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The Tree

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About the Contributor (Optional)

Jeff Stratton, originally from Appomattox, Virginia, is presently a junior in the mechanical engineering program at Cedarville. His extracurricular interests include whitewater canoeing, rock climbing, and backpacking, and he prefers fried tortilla chips over the baked variety.

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The Tree

The ant crawled across the forest floor. Its small, black body moved swiftly, oblivious to the two observers hovering above it. Its pin-like legs carried it into the shadow that grew larger around it until the ant was covered by a muddy, red Converse sneaker.

"Why did you smash the ant, Joey?"

"I don't know. Why do you keep asking me all these questions? If you don't quit asking questions, I'll send you back home."

"Mamma said that I could never be alone in the woods by myself."

"Who cares what Mom said. I'm the man of the house now, and I can do whatever I want. So you just better do what I say, or I'll make you go back home."

Thomas shifted his eyes from Joey to the ant. He bent down and picked up a twig and squatted above the smashed ant. Wrapping one of his arms around his bent legs, he probed at the flattened black body with the twig in his other hand. His blue eyes focused intently on the ant's lifeless body as he pushed it with the twig. The sunlight that broke through the green forest ceiling reflected off his light brown hair. A dirty hand took hold of the sweaty collar of his t-shirt and jerked at it.

"Come on Thomas. What cha' want to play with a dead ant for? Let's go climb the tree at the top of the hill."

"Oh boy! Can I climb up it this time? Can I, Joey?"

"We'll see when we get there."

Thomas sprang up following Joey as he turned and left the small clearing. Joey began to think about his father's order not to allow Thomas to climb any trees, but quickly his thoughts turned to the sounds of yelling and crying that filled his house the last night that his father was there. He forged into the forest ahead with a determined pace. Thomas stumbled behind him grasping onto Joey's shoulder with his left hand. He shielded his face with his right hand from the small limbs that Joey had passed underneath.

As they approached the top of the hill, Thomas could make out the outline of the old sycamore tree towering above the other hardwoods around it. Its white branches resembled human arms as they stretched toward the blue sky. Thomas' eyes lit up

as he pressed closer to Joey.

"Quit pushing me! You're going to knock me over and neither one of us will get to climb the tree!"

"I'm sorry, Joey. Do you see the tree? I think it grew fifty feet since you climbed it last time. Can I climb it today, Joey? Please?"

"If you'd quit pushing on me, I might let you climb it."

"I'm sorry, Joey."

When they reached the tree, Thomas immediately squatted down beside the trunk. Joey wrapped his arms around Thomas' neck and worked his way onto Thomas' broad shoulders. Grasping Joey's ankles, Thomas slowly rose until Joey could reach one of the whitened limbs. Joey stood up on Thomas' shoulders and boosted himself onto the limb. He repositioned himself and took hold of the branch above him. Standing to his feet, he swung his right leg over the branch as if he were climbing onto a horse.

"Joey, can I climb up now?"

Joey paused on the branch. He looked down into the innocent eyes that had watched him ascend the tree countless times from the ground below. He looked at the scruffy face that resembled the face he had not seen in over a week.

"Oh, alright -- but don't tell Mom that I let you."

Thomas did not even take time to reply; he reached up and wrapped his hands around the limb that was only a few inches above his head. He struggled to pull his body onto the branch with his arms, but dropped back to the ground. He tried again, jumping as he jerked on the limb.

"Use your feet, Thomas."

Hanging straight-armed from the branch, Thomas walked his feet up the trunk to the height of the branch. In one awkward motion, he twisted his body on top of the branch, wrapping his legs and arms around it to steady himself. Without loosening his grip on the limb, he looked up at Joey with a grin across his face.

"I made it, Joey."

Joey did not climb to the top of the tree that day. Instead, he sat on the limb above his older brother, seven feet above the ground.

--R. Jeff Stratton