

The Tree

Rick walked the narrow path to their spot. Brown and yellow leaves crunched underfoot, and a light breeze cooled his neck. He carried a full picnic basket. A heavy rucksack hung from his back, over a jacket perfect for fall. Rick's calves tightened ascending the steep path, and he thought about all the years he and his brother roamed these woods growing up. He was going back to their tree.

Rick approached a familiar giant black oak, put the picnic basket down and traced the tree's tall, straight trunk upward. As his gaze reached the open crown of leaves and branches that formed the canopy, a scent, mossy but good, like flavored pipe tobacco, floated into his nostrils. Sunlight, sharp and focused, beamed through the tangle of branches. Long ago, more times than he could remember, away from the watchful eyes of their parents, he and his little brother climbed and played games under this tree. In fact, their favorite game was one they made up called tree catch. It was a simple game. A kid's game. One brother climbed the tree then dropped a tennis ball through its branches; the other brother tried to catch the ball before it hit the ground.

Until last week, when Rick returned to the tree for a reconnaissance visit, it had been five years since he last saw it. During a picnic he proposed to his wife under the tree. And it has been twenty years since he last played tree catch with his brother, Avery. Today will be his brother's first visit to the tree since that last game.

Twenty-five feet from the tree, next to a patch of long brown grass, Rick removed from his rucksack a folded picnic blanket, a cell phone, and an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). He had learned to build bombs during his time in Fallujah. Rick pushed aside a patch of crisscrossed branches to reveal the shallow hole he had dug during his reconnaissance visit. The hole was

positioned, strategically, under the tree. He gently placed the IED into the hole, armed the bomb, then leveled the pressure plate even with the ground.

Rick wiped sweat from his brow. The cell phone, which he had laid on top of the picnic blanket, rang. Rick saw the caller ID; it was his brother. He sat on the ground and waited for the ringing to stop. He then placed the cell phone into the inside pocket of his jacket. *One way or another*, he thought.

Rick reapplied the crisscrossed sticks as daintily as if building a house of cards. Then, from the tree, he picked a bunch of leaves and piled them over the sticks that concealed the bomb. Not too many though, just enough leaves to clearly define the bomb's location but not appear as the target it is. Rick removed his jacket, folded it then placed it next to the leaf pile.

Rick put the rucksack back on and scanned the tree for two specific branches. He had found them during his visit last week; they could support his weight. The branches were thick and offset, one shoulder-high above the other enabling him to sit on one and lean back against the other. As he climbed toward those branches, sunlight cut into his eyes, and he rustled the tree causing a few leaves to cascade to the ground. Seated on his perch in the canopy, he easily spotted his jacket, next to the camouflaged bomb. When he got back down the rucksack was much lighter as all it contained was a cannister of four tennis balls.

Rick flicked the blanket open and floated it to the ground. It was positioned outside the reach of the tree branches and away from the camouflaged bomb. He needed the area under the tree clear, so they could play their game. He straightened the corners, so the blanket laid in a perfect square, then sat down next to it. A moment later, he spotted his brother walking up the path.

"Hello Avery," Rick called.

Avery stopped at edge of the blanket, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his black peacoat, “Hello Rick. It’s been awhile. That path is steeper than I remember. My legs hurt.” Avery then sat, his spine ramrod straight, across the blanket from Rick.

“Yeah, it’s been a while,” Rick bit into his lower lip and his heart raced at the urge to grab his brother by the neck and strangle him. But he needed to stay in control: “I thought this would be a good place to talk. You know, good memories.”

“Yes, the old tree.” Avery sniffed the air. “The place has barely changed. It even smells the same.”

The brothers sat, cross legged, separated by the blanket and like meditating Buddhas marinated in the silence. Rick’s jaw slowly tensed into concrete, and again he felt on the verge of losing it when a slight breeze rustled the leaves over the bomb. Rick involuntarily jerked his head toward the leaf pile.

“What is it?” Avery said, following his brother’s gaze to the camouflaged bomb.

“Nothing.”

Avery’s eyes remained on the leaf pile.

“Let’s have lunch,” Rick said.

