

Tree Hugger

by R.J. Fox



Some kids spend warm afternoons in the safe confines of a tree house. For one afternoon, at the tender age of nine, I had the luxury of spending part of mine tied to a tree.

Following a half-day of school, I was walking home, eagerly anticipating my mom's yummy egg salad when I approached Teddy Thompson's house. Teddy Thompson was one of the few jocks who – on most days – was actually nice to me. Every now and then, he would invite me over to play. However, the moment someone else saw us together, he conveniently turned against me. So our friendship was, for lack of a better description, closeted.

While I passed by his house, Teddy stepped out onto the porch and eagerly invited me in. This presented an instant dilemma: delay egg salad sandwich gratification in exchange for a rare opportunity for social interaction? Or stick to my game plan? I decided egg salad could wait. Who knew when I might next be invited to someone's house to play?

As I entered Teddy's house, I immediately noticed that three other classmates were already there. And two of those three classmates were among my biggest tormenters: Matt Belcher and David Murphy. And with no sign of parental supervision, the odds were not on my side. But there was no turning back. If I walked out the door, I would probably be subject to more ridicule than if I stayed. Then again, most of it would be behind my back, so maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. I ultimately decided to stay put and prove that I could hang with the in-crowd, despite my skepticism regarding their intentions.

But first things first. I had to call home to ask if it was okay to stay.

"May I use your phone?" I asked Teddy.

"Sure,"

"Why ... so you can call your mommy?" taunted Belcher.

I manned-up: "Yes. I need to call my mom."

Teddy showed me to the kitchen and handed me the phone. As I dialed, I could overhear the others:

"Why did you invite him over?" said Murphy.

"He's not that bad," said Teddy.

"He's a dork," said Murphy.

"And the biggest mama's boy," said Murphy, really fixated on this whole mommy thing.

"Don't worry. I got a plan..." I heard Teddy say, before my mom finally picked up.

“Hi, mom. Can I play over at Teddy Thompson’s?”

“Sure!” my mom said, probably trying to hide her excitement about the fact that her son had actually been invited over to a classmate’s house.

“Okay, thanks, mom. Love you!”

Laughter poured out of the other room as I hung up.

When I entered the room, I was greeted with an echo of my own voice. “I love you, Mommy.”

“Guys, stop,” Teddy pleaded.

And then I noticed that the pizza was gone.

“Is there any pizza left?”

“Nope,” said Belcher, shoving the last piece into his mouth, proceeding to live up to his name by letting out a loud belch.

I pretended not to let it bother me, despite being so darn hungry. There would always be egg salad.

We headed out into the backyard to play what I was led to believe was Wiffle Ball. I knew something was probably amiss when I noticed the rope. My next clue was when my tormentors began to push me toward the giant oak tree that loomed in the center of the yard. There was no resistance on my part.

Most devastating was the fact that Teddy stood by, doing nothing to stop it. Clearly, this was the “plan” he was referring to.

Et tu, Brute?

So was he the ringleader? Did he lure me to his house knowing full-well of his diabolical intentions? Or was he simply caving into peer pressure? I would have plenty of time to ask myself these questions later. With my back against the trunk, Belcher and Murphy held me in place. Teddy then grabbed the rope and proceeded to wrap it around my body as I awaited my crucifixion.

“If you scream, we will kill you,” Belcher said, ever-so-matter-of-factly, as Teddy tightened the rope around my ankles.

“And if you tell anyone,” Murphy said coldly, starring me in the eye, “we will hunt you down. And kill you.”

I never told anyone. At least not until it was too late to file charges.

Teddy and his merry band of tormentors began to dance around the tree, patting their hands on their mouths in a sickening imitation of Native Americans (adding yet another layer of wrong to this whole scenario).

As I struggled to free myself, the rope began to loosen, but Murphy stopped dancing in order to make the rope so tight it dug into my stomach.

“Hey, I found one of your balls!” a neighbor’s voice sounded, followed by a Wiffle Ball being tossed over the fence. The neighbor either didn’t notice that a boy was tied to a tree, or assumed that boys were just being boys. Either way, I lost a perfect shot at liberation.

My captors proceeded to play Wiffle Ball as I helplessly watched from my vantage point in “centerfield”.

You have not truly experienced life until you have Wiffle Balls batted in your direction, helpless from being able to block them off. Fortunately, only two or three actually hit me. One was a direct shot to the forehead, which stung like bee. I forced myself not to scream for mercy, fearful of retribution.

