

Changed Man

The treehouse was old. Not fossils-in-a-museum old, but more like rusty-tin-can old. It had aged enough that the once proud visage had taken on a wisened, if not sage-like, appearance. Above, the shingles that luxuriously adorned the roof had been plucked off by time, leaving a top that was bald and unprotected from the elements. Streams of white light now poured through cracks in the ceiling, illuminating the faded red walls within. Outside, the walls that faced the world had become sagged, drooping as they grew familiar with the elements. The tree, whose weary shoulders the building rested on, was desperately in need of a cane, bent-backed and angled. Now the whole thing leaned over as if to show its brown brittle bones to the world.

Wood and flesh. Two things that really don't stand up to Father

Time. Not without replacement, at least.

The body of a young man ambled up the rough rungs of the crumbling ladder. With each step came the whispered whines of withered wood, and the climber could feel himself start to sink on the old bars being burdened by new weight. It had been a long time since these greyed strands had needed to do their job, not since their youth, and they now did so with great complaint. To keep from toppling, he resorted to a balancing act, slowly shifting between each step, carefully trying to avoid putting too much weight in any one place. He had already needed to abandon the climb twice now, fearing the whole bridge-up might collapse. Struggling for a moment, he heard a low-groan, then carefully pushed himself backwards.

Make that three times.

The afternoon-sun gave away its setting through the long shadow of the figure that it cast at an angle across the lawn. Bent-backed. He paused himself, waiting for a moment before trying again.

Not that his body was lacking in physical strength or stamina, of course. He had paid good money to ensure as much.

A lot of damn money.

The man's pause came from reflection. It had been almost two decades since he had built the thing with his grand-kids, and he could still remember the very first time he had proudly looked at it, fully finished, from just about where he stood now. The tattered form had been in much better shape then.

As he took another stab at making his way up the ladder, he started to feel sharp pricks, as pieces of one of the jagged rungs broke off into his palms. This time, however, he was able to steadily ascend his aged-creation, rising up with only these small slivers getting in his way.

Good thing I won't have to deal with these splinters for much longer.

He mused, smiling to himself as he finally topped the ladder.

Although I may need to pay extra for them.

Jacob Beech-Sellers had been born and raised in the Alaskan woods, among the tall pines and crisp mountain air. As a boy everyone called him “Jay”. He had been energetic, flitting around the woodlands like the bird that shared his nickname.

Growing up, his father always stressed to him the importance of living off the land, and exercised this himself in both habit and job. In fact, Jacob’s earliest memories were of going out into the deep forests with his father as he went to work cutting down yellow cedar, and he would vividly remember later leaving these woods driving lumber into town as he grew older.

He had been born to these snowy forests, and felt a strong connection to the green and inviting wilderness that surrounded him. But he also loved the sea. Jacob dreamed of living by the beach, feeling the warm sand and pleasant breeze, especially when the days at home were cold. That’s why, when he finished high school at eighteen, he left the Alaskan winters behind, moving to the sandy beaches of Santa Barbara, California. His father had connections there, a friend from his college days, and put him in contact with his son. His dad’s friend ran a farm in the fertile land of California’s central coast, growing lettuce and artichoke. Jacob was able to get a job there, working as a field hand, and cruising the seaside in his free time.

One day while he was out at the beach, a tall glass of water caught his eye. She was stunning, more beautiful than any other woman he had ever met. Jacob gathered the courage to speak to her, and made what he considered one of the best decisions in his life. It had been Eden, sweet Eden. And for some strange reason, she had liked him back.

Soon they were dating. Two years later they were engaged. Four years after they had first met they were married. With her he was complete. She was his other half, and it was as though they were created just for each other.

After spending five years doing farm work, Jacob had decided he wanted a change of pace. He had grown tired of blistered palms and aching limbs, and wanted to try his hand at something new. A friend suggested real estate as an option, and he figured he'd take a chance. He decided to take a course at his local community college on it, and quickly came to be satisfied with this choice. The ins and outs of real estate brokerage spoke to him, and he loved the idea of helping people discover their dream homes, all while getting to explore new houses himself. After the class ended, he studied up, took the test, and earned his realtor license.