“Lunch!” Avery returned his attend to Rick. “It’s only 10:00 AM. Shelby is not even done with her . . .” Avery’s head dropped.

“We’ll get to Shelby. Lunch is early because I have a surprise, and I don’t want anyone wandering in before I give it to you.”

“No one every goes here, Rick. You know that.”

“Just in case, I don’t want to spoil it.”

Rick removed two plates from the picnic basket along with cloth napkins and silverware. Then a bottle of wine, two wine glasses and a corkscrew. He opened the bottle, poured the wine and handed a glass to his brother.

“Wine? That’s unexpected. You’re a beer man. Besides I should be treating you.”

“Yes, you should be. But I’m the one who called you and I know how much you love wine,” Rick said as he pulled two small containers out of the basket and handed one to Avery.

Avery peeled the lid off and heard a slight pop as the airtight seal broke. The creamy aroma of olives and eggs mixed with the briny scent of anchovies. “Nicoise salad. You put some work into this lunch Rick.” He put a forkful in his mouth.

“Enjoying the salad, Avery?” Rick shoveled large portions of the salad into his mouth and smacked his lips with each chew.

“I know you’re angry,” Avery said as he put down the container, his hand betraying a shake.

“Here,” Rick unwrapped a sandwich and passed it to Avery.

“Avocado and cream cheese, on dark pumpernickel.”

“I hope you’re not already sick of my ex-wife’s favorite sandwich.”

“I’m sorry Rick.”

“Sorry will never be enough.”

“Then why did you invite me for a picnic? To taunt me. First the salad, then the sandwich. I suppose you have Shelby’s favorite desert in that basket.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Rick spoke through gritted teeth, “And you deserve much, much worse than taunting. You and Shelby carried on for almost a year. That’s a lot of lying. Do you have any idea of how stupid I feel?”

“You shouldn’t feel stupid.”

“Don’t tell me how to feel. All the time I thought you were looking out for her while I was overseas. You were sleeping with her. And now you're living together,” Rick tossed his sandwich on the blanket.

“At first, I was looking out for her. I swear.”

“By screwing her. That’s something that can never be taken back. I need to hear from *you* what happened. That's the only way I'll make peace with this.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“I asked you here. Didn’t I?”

“You have quite the temper.”

“Yes. I know. But believe me when I say, today is the day I have picked to move on. Please tell me.”

“As you know most of my photography jobs are weddings booked at night which made it easy for me to drop by your house during the day to check on Shelby. To see how she was doing with you being overseas. We discovered we had a lot in common. Sometimes we’d drink wine. I’d have my camera, and she would pose for casual shots, like sipping tea at the kitchen table. Or outside on the porch swing, tending the garden. The photos were meant for you.”

“She sent them while I was in Fallujah. And they were all over the house when I got home. They were of the highest god damn quality.”

Avery swallowed, “I found myself visiting more often. There were times when Shelby said she missed you and would tear up. I would take her hand. Each time we held hands just a little longer than the time before. It was wrong, and we knew it Rick, I fought it, I really did. But Shelby kept saying how much she liked my visits. Those words stuck with me.”

“You knew it was wrong, yet you kept coming over tempting Shelby.”

“You’re right Rick. I did keep coming over. She moved here for you Rick. And, she does not have many friends. Don’t blame Shelby.”

“I blame both of you. So dear brother, when did” – Rick’s nostrils flared, and his eyes darted toward the leaf pile – “*it* happen?”

“One. . .one late afternoon I had arrangements to bring my lighting equipment and backdrops to your house. Shelby wanted portrait type pictures in different outfits, to start a portfolio. She was excited about the shoot.”

“I’m not surprised. Shelby does like her clothes.” Rick said.

“Shelby was running back and forth between the living room and bedroom, where she changed. I’d take a bunch of shots, we’d drink some wine, then she’d change. This went on into the evening. We nearly finished with our second bottle of wine when she put on a, well, a provocative outfit.”

“What was it? Rick said.

“Rick, I’d rather not. . .”

“Tell me!”

“Why do you need to know the details?”

