

Tom Kelly

Grandma's Tree House in the Sky

My grandma's taken up residence in a tree house. She doesn't plan on descending back to earth. Perched atop the baseboards which constitute her patio, built on the branches of our backyard Sugar Maple, she asks us to climb up for the occasional visit. She has a request: she wants us to place miracle grow at the tree's roots; she'd prefer a better view of the clouds. Naturally, we'll do as told. When mom asks if she'd like someone to deliver meatloaf for dinner, she twists her earlobe and says she can't hear. She waves goodbye and recedes deep into the tree's orange leaves, which glow like a torch in the sunset.

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By the month's end, the Sugar Maple dwarfs our two-story home. Mom stumbles on a journey down the tree trunk's ladder, so dad engineers a pulley elevator system to make visits less dangerous. Because grandma always complains about how she misses Wheel of Fortune, he uses his contraption to wire a series of extension cables, which run from his garage through a mouse-sized hole in the treehouse's wall. When he sets up her twelve-inch tube TV, she shakes her head, creeps onto the patio, and produces a brass pocket telescope; a story he recites over breakfast. He says she claims he should've known she prefers watching the blackbirds.

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My sister and I visit at the cusp of spring. Somehow, grandma survived the frosts. Empty bean cans and potato skins litter the warped floor; blackbirds roost on the roofbeams. My arms wrap around grandma's bony shoulders for an embrace and she gives me a weak shove. She says we appeared healthy down below, on the ground, but up-close, we look like we've put on weight. Outside, the bare branches waver in the wind. I want to tell her how from our porch she looks like a molting cockatiel trapped in a cage. Instead, I say we'll do better. She shuffles to the counter for a sleeve of crackers, starts to fall, and my sister props her up. She calls us useless, shrugs her off, and keels again. She invites us to stay the night.

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Eventually, our journeys to the treehouse dip in frequency until mom's embarking on solo trips once a week, and the rest of us don't visit at all. Sometimes when the weather's nice, through our tripod telescope, we'll spot grandma cloaked in a quilt on her porch, but the distance blurs her face like a thumb print. To my sister and I, she's become more idea than person, more suggestion of a presence which might watch on us than human out of touch.

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Per mom, grandma's lost interest in affairs on earth and devotes most of her time to caring for the resident blackbirds. They nest in cupboards, buckets, underneath the bed. Named after grandma's long-deceased friends, she shouts at them when she's angry and doesn't know who to blame or why.

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In summertime, the backyard flourishes with pale flowers, clover, and hummingbirds. Jet noise roars at midday. Mom made her last visit to the treehouse two weeks ago. During her trek down, the pulley started to give thirty feet in the air and dad says any future expedition's a gamble. This afternoon, my sister and I take turns peering through the tripod, but the Maple's green top grazes the clouds and grandma's impossible to locate. While dad flips burger patties on the grill, mom strolls to the tree's base and tilts her head towards the sky. I ask what she sees, and she shrugs. She says she'll make the ascent again, someday.