Not long after, he was able to land his first job in the field, working as an agent. It was low-level projects at first, but over time it grew, and Jacob loved the work. Around fifteen years later he had made a name for himself, and had slowly but surely risen through the ranks of a local firm before leaving them on good graces to start his own practice. He sold residential real-estate, primarily ones beside the sea.

And in a funny sort of way, both his father's lumber mill and his own selling of beach-front properties would illustrate living off the land. But that joke was lost on him.

He had been happy for a long time, and had raised a nice family in great comfort. Three beautiful and healthy kids: a son and two daughters. A picket fence, a well-manicured lawn, and a tire swing out back as the cherry on top; He had it all. And

after years of mostly good parenting, his kids had moved off, and started families of their own. But they would come by often, bringing their own young children.

He had decided to build a treehouse for his grandkids and spoil them in the ways befitting a grand-parent. They would excitedly visit, and play in the treehouse along with their grandfather, making up adventures in their imagination. To him, life at this point had been perfect. He was retired, and could live how he liked. He was able to spend time with his wife, his children, his grandchildren, and play a little golf on the side. He could enjoy the youth and vigor of his grandchildren without having to also bear the toll of rearing them as he had with his own children. It was paradise.

But as his grandchildren grew up, they went off on their own into the world, and while they occasionally visited him, these visits soon grew few and far between. Then, eight years ago, his wife had begun feeling quite ill, and after a trip to the hospital, the worst was confirmed. Despite the chemotherapy, she slowly withered away, until the end about five years ago. Without Eden, there was little else to keep him going. Both he and the treehouse in back began to sag with the years, falling into lonely disrepair.

Looking out the kitchen window, this scene had come to represent not just a glimpse into his backyard, but to better days. To his young grandkids. *To Eden*. He always imagined climbing back into that treehouse, but it was no longer possible for him to visit except in his memories. Jacob knew he'd never be able to climb back up into that thing and get back down in one piece.

Until now.

Jacob had made it. He had climbed the ladder-*his* ladder-into the clouds, where he could not have traveled before, to a land always visible but out of reach. It was as if grasping the gentle blue veil of the sky and tucking himself into the heavens. For he had not journeyed into the treehouse since his grandchildren were young, and had long been stuck below, as an outside observer. All these years, it had remained an untouched sanctuary.

Oh, how it had called.

Beautifully, dangerously, like a siren. A silky-cry serenading his mind's eye.

As Jacob now looked around inside the treehouse, he found himself suddenly struck by all the memories that came flooding back. Wispy visions of his still-young grandchildren floated around him, smiling as they raced past. They filled the wooden grotto with ethereal echoes of laughter and joy, a cacophony of youthful spirit. He stared breathlessly. Here, high above the ground, where forever-young children played, it was certainly hard not to gaze with rapture.

And there was Eden.

She looked as beautiful as ever. Younger and more healthy than last he saw her, perhaps, but to him she had never aged a day so long as they'd known each other. He wanted to reach out and embrace this beautiful apparition, to place her memory against his heart.

Yes indeed, he had climbed his ladder. He was reunited with all that he had lost. But it wouldn't be time to reconnect. Not yet. They were there and he was here but not to stay. Only for as long as he had the time.

Was there the time?

He looked down at his watch.

Jacob dreaded the thought of leaving. He wanted to stay here forever. In this body. This treehouse. These memories. But soon the day would end, and all of this would be a memory once more.

It was a sacrifice, being carried into this world of unkempt earthly pleasures and sensations, of youth and all its joys, but only for a term. Getting to live, truly live, then having it all snatched away. To leave the fruitful lands of paradise, and travel towards an arid sand-swept desert. He was expected not just to cross out of life and vitality, but to embrace this cross with open arms, outspread for all to see. These hands had changed, but they could never show the true weight they carried.

But all of this was a noble sacrifice. A sacrifice that saved others. The selfless act of bearing this toll with dignity and grace. It meant others would be safe. If he had refused this cross, others would have been damned to worse fates.

