

The Magical Tree: A Tate and Theo Adventure

Chapter 1

Tate sat on the grass with his arms around his knees. From this spot on the hillside, he could see a long strip of land heading east and the sparkling ocean beyond. The day was sunny and warm, a perfect day for a picnic.

Grandma and Grandpa had picked them up at ten a.m. sharp. Grandpa always used the word ‘sharp’ when he spoke about time, which made Tate wonder whether time could be round or soft instead of sharp. His mother said it was just an expression. What Grandpa really meant was that they should be ready to go when the red convertible arrived. Grandpa didn’t like waiting.

Tate and his younger brother Theo loved going out in the red convertible. They called it the zooming car. On this particular day, Grandpa had put the top down so that the wind blew in their faces, and by the time they got close to their destination, they could smell the sea.

“Boys, you find a flat spot where we can sit,” Grandma said. She handed Tate a blue blanket. “Spread that out and I’ll bring the picnic basket.”

Since Grandma’s picnic basket always contained treats, Tate and Theo were quick to help. Once they all sat down, Grandpa lifted the lid. “Shall we start with dessert,” he asked.

“Upside down day!” Tate exclaimed. He remembered their first upside down day, a day that began with ice cream and hot dogs and where they wore their pajamas for as long as they wanted. They’d even worn their clothes to bed that night.

Grandpa smiled. “Chocolate chip cookies anyone?”

The cookies were followed by watermelon and Twizzlers, then peanut butter and jam sandwiches with potato chips, and finally crunchy vegetables. When they were done, Tate flopped onto his back and stared at the clouds floating by – fluffy, white clouds that drifted with the wind, forming and reforming into different shapes. “I think that one looks like a ship, don’t you, Grandpa?”

His grandfather leaned back on his elbows. “Definitely a ship. Maybe a pirate ship? Theo, what can you see in the clouds?”

While Grandma put leftovers from the picnic into the basket and carried it down to the convertible, Tate, Theo, and Grandpa identified a giraffe, a bird, a face, a car, and a lopsided castle in the clouds above them.

“Grandma, can we climb that tree over there?” Tate asked when his grandmother returned. He pointed further up the hill at a tall tree with branches that wound here and there and a dense canopy of leaves. A perfect place to daydream.

Grandma shaded her eyes. “Do you think your brother is big enough for a tree like that?”

Tate solemnly nodded his head. “Theo can climb anything,” he replied.

Grandma put her hands on her hips. Tate held his breath. If Grandma had her hands on her hips, it meant she was seriously considering the request. A little smile played on her lips that made him wonder what she’d been like as a child. Maybe she’d climbed trees when she was nine like he was now. He’d seen pictures of her sitting on a swing, building a sandcastle, and dressed in a cowboy hat while holding a toy gun, but none of these pictures told him what kind of person she’d been.

Grandparents are so old, it’s almost impossible to imagine them as kids, he thought.

“Well, since your grandfather probably wants a little shut eye, I don’t see why not,” Grandma said. “Make sure you don’t climb up too high. Call me if you need help.”

Tate’s eyes sparkled. He jumped up, threw his arms around his grandmother’s waist and hugged tight. “You’re the best.” He waved at his brother. “C’mon, Theo. Grandma said we could.”

Tate began to run.

“Wait up, Tate!” Theo shouted.

Tate debated whether to slow down. As the older brother his legs were longer which meant he could run faster than Theo who was only seven. But slowing down might mean losing the burst of excitement and anticipation that filled his chest. How far could he climb? What would he see from high in the branches? Would he find some sort of treasure?

Last year, he’d found a blue and yellow kite wrapped around one branch of a tree near the cottage they’d rented in Kennebunkport. His father had climbed up beside Tate and carefully untangled the kite. Later that day, they had added a new tail and string to it. Tate called it his lucky kite. And this spring, he’d found a nest in one of the maple trees behind their house. The nest was empty except for a piece of blue eggshell.

Tate chose not to slow down. As he ran the last few yards, the wind gusted. The tree loomed above him, its bark thick and gnarly, its wide trunk anchored to the soil as if it had been there for hundreds of years. And maybe it had.

