
One.

an installment by Alec Hendrickson

Will very nearly resembled a sloth as he draped his weight along the thick, seat-like branch of the treetop nest. His leg dangled lazily as he laid on his back and gazed up at the pale blue sky through the colorful leaves. Just around the corner from home, this particular maple tree was his favorite because it provided a sturdy, quick climb, and hosted several routes up and down. He blinked quickly. Shaking off his daydream, he glanced down at the well-used paper of his leather-bound sketch book; doodles of half-drawn animals showed how focused he had been. Will had his head in the clouds, or so he was told by his teachers. He frowned at the thought. Everyone in this small town was so closed-minded. He preferred to think his imagination soared to heights that others did not dare to go. He didn't quite sigh as he exhaled—his mind had wandered yet again to that peculiar summer night.

Why can't I just forget about it? He wondered to himself for what seemed like the hundredth time. A couple months back, he had seen something, or thought he saw something...no he had definitely seen something that he was sure no one in this straight-forward, no-nonsense town would believe. Will drummed his fingers irritably. He barely believed himself. Will's stomach growled as if it recognized his mood. I better get back before mom starts to worry.

"Fat chance of that", he replied to his own thought with a laugh. Will's mother, Mrs. Willow Free, seemed to worry as a rule. Will slung his sketchbook onto his back using the straps he had fashioned from spare shoe strings. Reaching up to grasp the overhead branch, he swung, graceful as a chimp, down to the next branch as he had so many times before. Vexing thoughts of that mysterious summer night flickered in the back of his mind as he methodically descended from limb to limb before finally reaching the soft earth at the base of the great maple.

"Same time tomorrow?", Will jested with a pat to the trunk of his tree friend. He looked up once more through the looming limbs of the towering tree. This time he did sigh as he said, "Back to reality." He turned to go. Before he could take a step he ran square into something that was moving swiftly in the opposite direction.

"Hey!", an indignant voice yelled.

Will felt a bundle hit his stomach as they collided, and he looked down to see several books lying at his feet. He stooped to pick them up, and the girl was there in an instant.

“Be careful with those!”, she said with concern and a touch of annoyance. When all the books were gathered safely back in her arms, she flicked her wavy brown hair out of her face with a toss of her head and said, “You’re lucky there’s no damage. You would be paying me back for months to replace them. These books are filled with need-to-know information, and I need to know.” For a moment, she studied him with intelligent eyes. “What are you doing out here, Will? Hugging trees?”

Will put his arm up and rubbed the back of his head. A little embarrassed, he said, “Hey Olivia. Sorry about your books. I was just..umm..drawing. Wanna see?” He pulled his sketchbook out and opened to a random page. Taking up every bit of space on both pages were pencil-drawn tree trunks and shaded branches with dense foliage. They were clustered close and very detailed. Off to one side there was an erased clearing shaped like a door that seemed to be radiating light. Will faked a cough and snapped the book shut. With a nervous laugh he said, “Not one of my better pieces”.

Olivia eyed him curiously, then shrugged and said, “I better be off now. These books won’t read themselves! Enjoy your fantasies, tree hugger”. She looked at him with a sly grin before setting off at a quick pace.

“Smooth. Real smooth”, Will spoke aloud with mild frustration, but keeping his humor. “Next time I think I’ll wear a sign around my neck that says, ‘Don’t Mind the Loony Toon’”. Will kicked at a small rock and sent it bounding away from the tree. An immediate reaction of light, quick chattering came from where the rock had been sent. Will saw a squirrel with impeccable brown fur and a big bushy tail holding the rock in its tiny hands. Curious, Will thought, and the squirrel dashed past him and skittered deftly up the tree trunk, where it stopped and turned to look at him with beady black eyes that seemed kind, somehow. The squirrel scanned him for a moment, as probable as that sounds, and Will stood motionless for a moment. Without thought, he reached towards it, and the squirrel scurried to the lowest branch and hid behind a cluster of maple leaves. Will took a careful step forward, caught up in the animal’s odd behavior, but before he could get close, a tiny, shining object dropped from the squirrel’s hiding place. Will bent and plucked the item from the ground with two fingers, like a bird would grab a pebble in its beak. He held it up, and it shone with a dazzling display of color, reflecting the evening sunlight in all directions. Curious as a cat, and getting a closer look, Will noticed his own face mirrored over and over in several small sections on the stone’s surface. It looked like a fly’s eye would under a microscope, and the kaleidoscope of color was like no gem he had ever seen.

“Incredible”, Will breathed. Transfixed by the crystal, he forgot the squirrel completely, and did not notice when it headed up the tree trunk. Suddenly, a bird

burst from the uppermost foliage singing a tune that touched Will in a familiar way. Taking tender care, he slid the gemstone into the front chest pocket of his light, warm jacket, zipped it closed and set off for home with newfound energy. This little beauty will make a great addition to my collection, he mused with a touch of pride. As he walked, he bounced on the balls of his feet and whistled the tune he was sure he had heard before the bird. He beamed at all the beautiful trees along the way that rustled their leaves to greet him as he passed by. One of the neighborhood dogs came bumbling up happily beside him, and Will ruffled its head and smiled before sending it on home with only a smooth gesture. Thoughts of that bizarre summer night had fled for now, and Will felt something settle inside him. He felt..clear; open.