

## Tree House

You can't just walk out into the back yard and build a tree house these days. First, you have to explain the project to the neighbors.

"It's for the children," I told Dudley, when he walked over from his house next door to ask why I'd been wandering around the big elm tree, staring up at the branches and taking notes on my sheaf of papers.

"Your children are in their forties, Dave."

"Well, I mean my grandchildren," I said.

"Don't they live on the other side of the continent?"

"Well, I mean the child inside me," I said.

"Your Inner Child? Then why not build an *inner* tree house. You know, in the attic so it doesn't make the neighborhood look shabby."

I was sure the tree house would be a terrific architectural accent to our little part of town. New to the neighborhood just over a year before, I worked all winter on the plans, scribbling in the details, drawing and redrawing the elevations and views. The design was top notch, a masterpiece. If any of the neighbors cared, they'd see the little house in a tree as a fine addition to the property. Even Dudley, a man in his forties with a bent sense of humor who seldom left his house, would come to like it.

I suppose anyone might wonder why an aging retiree wanted a small retreat out back, especially since I'd have to leave my easy chair, cross the yard and climb a tree to enjoy it. After all, I had our home practically to myself all day. Most mornings my wife went off to work and left me with a sleepy dog that snoozed most of the day. With Buster unconscious and the telephone just as quiet, I didn't need to get away from the hustle and bustle of a busy household. However, a deep seated desire drove me to become a carpenter.

I longed for a small aerie in which I would live out my dream and become a famous writer. Only in a fresh and stimulating environment would my creative vapors bubble up and begin to flow, giving shape to the characters and plot of my first novel. What better way to create than by putting myself out on a limb.

I'd already begun the novel. It was a terrific story of the sea, about a man who falls off a tour boat as it makes a hard turn to starboard to avoid colliding with a garbage barge. He almost drowns, but saves himself by climbing

from the water on to a floating 52 inch digital TV screen that slid off the pile of trash on the barge. The tour boat's crew steers clear just in time. Engrossed in pulling their boat out of harms way, they fail to notice Charles get flipped overboard like a flapjack.

*"Charles was wet, really wet. And the TV screen was slippery, really slippery. But as the Happy Time Tour Boat steamed off and disappeared over the horizon, he knew modern technology had somehow been sent to save him from the briny depths."*

My writer's shack didn't proceed without a few bumps in the road.

"You don't need a building permit for a playhouse," said the buxom lady at the town office.

"It's not a playhouse," I said, "it's a writer's aerie."

"Whatever," said the woman, "just don't put your hairy up higher than 400 feet or you'll have to deal with the Feds and the airport across the river."

"It's only a tree house," I said, "not an oil derrick, and I want a building permit so my neighbors won't sue me."

"You get your dare-a-dick too high and you'll have to add a beacon visible for ten miles," she droned on. "And then the Audubon folks will show up, worrying about the little birdies..." She sighed and her voice trailed off, as though bureaucracy weighed more heavily on her than it ever could on me, a mere citizen. Finally, the woman relented and issued me a permit to build an "ancillary storage structure in a tree. Four Thousand Watt Beacon to be installed if above 400 feet. Bird netting as necessary."

The construction of my writer's aerie began soon afterward. I crawled up to the top of the ladder and bolted the main braces on my chosen tree just as a stiff breeze was freshening from the northeast. Getting everything square and plumb in a swaying tree was a challenge. The stately old tree had looked so strong and stable when I stood under it on warm and sunny days, but it was now acting like it was made of rubber. I'd be in for quite a ride when I sat up in the little house on a windy day 40 feet above the ground. Thankfully, the fellow at the lumber supply store convinced me to add safety cables.

"Even if your playhouse sways back and forth and pulls out the bolts," he said, "the cables will hang on to the shed so it doesn't go crashing to the ground."

I tried to picture how I would get back down on the ground from a shack hanging by a cable from a tree limb.

"And if I'm in it when the shack goes flying off the limb?" I said.

"Don't be," he said.

My wife asked me where I kept our insurance policies after I brought home the longest ladder I could buy.

"Why does your fairy house have to be so darn high?" she asked.

"It's an aerie," I said, "and a writer needs to see forever," I said.

