

My Climb To Freedom

Growing up in a small town may be considered by some to be dull, but to a nine-year-old, it could hold significant interest, especially were it to become the site of his premature end.

At that time, my family was considered by the other kids on the block to be the “poor family.” I was upset by this, as a child. It was difficult to feel different from everyone else. We dressed differently, lived in a rent house, and had old, rusty vehicles. Dad’s car was so loud that, in a quiet neighborhood like ours, one could hear him coming some minutes before he actually arrived.

In our back yard was a massive sugar maple. Branches went everywhere and extended for miles until they disappeared, somewhere up there. To me, this particular tree held adventure and excitement. How to get up to that first limb? How to get just a little further, up there? What can you see from over there? That tree often served as an escape from the cares of the world, a shelter from life’s storms. Even on a clear August day such as this one, a storm was beginning to brew.

My neighbor Will, a year older, and I were friends, except when the older brother he idolized was around. I remember the first time I met Nick. He made me give him a quarter for protection and then slapped me in the face. “I’m protectin’ ya from yerself,” he laughed derisively. Jamie Peters said he was the meanest kid in town. Bobbie McBride called him a “devil incarnate.” I didn’t know what an incarnate was, but it sounded awful. This particular evening, however, he seemed to be in good humor as he sauntered over to where Will and I were playing. “Hey, stupid,” he growled in my direction. He whispered something to Will, and they snickered over it. Then Nick turned

to me and made several off-color remarks concerning my family, followed by howls of laughter from both. My cheeks flushed crimson, as I strode over to him, my family pride boiling in my veins. I didn't know what to do. I had never fought anyone before, but I was certainly in the mood for it now. I clenched my fist, closed my eyes, and swung. When I opened my eyes, there was Nick on the ground, dazedly holding a bleeding nose, and Will staring agape. As I realized what I had done, the impending danger of the situation did not escape me.

I took off! Nick was after me in a flash, with Will close behind. I raced around their house, through a neighbor's yard, along the fence, and into our backyard. I was headed for our front door and safety, but was there time to make it? They were gaining on me much too quickly! In another second I'd be caught. Unless...The tree! I made a sudden change in direction, and was off the ground before my pursuers knew what happened. My dear old tree, which had been my escape from care, was now become a safe haven.

Then, to my horror, Will was sent up after me! I scrambled to a hasty retreat in the upper recesses of the tree. My adversary was a fair tree-climber, not to be considered lightly, and he was getting closer. I leapt from branch to branch, swinging nimbly as the fabled Tarzan. Will followed, while Nick barked orders from beneath. Both were clever, and though I was more skilled, they soon had me trapped. I had made the mistake of not going high enough. I could now just barely escape Will's clutches, while Nick, bounding beneath me like some savage animal, was clawing at my feet. Nowhere to turn. Nothing to do but await the inevitable.

Suddenly, a familiar roar filled the air. Oh, what a glorious sound! “Dad’s home!!” I sang out. Will fairly fell out of the tree in his haste to get away. And Nick, he ran almost faster than he had in chasing me.

So much can happen in a relatively short space of time. Often it takes years to fully appreciate an event that transpires in a few minutes. The concept of fair-weather friends is one that even I learned quickly. My friendship with Will was somewhat strained after this event. I also saw that a bully, such as Nick, is often more talk than action, and that even someone claiming to be so tough, fears a higher power, namely Dad. Both were valuable lessons, but the most important, though slightly less obvious, point didn’t present itself to me until much later. No matter what one’s differences may be, or how poor one’s state in life, one should never be ashamed of one’s family or position. That noisy, decrepit vehicle not only saved me from immediate danger, it taught me a freedom from the fear of other’s opinions.