Though that hardly made it any easier. Even if he told himself as much, it still didn't stop the urge he had to flee; to take heaven and body away to somewhere that he could be safe. He felt like a scorched ship surrounded by sea, dying of thirst, begging

for just one cool sip from the fountain of youth. For all of his suffering before this cross, he had only been given a single day. He was so thirsty. This small taste was nothing but a sickening taunt, like vinegar given to the parched man. It only tortured him, teasing his desires, leaving him more dry.

This trickle of youth was not all in vain, however.

When Jacob was younger, he learned with much fascination about the beings and fables of Jewish folklore. Ever-frightening was the dybbuk, an entity whose name was Hebrew for “cling”. This was a spirit that malevolently wandered the Earth, looking for a body to steal. It’s only thoughts were of itself, and it would inhabit a living person forever unless forced out. On the other hand, so too existed the Ibbur, a similar but positive soul, whose name was Hebrew for “pregnancy”. While it would also possess a body, this spirit would only do so with the owner’s permission, staying for just a short time while it completed a mitzvah, and fulfilled a task that could only be completed in the flesh. But such thoughts of tall-tales were far from Jacob’s mind right now. The land of spirits had left long ago with his childhood, and men had replaced legends.

Jacob looked out from the windows of the tree-house. From his judas hole he could see a beautiful view of the ocean, honeyed by the now-orange-sun sinking beneath the sky. With dusk had come a beautiful sunset, and he was in the perfect place to watch it all unfold. Jacob had always thought of sunsets as a sort of grand finale, like those at the end of a fireworks show. The final hurrah before the sun retired,

and with it, the day. One more brilliant light show to leave spectators with, and make the impending darkness worthwhile.

Today had been a day that stood out amongst many of his recent others, and he had been able to do what he hadn't in years. He was treated differently by the world, had more energy, and had felt as though he could do anything. Most importantly, he had been able to give his dearly beloved the goodbye that she deserved. Up on the cliff she had always loved to visit with him, nestled away at the end of the secret trail they had hiked together for so many years.

They used to have picnics there, eating up the sunshine and each other's company on the tall chaparral-covered slopes. In fact, it was on one such excursion many years ago that he had proposed to her, and their love had grown even stronger between these rocky craigs. It had been their secret garden, and he had felt pure bliss with her there. But he had not traveled this path for many years. Not until today, when he returned with a new body and strength; his wife's urn cradled in his arms as tenderly as if he had been able to hug her, one last time, travelling solemnly along the trails they had so giddily hiked together before.

It had been bitter-sweet watching her dance away with the wailing wind. But it invoked more peace than pain. She had suffered for so long. And though he had long feared otherwise, he had finally been able take her back to their sanctuary after all, just the two of them, one last time.

Now, as he stood and admired the world beyond the treehouse, his anxiety subsided slightly, and he felt a soft sense of contentment. This joy was as gentle as the breeze. He had nothing left he needed to settle in this world, and would just be waiting now until he was reunited with Eden once more. He could focus on whatever he wanted, maybe pick up some new hobby, perhaps.

Being in a thoughtful mood, he decided that his first course of action would be to try and figure out what the tattoo on his arm was. It looked to him like some sort of snake, coiled around itself, gilded by the sinking sun. Or was it biting its own tail? The serpent lay in frozen movement, twisting and writhing across his muscled arm. Whatever it was, Jacob had decided it was a product of poor judgement.

I would never get a tattoo. That'll look terrible when he's older.

He wondered if he would regret it, and what else he might come to regret. So many things left to do, so many poor decisions left to make. He was so young. But regret was a rite of passage towards adulthood, just another rung that needed to be ascended.

Life was ladders, Jacob thought.

Starting as a child, everyone began climbing their own ladder, though this wasn't something that they could ever quite get back down from. Yet at the same time, once you grew older, you could no longer climb up the same ladders as before. Though Jacob's ladder was one he'd been climbing his whole life, it wasn't until now that he could make it to the top again.

He was thinking in depth on this, when his phone rang. It was like an alarm waking him out of a dream. He took a moment getting the phone out of his jacket, but Jacob already knew who it was before he looked down at the screen. He knew before they had even called him.

A raspy voice on the other side responded, and he could hear labored breathing in the background. And when the voice spoke, it was his own.

“Time’s up.”