“I NEED to justify this”

“Ok, ok. A nightgown. She wore a nightgown. It fell mid-thigh and clung to her. I was posing her, and my hand brushed her breast. We kissed. . .and then.”

“Enough,” Rick said, slashing his hand through the air, his hands clenched into fists. “How could you look me in the eye? How could either of you?”

“Believe it or not I do feel guilty. We both do. And we’ve thought about it a great deal. It wasn’t just my proximity and your distance. Come on Rick. Shelby and you are opposites. You’re ham on rye not avocado and cream cheese. You prefer Pabst to wine. You proposed to Shelby after only three months of knowing her.”

“She did say yes. What does that say about her?”

“It says she’s impulsive, like you. That’s the one thing you two have in common. My god Rick, you joined the army on a whim. And you came back different.”

Again, the breeze rustled the leaves covering the bomb. Rick knew what he said next had to win Avery over. He bowed his head.

“I’ve thought about it a great deal as well and I know you’re right . . . about everything. I guess I always knew, deep down, that Shelby and I weren’t a match.” Rick rubbed his eyes and poured more wine and sipped deeply, “Do you love her?”

“Yes,” Avery said.

“I’ve come to know Shelby loves you. She is yours.”

“Then you’re okay with things?”

“No, not yet.”

“But you will be?” Avery gripped the grass beneath him.

“Yes. That’s why we are here.”

Avery’s shoulders sunk, he released the grass, “Thank you, Rick.”

Rick reached into the picnic basket for what he knew would be the last time. He retrieved two containers of strawberries, honey, and cream, Shelby’s favorite dessert. “Did you tell Shelby about our picnic?”

“Yes, when you first invited me. And we were supposed to talk today when she got back from her early morning run before I left. But she wasn’t back in time. I tried calling her on the way over and it went to voicemail. I am a little worried, she runs through some heavy traffic” – Avery pulled his cell phone out of his pocket – “I’ll give her a ring.”

Rick, trigger quick, grabbed the cannister of four tennis balls from the rucksack and waiving it over his head yelled, “Surprise.”

Avery’s arm dropped before dropped before calling Shelby. “Tree catch! I had an inkling when you picked this place for our picnic. So, this is your surprise.”

“Yes, and don’t worry about Shelby. As we both know, her Saturday morning runs are her longest, especially on a beautiful morning like this one. You can try her again later.”

“Aren’t we a little old to be playing this?” Avery said putting his cell phone back in his pocket.

“Humor me. We had a difficult conversation. Let’s eat our dessert.”

Rick placed his empty dessert container on the blanket and said, “I’ll go up first.” He loosened his belt, stuffed the cannister of tennis balls between it and his pants, cinched the buckle tight. Rick had to go up first because of what he had tied to one of the branches earlier. Its brown color blended with the tree, making it invisible from the ground. He grabbed the trunk and scrambled up the tree. He reached the two branches that could hold his weight, sat on the lower one and leaned back, his shoulder blades resting on the other branch.

“Bravo,” Avery said slowly walking and clapping his hands

Once again settled in his perch, Rick saw Avery moving toward the leaf pile. “Hey, hey, stop,” Rick shouted. “You have to be right under the ball dropper, not where you think the ball is going to end up. That’s cheating, remember?” *Something you’re very good at.*

“Ok, ok,” Avery said, stopping short of the leaf pile.

Rick opened the can of tennis balls, still cinched tight to his waist and took the first ball with his right hand. Tightly gripping the branch he was leaning on with his left hand, he bent forward extending his right arm. He hovered the ball over the tree’s cascading branches.

“Ready?” Rick shouted.

“Yes. But I feel silly doing this after all this time.”

“We’ll be done soon.”

“I have four chances. Right?”

“Ha, you remember.” *No dear brother, I have four chances.*

During his visit to the picnic area last week, Rick practiced dropping balls from the tree to determine the best place to bury the bomb. Where Avery had the best chance of stepping on the pressure plate. The velocity of the tennis ball, with a direct hit on the leaf pile, could cause the bomb to explode as well. But as Avery would be chasing the ball, he’d still be blown to bits. Rick didn’t care which way Avery died.