The floor of my little house was only four by four feet. The side walls rose only forty-eight inches and the peak of the conical roof was seven feet. I could stand up only in the exact center of the tiny structure, but I didn't often chance it because the wasps had taken over inside the peak. As it sat on a limb a few feet away from the tree trunk, my aerie reminded some of an inverted ice cream cone. Pete Perkins from across the way named it Dave's Mini Mausoleum. Up and down the street the kids were calling it a space rocket.

As construction progressed, I attracted quite a crowd from the neighborhood. While I sawed and hammered away on high, Dudley showed up at the foot of the tree to pass along his comments. He seldom left his house and I often wondered if he was employed. Now he began to play the role of Master of Ceremonies, standing beneath me and ducking when I occasionally dropped a tool or a board. To a mixture of neighborhood kids, retirees and the occasional Fedex deliveryman, my next door neighbor explained each of my actions as if I were his trained monkey. The afternoon I nailed shingles on the steeply pitched roof, Dudley reached a high point in his new career as a carnival barker, whatever his old career had been. "There he is now," he trumpeted to the ever growing group, "with his hammer and nails, pounding away at his home in the sky, oblivious to fates that may await him in the stormy future."

"When it falls outa the tree, it's gonna explode in a huge ball of flame," I heard one kid tell another.

"Why did he build a shithouse up in a tree?" asked the Fedex man.

***"Charles dozed frequently now, as his spirit drooped and his remaining vital fluids sunk to new lows. A sudden flash brought him awake, and he wondered if the digital screen beneath him had magically come to life. Lifting himself up, expecting to see Oprah, he spied the specter of a storm looming on the horizon, spears of lightning thrusting toward him and his little High Definition craft. This would be 'must see TV.'"***

When the tree house was finished, I waited a few days for the crowds to disperse and allow me to enjoy my new retreat in privacy. Furniture was no problem. I simply nailed boards to the inside walls of the house to serve as a desk and chair. My wife insisted I take a small walkie-talkie up the tree so she could reach me if necessary and, I'm sure, to check on me when she became worried.

Getting up into the little abode was not easy. I had thought of using a rope for my ascent, allowing me to grab on and climb up into the house if it was swaying, which was most of the time. But I'm too large and too old to haul myself up, so I opted for the ladder. Of course, the house would have to be absolutely still to use

it, and the weather seldom cooperated. Sometimes Dudley would appear from behind his fence and hold the ladder while I climbed. I tried to avoid him, however, because of his sarcastic remarks. And I was afraid he would bring back the crowd of onlookers, each voicing their own estimate of how long I had to live.

There were enough calm days when I was able to get up the ladder by myself. I'd sit on the seat board nailed to the back wall. Opposite me was another board that functioned as my desk. There I would sit working on my novel, as though wedged into a rather tight booth in a super-small diner without food or wait staff. With an eye to the weather, I thought it advisable to secure my laptop to the desk board with a tiny fence of screws driven into the wood around the computer. The screw heads constantly caught on the cuffs of my sweater.

***"Charles felt the ocean swell beneath him as the advancing squall pushed his high tech platform up to the crest of the next wave, where it would balance precariously for a moment and then begin its deadly descent down to the next trough. This was going to be one hell of a ride. He couldn't hope the engineers back in Tokyo had included water tightness in their final TV design, but he could still pray for good luck. He tried hard to remember the name of the patron saint of good luck. Taking a chance, he settled on Saint Patrick."***

When the wind picked up early on a Thursday evening, I'd been up in my tree house for an hour after supper and was deeply enmeshed in writing the chapter where Charles gets run down by a supertanker from North Korea. Staring at the lighted screen of my laptop, I barely noticed the sun begin to dip toward the western horizon. The little house began a rhythmic sway as a storm approached. The safety cables twanged with a forlorn nasal sound, like a choir of the damned who had probably been accident victims. All went unnoticed while my mind reeled with Charles on the tiny 52 inch wide-screen as he was roughly swept aside by the bow of His Dictator's Ship, The Garden of Longevity.

The walkie-talkie came to life and my wife's voice crackled on the radio.

"Are you still up there? Over."

"Yes, but I'm coming right down. Over."

"No, you're not," she said, "the ladder's gone. Over."

"What? Over!" I was amazed.

