

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 don't you build an *inner* tree house in the attic and not ruin the neighborhood."

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 ago, I had worked all winter on the plans, scribbling in and changing details, drawing and redrawing the elevations and views. The design was top notch, even a masterpiece, if I did say so myself. I thought if any of the neighbors cared about it at all, 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, across the yard and up a tree. After all, I had our home practically to myself all day, with my wife gone off to work most mornings, leaving me alone with a sleepy dog. Even the telephone snoozed most of the day, so it wasn't as if I needed to get away from busy-ness in the house..

But my *real* plan had the little aerie in the forefront of my dream to become a 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 place to create than out on a limb.

I'd already started the novel. It was a terrific story of the sea, about a man who falls off a tour boat when 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 onto a floating 52 inch digital TV screen that fell from the tour boat just behind him. The boat's crew is so concerned with the loss of the TV, they don't notice Charles has gone overboard.

"Charles was wet, really wet. And the TV screen was slippery, really slippery. But as the Happy Time Tourboat 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 birds...." 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 going to be a challenge. The stately old elm 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. So, if I decided to sit up in the little house on a windy day, I might be in for quite a ride. It's a good thing the fellow at the lumber supply store had talked me into adding safety cables. Even if the aerie swayed back and forth and broke loose of its mooring, the cables would hang on to the tiny shed for dear life and save it from crashing to the ground. Hopefully.

As construction progressed, I attracted quite a crowd

from the neighborhood. While I sawed and hammered away on high, I noticed Dudley assume the role of Master of Ceremonies down below on the grass. 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 the roof shingles on to the small steeply pitched roof, Dudley was reaching a high point in his new career as a carnival barker, whatever his old career had been. "There he is now," trumpeted Dudley to the ever enlarging 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."

"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 instead witnessed the specter of a storm looming on the horizon, spears of lightning thrusting toward him and his little high definition craft. This was not "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 peace and privacy. My wife insisted I take a small walkie talkie with me so she could reach me if necessary and, I'm sure, to check on me when she became worried. Furniture was no problem. I simply nailed boards to the inside walls of the house to serve as a desk and chair.

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 while 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 a ladder. Of course, the house would have to be absolutely still for me to use it, which was not an everyday occurrence. 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 when my little house would fall out of the tree.

"When it drops, 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.

There were enough calm days when I was able to get myself up the ladder and sit on the seat board nailed to

the back wall. That board faced the desk board jutting out from the front wall opposite me. 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. If he could only remember the name of the patron saint of good luck. Taking a chance, he settled on Saint Patrick."

When the wind picked up early Thursday evening, I'd been up in my tree house for a few hours after supper and was deeply engrossed 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, or the rhythmic swaying of the tree as a storm approached. All went unnoticed while my mind reeled with Charles as his tiny 52 inch wide-screen was roughly swept aside by the bow of His Dictator's Ship, The Garden of Longevity.

The walkie-talkie came to life.

"Are you still up there? Over." my wife's voice crackled over the radio.

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

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

"What?" I was amazed. "Over!"

"I just got home from work, 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. Then she said, "David! You come down here this minute!"

Thunder cracked, the sky opened and a sea of water dropped down on my little shed. A gust of wind bent the tree so far over I wondered why I hadn't considered seat belts. The tree house was really whipping around now. The little fence of screws popped out and my laptop came loose and slid away down the desk board. I lurched out of my seat to catch 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, I lost my footing and flew headlong across the tree house like a bowling ball, crashing against the

opposite wall. That's when the main brace broke with a sharp snap, followed by a sickening mechanical groan as the bolts pulled themselves from the tree. The little tree house I had planned for years, the writer's aerie I had 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 deadly 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 Syndrome."

The rain now poured down in sheets, as I tried to get comfortable in what was left 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 pieces of my beloved aerie abruptly stopped, other parts kept going. Luckily, my fall was broken, but I was left in mid air perched on the remnants, the floor hanging over my head and the little window dangling in front of me.

Thunder and lightning had come and gone in the past fifteen minutes and were now replaced by flashing strobe lights of blue and red and amber. Huge search lights shone up from the ground to illuminate me in my shame. I sat in a 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 volunteer firemen assembled below argued back and forth about how to rescue me. Swaying here about them, there wasn't anything steady enough to lay a ladder up against. Finally, they decided to call in a truck with an aerial ladder from the next town. Coincidentally, that 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 over 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 the driveway rivaled that seen when the last car of the circus train disappears down the track.

Pete Perkins from across the street showed up 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," asked Dudley.

"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'll be here to encourage you."

I looked up at Dudley. He appeared sincere.

"Dudley," I thought to ask, finally, "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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