

## On a Limb

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As the sun slides down behind the darkening clouds of night, I climb up the stairs to my bedroom on the top floor of the house I inherited, which stands in the little village of Historic Washington, Arkansas, capital of the state during the Civil War. Not far from where I was born. I sit on the edge of my bed and look out as the last streams of yellow fade in the sky. I stare at the place where a favorite Apple tree once lived. Now, like my life, the place where the tree stood is empty, and loneliness haunts my room.

I think of my childhood when I spent a large part of time sitting happily on a limb of a beloved Hickory tree in the front yard of a house in McCaskill, another Arkansas village which has faded away. That tree had a limb which bent out over the grass in our lawn as it met the black-topped street. I don't recall the struggle of learning to climb. It seems I was just suddenly "up there."

When people walked into town, and under my perch, I thought they did not know I was there. Old John would walk along slowly, kicking rocks, spitting out blobs of chewing tobacco, and talking to himself.

Or so I thought.

"Me and my hound-dog need to ketch somethin' to eat," he would grunt out as he scuffled along. "Ain't got no more taste fer moon-pies."

Not knowing then what 'mon-pies' were, my imagination would bounce up into the rolling clouds, as I searched for the silent outline of a moon obscured by the southern sun's powerful glare.

"Ah'm shore glad the world is flat," 'Old Hamp' would say to the wind as he waddled past my tree. "If it wudden, we'd all fall off!!" He'd then bend over laughing in a center-stage performance which he repeated again and again for the child sitting high up in the tree-balcony. John and Hamp were well-known characters of that little village. Both loved to talk; both wore baggy trousers and scruffy shirts for days and days before letting their wives scrub them on their metal wash-boards. Neither of them seemed to want to be anywhere except in that little two-store town. Both spent most of their days hanging out at the old service station so they could see who went by, who stopped in, and who had something to talk about.

Both of these old men had wives and children, cows and chickens; one of them had a truck. And they had friends. Or they never thought that anyone was not a friend. They never seemed to know loneliness.

Loneliness for an only child in a tiny village, far from the developing world is a cloak both heavy and light. I had no reason to try to calculate the heaviness of my isolation as I had no scale which could show the measurement of 'sometimes'/ 'never'/ 'always.' I had no way to compare 'always' to 'never' as I sat in my tree or played alone.

The light of imagination/dramatic pretending was also immeasurable for me. No one asked me if I though EVERY one had a vividly vibrating imagination. No one told me that most people in the world had other things to do rather than to 'pretend.'

I also spent hours and hours in my little playhouse behind the real house. There I could speak, laugh, whisper, weep through all my 'play scenes,' and - like the tree fallin in the forest - be eternally unheard.

My mind was highly stoked with images of birds, butterflies, sailing skies, howling wolves, and the music of my mother's voice. And the country voices of the old Johns and the old Hamps.

Sitting alone in my tree and growing up as an only child did not help me to develop exceptional stages of conventional wisdom. My personal options were embossed with pieces of spirit inherited from my parents.

Hear a story, be a story-catcher. Watch the clouds, draw their faces. See the profiles of characters that live in a tree. Paint the lines and colors and images.

And go far away to college, to find the world.

But I somehow remained 'disconnected'/ 'isolated' no matter where I was. Always like a child high up in a tree.

Through eighteen years of what I thought was a wondrous marriage, with three brilliant and beautiful daughters, I often saw my husband fly off to exotic spots to pronounce things in the banker's language. One night, when we lived in Providence, R. I., I met his plane and watched him come slowly down to earth. He picked up his luggage and walked out to the car without a hint of embrace. I deciphered, for another un-countable time, that his tight-lip was evidence of an international businessman's pre-occupation with a world beyond my reach. We drove into town to our favorite pub. As the first sip of my choice wine touched my lips, I saw that he held on to the edge of the table with both his hands and then I heard him say:

"I'm getting a divorce. I'm moving to Boston. I've got a child on the way."

As if he were speaking to some distant acquaintance.

We drove home to forever sleep in separate bedrooms. I watched him leave the next morning with suitcase, raincoat, briefcase, and a pair of tennis shoes tied together and slung over one shoulder.

Now I sit on the edge of my bed and watch the sun's last streaks of yellow welcome the approaching night outside the window of my inherited house.

I look for moon-tree shadow on the grass. But my Apple tree is gone.

The sky darkens.

There is not the sound of anyone anywhere. But the stories I'll write and the visions I'll paint swoop down to me as the stars begin to gleam.