“Look, Theo! There’s a hole at the bottom of the tree.”

Panting, Theo fell to his knees. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“I dunno,” Tate replied. “Sometimes, I don’t want to. Come and see the hole.”

The two boys knelt at the base of the tree in front of a wide opening full of leaves and twigs.

“Shhh,” whispered Theo. “Maybe an animal lives in there. A snake or a squirrel. You know what Daddy would say.”

Tate nodded. Their father was the cautious one in the family. He would tell them not to put their hands into a hole that they hadn’t investigated. “I’ll get a stick.”

After poking and prodding with the stick, they determined that the hole held nothing of interest, and so, while Theo pretended that the stick was a sword and he was a daring pirate, Tate walked all around the base of the tree. “The tree sort of splits in two. You climb this side, Theo. I’ll climb that side.”

“How are you boys doing?” Grandma shouted from halfway up the hill. “Is there room for me to join you?”

Tate wondered whether grandmothers were allowed to climb trees. Surely their legs wouldn’t bend enough. And Grandma was always complaining about her hips. What would he and Theo do if she got stuck? They weren’t strong enough to rescue her. His mother’s voice echoed in his head, “Do you have a plan to get down?”

“Grandma, are you sure you can climb this tree? Maybe you should just watch.” Tate thought this was a kind way of telling his grandmother to stay away from the tree. “Besides, Theo might need your help.”

“I don’t need any help,” Theo said with his hands on his hips. “Grandma, you can climb up behind me. I’ll show you the way.”

For the next while, the three of them concentrated on finding footholds and toeholds as they climbed higher and higher up the tree. Tate stopped from time to time to check on his grandmother and was surprised to see that she was keeping up with Theo, although at that very moment she had a rather painful expression on her face.

“Let’s rest for a few minutes,” he said. Surely Grandma needed a rest by now. She was old. A nervous feeling pinched his stomach. Tate was certain that old people shouldn’t climb trees.

“I haven’t had this much fun in a long time,” Grandma said, breathing heavily. “You boys are excellent climbers. When I was young, I used to climb trees with my friends.” She shaded her eyes with one hand. “It’s glorious up here!”

Tate’s grandmother often used words and expressions that he thought of as old fashioned and glorious was one of them. Forbidding, symbolic, lumbering, marvelous, tumult, fantastic, and so many more. Perhaps she enjoyed big words? He wondered what Grandma was remembering as she looked around.

Grandma pointed at the water. “Do you see that long strip of land?” she asked. Not waiting for an answer, she continued. “That’s Nahant.” She pointed a little to the left of the strip of land. “And do you see those red rocks? They’re part of Red Rock Park. Grandpa wants to walk down there after his nap.”

Tate nodded. He’d never seen red rocks before, and they looked pretty cool. His grandfather would have an explanation for why they were red.

“Now, hold still,” Tate’s grandmother said. “I want to take a picture for your Mom and Dad. Give me a minute to get my phone out of my pocket.” Grandma held onto a thick branch with one hand and reached into her back pocket with the other. “Got it!” she said. Grandma braced against the tree trunk and held the camera with both hands. “Smile!” She took Tate’s picture then turned slightly to take Theo’s. “Your turn, sweetie.”

At that precise moment, Grandma’s foot slipped. Theo leaned forward to grab for his grandmother’s arm. Tate’s heart thumped with fear. The phone dropped, clunking and banging against different branches as it cascaded to the ground. Grandma lurched and then tried to regain her balance. Tate scrambled to pull close enough to help. A tangle of arms and legs – Theo’s and Tate’s – shifted toward their grandmother.

“Grandma, grab my hand,” Tate yelled, as his feet slithered along the branch. He knew it was hopeless. Grandma was too big for him to hold. Even with Theo’s help, they wouldn’t be able to stop her from falling. But he had to try. He steadied his legs, wrapped his left arm around a smaller branch and stretched his other arm as far as he could.

Grandma’s eyes widened. She swiped one arm toward Tate’s and missed. In his haste to reach his grandmother and prevent her from falling, Tate’s feet began to slide. “Give me your hand, Theo!” he shouted.

But it was no use. One by one they tumbled towards the ground.