"I just got home from shopping, Over, and I thought you were in the cellar, Over, but I couldn't find you, Over. Where's your ladder?" she screamed. "Over!"

"I don't know!" I shouted "Over!"

There was a short pause and she said, "David! You come down here this minute!"

Thunder cracked, the sky opened and Niagara Falls came out of nowhere to drop more water on my little shed than existed in the Biblical account of the Creation. A gust of wind bent the tree over so far I wondered why I hadn't considered seat belts. The tree house began to

whip around violently. The laptop popped out of the little fence of screws and slid away down the desk board. I lurched forward to grab it before it got away. I was too late. Out the tiny window it went, into the void. Worse, as the tree bent with another gust of wind, my seat board collapsed and I slammed forward on my butt into the opposite wall like a bowling ball. That's when the main brace broke with a sharp snap, followed by sickening pops and groans as the bolts pulled from the tree. The little tree house I had planned so carefully, the writer's aerie I lovingly built as the neighbors stood by heaping scorn upon my head, my retreat from the daily grind of retirement, the partner in writing I had loved and enjoyed so much, now teetered for a moment on the edge of the abyss, then tipped forward and began its destructive descent to the ground.

***“Charles was down for the count. All he could see now was nothing. The blackest of darkness. Underwater in unknown seas he was wetter than he'd ever been in his whole life. He flailed his arms around, hoping to grab on to anything going up instead of down. If he made it out of this predicament alive, he planned to always have a 52 inch TV nearby, hugging it when moved by the spirit of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”***

The rain poured down in sheets as I tried to get comfortable inside the carcass of my upside down tree house. The cables had saved me, but I'd given them too much slack. When the tree house reached the end of its tether, some parts abruptly stopped, most kept going. Luckily, my fall was broken, but I was left in mid air perched among the remnants, the floor hanging over my head and the little window dangling in front of me, still pretty high off the ground.

Thunder and lightning came and went in ten minutes and were replaced by flashing strobe lights of blue and red and amber. Huge search lights shined up from the ground to illuminate me in my shame. I sat in what was left of a shed built large enough only for a ten year old. I could see tomorrow's headlines: “Man Invades Playhouse and Collapses It.”

The assembled volunteer firemen below argued back and forth about how to rescue me. Swaying here above them, there wasn't anything solid enough to lay a ladder up against. Finally, they decided to call in a truck with an aerial ladder from the next town. The delay gave the TV News crew time to get to my back yard.

“And is this your children's tree house, sir?” asked the wide eyed News Blond as she stuck a microphone up in the air in my direction, as if I could reach for it.

“No,” I replied. “It's my ... my ancillary storage shed.”

She turned back to the camera and with a serious air announced, “The Suspect has just announced he keeps his artillery up in the tree, seen here directly above my shoulder, which you're viewing live, right now on Channel 6 Action News!”

“But,” I shouted down, “I've got a building permit!”

When the show was over and I was safely back on earth, the firemen left with little fanfare. The TV crew departed with much noise and excitement and flashing of lights, after handing out Channel 6 Action News bumper stickers to everyone, even babies. The crowd's deflation as the Satellite Truck and the News Blond's Pink SUV rolled out of my driveway rivaled that seen when the last car of the circus train disappears down the track.

Pete Perkins came across the street with his 12 year old brat and my ladder. The kid will be doing my lawn for the rest of the summer.

Dudley was gracious in his comments to me after observing the mess of materials beneath the tree.

“What are you gonna do with all those pieces of your writing hut,” he asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “Maybe a bonfire?”

“Don't be too hasty,” he said. “I'm sure it won't be long before you think up another project. I'm home all day and I'll be sure to come over and encourage you.”

I looked up at him. He appeared sincere.

“Dudley,” I finally thought to ask, “what *do* you do for a living?”

“I'm a comedy writer,” he answered. “And you're the best material I've had to work with in a long time. You might show up in my next book.”

***“Charles was lucky, but not really lucky. He lost his wide screen TV, but was rescued by the crew of the ship and taken back to North Korea. Eventually he returned to America, and now works as a TV salesman for a chain of electronics stores. In his family room are five wide-screen high definition televisions, one in use as a coffee table on which he often rests his feet. Life has become a bit boring for Charles, and he has been thinking of building a tree house.”***

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