusiastic swipe of his tongue, his tail thumping against the ground. Kenny felt something connect within him, but he still couldn't tell what it was. It was good, though.

"Come on, Kenny," Grandpa said. Kenny stood, and the dog took his place on Kenny's other side, his tail wagging hard enough to hurt as it battered Kenny's knee. "It's time to go home."

"Do you hear that?" Kenny asked. Grandpa listened, but he just shook his head, smiling.

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

Kenny concentrated on the words that seemed to come from the trees around them, floating on the crisp air like the clouds of his breath. It sounded familiar, like something he had heard someone say before: *"Soon the ice will melt, and the blackbirds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in this face of God, and we will not be sorrowful, if he is not."*

As they stepped into the odd twilight lingering beneath the trees, Kenny turned back to glance once more at the meadow.

There was no great tree there: only a silent, unbroken field of white.

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