

The older boys, who are around the age of my brother, have taken a machete to the giant evergreen tree between Zachary's house. The tree's branches, coming out on all sides and at all heights from the tree trunks, all slope downwards, as if striving to reach the ground. Its pine-needle fingers are splayed out in all directions, so overall the tree looks as if it is in a dream and just realized with a shock that it forgot to put clothes on, and now it is trying to shield its bark skin from sight by angling and layering its limbs in front of itself as defensively as possible. The older boys have taken advantage of the tree's natural modesty to create a hiding spot, by cutting off all of the tree's lower branches except those that form the outermost layer of cover. Now, a thick needle-y branch can simply be pushed like a curtain hanging over a stage, and anyone who knows the tree's secret emptiness can slip inside and hide from the scrutiny of their watchful parents.

I learned about this from Steve, who is the only other kid my age in the neighborhood, so while he'd rather hang out with the older boys — and occasionally can manage it, which is how he learned about the hollow evergreen — he often has to hang out with me. Every time he ends up doing this — after knocking on the door to ask if my brother is home, and upon learning that my brother isn't, coming inside anyway — he makes sure to look as bored and disdainful as possible, as if I have somehow forced him to play with me. The truth is I don't care much if I am alone or not. The backyard behind my house ends at the boundary of a small forest — the same one behind Zachary's house — and at the other side of the small forest or occasionally running through it there are some train tracks that aren't used anymore, and I still have not managed to follow them to the end, and when the whole world will play with you like that you really don't mind if other kids play with you or not. But I was grateful for Steve's company on the day that he showed me the hollow evergreen tree, because I really needed it at that time.

Inside the tree, everything looked green and soft because of how the sunlight was filtered through the pine needles. The older boys had kept some of the branches that were around head height, so I needed to stoop occasionally when walking around the circular space. With some effort I could pull myself up onto one of these head-height branches, and then I could sit with my feet dangling above the ground. When Steve was in the tree with me, and I discovered this, he made sure to pull himself up onto a branch too, and then for good measure, climb up to another, higher branch, so he could sit with his feet dangling above my head. I didn't mind. I was busy thinking that this tree would be the perfect place to hide out for a day or two, as long as I didn't mind sleeping on the ground and getting my blanket dirty.

We were supposed to move at the end of the week, even though I had insisted that I didn't want to. We were moving to Miami, where there were no train tracks in the backyard forests or backyard forests at all or even, my mom warned me, a backyard probably, and although there were trees the majority of them were palm trees which couldn't be climbed. I asked my mom if we would live on a cul-de-sac in Miami, because kids could play in the streets on cul-de-sacs like ours, and if I couldn't play in a forest or in a backyard or in a tree I at least wanted to be able to play in the street, and my mom said we would live by a highway in an apartment. So I decided to move into the hollow tree on the day of our plane flights, figuring that if my mom wouldn't want to waste the money on the plane tickets, and that if she couldn't find me she would have to leave eventually. After my mom was gone, I hoped to move back into our empty house, since I knew how to open the back windows even if the front door was locked. I

packed myself two sandwiches and some juice, slipped out of the house with a sleeping bag while everyone was yelling at each other about getting their suitcases shut, and escaped inside the evergreen tree in Zach's backyard.

I lay down on the ground and spent time looking up and around. The pine needle-fingers and branch-arms were all I could see around me, and I had the comforting sensation that the tree was hugging me. I watched sunlight and shadows play across the ground as breezes moved the outer branches, and felt completely at peace imagining my mom walking one-by-one to each of the neighbor kid's houses on the cul-de-sac – without ever crossing the street – and asking if I was there. I was imagining them all saying no, one by one, and then my mom leaving, and just before this could come true, Steve, who lives all the way on the other end of the cul-de-sac and was the last kid my mom talked to, when she was in a complete panic about my whereabouts and he was her last resort, tattled on me and said I might be in the tree. So my mom found about the tree, and his mom – who had gotten invested in the outcome of the search – found out too, and she must have told all of the other parents on the block, and the older kids must have gotten very angry at Steve for ruining their secrets, but I never found out if they decided to shun him (which would have meant he'd come over to mine much more often) because I moved away that afternoon.