When they had their fill of Wiffle Ball fun, Murphy approached me and put a bunch of dry leaves under my feet. Belcher removed a pack of matches and attempted to set the leaves on fire, which I managed to stomp out with my feet. Angered, Murphy attempted to set the rope on fire, but I blew out the match. Twice. The third time, Belcher put his hand over my mouth to allow David to complete his task. Fortunately, the rope wouldn't ignite and even more fortunately, lighter fluid never crossed his mind. After several attempts, he gave up, with a late plea from Teddy to "cut it out." Belcher and Murphy listened, which prompted Teddy to suggest that they head off to a park "to hit some real baseballs." Naturally, I wasn't included in this plan. The plan for me was to stay tied to the tree, which was certainly a better alternative to being set on fire.

A silver lining.

Left behind, all I could think about (besides my yearning for freedom) were the egg salad sandwiches that awaited me at home. But then I wondered:

Would I ever see home again? Would I be left here for dead? Will crows peck out my eyeballs? Is this how Jesus felt? What would Jesus do?

Jesus died for all of humankind. That's what Jesus would do.

The only saving grace was that the claustrophobia I developed later in life hadn't yet kicked in. No doubt that this event was the catalyst. At least I wasn't going up in flames.

But then things took a turn for the worse as the sun beat down on my face, which caused me to sweat, which then attracted mosquitoes. And then there was the humiliation that awaited me *literally* just around the corner. Teddy's house stood on a corner and therefore, the backyard was in full view of anybody walking along side the house. This gave me a faint sliver of hope. All I needed was for somebody to pass by and freedom would be mine.

Good things come to those who wait.

After an hour or so (the bells of a neighborhood church let me keep track of time in 15 minute increments), I finally heard voices down the street. I could taste freedom on my lips. And freedom tasted like egg salad sandwiches. The voices belonged to three *popular* girls from my class, one of whom was Nicki Smith, my biggest crush. As much as I yearned for freedom, I started praying that Nicki wouldn't see me. An elderly neighbor walking a dog would have been much less embarrassing. I knew full well that any chance I had with Nicki would be instantly obliterated if she saw me like this. Then again, perhaps she would have felt so bad for me, she would have fell for me on sympathy alone. But who was I kidding?

If only I could make myself disappear...

As much as I longed for freedom, I realized that I would rather spend the whole night tied to that tree than be seen there by the girl of my dreams. But if there was one thing I had learned by the tender age of nine it was that *fate could be cruel*.

As the girls drew nearer, I held my breath. At first they did not notice. But as soon as one of the girls pointed a finger, I knew it was over:

"Look!" one of Nikki's friends said, laughing hysterically.

I didn't respond. Maybe if I played it cool enough, they would just assume I *wanted* to be affixed to the tree. *Nothing to see here!*

They kept on walking. And for one fleeting moment, I swear that I saw what very well could have been pity on Nicki's face. It was probably a hallucination caused by the sweltering heat. After all, my vision was obscured by mosquitoes, which had already begun to nest in my eyebrows.

I tried not to panic about the fact that an opportunity for rescue had passed. After all, it could have been worse, like that scene in *Titanic* when they see a ship out in the distance, which doesn't see them in return. At the very least, my mother would either come looking for me, or Teddy's parents would return home. And more than likely, my captors would let me go before then.

The church bells chimed two. Then three. Sometime between three and four, the gang returned.

Teddy approached me with a knife. His friends trailed behind. My initial thought was that I was about to be gutted like a fish. But instead, Teddy cut the rope. I was a free man.

"If you tell anybody about this, next time we *will* kill you," Belcher warned. I took heed. Part of me still fears that writing this will somehow lead to retaliation.

I ran home as fast as I could just in case my tormentors changed their mind. My mother greeted me at the door and all was right again with the world. I promptly proceeded to feed my Sea-Monkeys, comforted by the thought that – unlike my classmates – they would never let me down.

"Did you have fun?" my mother asked, as I watched my Sea-Monkeys make loop-the-loops.

I considered telling her the truth, but chose life instead.

"Yeah. A lot," I said, making every effort to sound convincing.

"So what did you do?" my mother asked, seemingly relieved that her son had been invited over to someone's house to play.

"Oh, we played Wiffle Ball."

"Did you eat?"

"There was pizza."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, a little."

My mom promptly removed the egg salad out of the fridge, which almost made everything I had endured worth it.

To this day, I wonder if Teddy Thompson ever regretted his role in what transpired on that unfortunate day. Maybe some day, I will ask him. But deep down, I already know the answer.

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