Rick peered through the branches below him, targeted the leaf pile, and then released the tennis ball. It pinged off the branches, zigzagging as it dropped, knocking leaves free. Avery scuttled across the ground anticipating where the ball would fall to catch it before it hit the ground. Avery was stepping toward the leaf pile when the ball hit a low branch and ricochet into his hands without touching the ground.

“Ha, wow,” a wide smile covered his face. “That’s one point for me,” Avery said.

“You won’t catch the next one.”

Rick saw his brother under the tree, arms up as he prepared for the next ball drop. A flashback filled Rick’s head. How, as young boys, they pedaled their bikes up the forest path, jumped off and let them fall to the ground, not even thinking of using the kickstands. It was a race to the tree because the first one to touch its trunk, dropped the ball first. Each visit, they climbed the tree higher, so the ball could hit more branches as it fell. Rick remembered when Avery reached the crown of the tree, determined to go higher than him. He feared Avery would slip and fall and called for him to stop. Avery, in his zeal to top Rick, appeared unaware that those upper branches were thin, and could break. And right now, poor Avery was unaware that this was his last day of life.

Rick’s thoughts returned to the present and he peered through the branch maze to the leaf pile and his jacket next to it. He analyzed the crisscrossed branches for a possible path to the target, then took aim and dropped the second tennis ball.

“I’ve got it, I got it,” Avery said.

Rick watched his brother eye the ball and backup toward the bomb. The ball careened through a square of overlapped branches as it spiraled downward, it arced toward the leaf pile. To get under the ball, Avery shuffled his feet in the direction of the bomb. He was one step from dismemberment when the ball hit a branch and beelined the opposite direction. Avery jerked his body forward, away from the bomb, swung his arm but the ball hit his fingertips and fell to the ground.

“Ha, that’s one for me,” Rick said.

“Don’t be so cocky. If I remember right, we always played three rounds. I’ll be in the tree next.”

That would never happen. This would be a one round game. “Are you having fun?” Rick said then, gunslinger quick, grabbed the third tennis ball and dropped it.

“Hey,” Avery said, as the ball ping-ponged off the branches, then like a knife slash, careened away from the leaf pile and punched into the ground. Avery picked the ball up then dropped it back to the ground. “And, yes I am having fun.”

Fun. Like when you’re with Shelby. “That’s two points for me.” His hand firm on the fourth ball and final ball, he shut one eye and aimed through the branches at the leaf pile, and then relaxed his grip. The ball hit a branch, then another, and then a third as it fell. Avery backpedaled, his eyes skyward, his shoe heels scattering dirt, leaves, and twigs as he plowed a path towards the bomb. Rick braced for the explosion.

“Got it,” Avery yelled, his back was arched, arm extended behind him, with his foot touching the edge of the leaf pile, a half-step from death. The ball had plopped right into the palm of his hand, which hung directly over the leaf pile. He straightened then thrust the ball high into the air, his smile beamed upward like a spotlight: “It’s my turn to be the ball dropper, climb on down.”

Rick did not move. That grin, that face, that Shelby liked more than his. He looked at Avery standing a whisker from death. “Avery, why don’t you try Shelby again before you come up. This would be a good time to check on her. I’m sure she’s back from her run by now.”

“Okay. Thank you. Rick.” Avery tapped Shelby’s name on his cell phone. Another cell phone’s ring filled the air.

“What, what,” Avery said. “Shelby’s ringtone it’s ... it’s here, at the picnic area. It’s coming from your jacket.”

“Better answer it, Avery. It’s your lover.”

Avery stepped to the jacket and his foot plunged through the leaf pile as he bent to pick the phone up, putting his full weight on the pressure plate.

The tree shook from the explosion. Avery's leg spun like a pinwheel as it flew into the sky. Blood gushed from Avery's torso which had one leg, and one arm still attached. The leaves and dirt became a crimson mosaic, like the sand in Fallujah after a bloody battle.

Rick slipped his head into the noose he had attached earlier to the branch he held while dropping the balls. He had taken Shelby's phone after he strangled her during her morning run, the same run she took when they were living together – her body now in the trunk of his car.

Rick smiled then stepped into the sky.