



The Ladder

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I WRITE this sitting at a desk, wind serene about me, clouds forming and unravelling in beautiful shapes above me. I write this, and you are forgiven if you don't see the shakes in my hands, or notice the hurried scrawl of my writing. I write fast as I have no idea when he might come back to me. According to my watch, it has been three days and roughly six hours since I last held him, and fourteen hours since I last saw him and heard his voice. *I'll be back, Dad*, he had said. And I believe him. So I wait for him still.

There are noises in the far distance. Weird, animal hoots and growls, and I am certain they are of a kind I have not heard before. The wind smells faintly of cut grass and faintly of rot. I do not know which I prefer, because cut grass reminds me too vividly of home, and sunny, perfect days on the lawn with my son, throwing Frisbees and kicking balls. I can close my eyes and imagine the silk of his translucent yellow hair. I don't close my eyes too often here, because when I do, the sounds and smells become all the more real, as if I am compensating for the loss of one sense by heightening my others. And so I make the very things I am trying to avoid all the closer.

When I try to look for the source of the sounds, it is as if my eyes suddenly cease to focus, and the far distance becomes blurred and pale, as if seen through mist. Only when I return my gaze to the desk do things become sharp again.

My son has been gone for over three days, have I said that? I heard him speak those final words after two and a half days searching, and as I called out to him, spinning to look in every possible direction, I was sure I caught a glimpse of his bright red tee shirt. Then it was gone and I am now not so sure I saw anything. *I'll be back*, he said. And so I write, waiting for some sign. Waiting for the courage to follow those sounds into the far distance and find my boy.

He first showed me the ladder on the day after his eighth birthday. We have a large oak tree at the bottom of our garden, standing monolith-like on the edge of a large but unkempt lawn, all other plants and garden ornaments placed in such a way that they seem to draw the eye to it, although this is wholly unintended. This particular day, my son was standing in front of the tree, looking smaller than ever, and I can still see the way the dappled sunlight played on his face, soft ripples of light turning his hair white and then darkening to a caramel blonde. I loved

him more than ever at that moment, I think. If only I had done things differently. You may read that line more than once in this...

... confession? Yes, confession fits.

Around the tree was an old garden seat, its deep green paint long ago weather-faded so that it almost seemed part of the tree. It curved around the tree about a third of the way round, and as I watched, my son stepped up on it, reaching to touch the ladder that folded itself around the front of the tree, then continued a curve around its massive girth, ever upwards. It vanished from sight into the branches around the back.

I had never seen the ladder before.

I stared. My son turned to face me, a look of wild excitement on his face, and even across the distance I could see the sheen in his eyes and the wind in his hair. I think that the look he had is saved specifically for eight year old boys, when every event becomes adventure, every darkness becomes a monster-filled cave, and every anomalous ladder simply another thing to climb just because it is there. The look said, *Can I climb it, Dad? Can I?*

I started towards him, a look of concern obviously showing, for he dropped his hand and stood on the seat, barely able to contain his jittering. I approached the tree, ruffling my son's hair as I passed and I looked closely at the ladder. As I think back on it, it is a surprise even to me that I felt no shock at seeing it there. It was as if I convinced myself it had *always* been there and I had just never seen it.

It seemed to begin somewhere at the back of the tree, out of sight, its rungs organic and woody, laced with delicate ivy, slick with old moss. I stepped slowly to the side and followed it around the tree. It seemed to curve forever upward and as I stood at the back, it yet again disappeared out of sight, this time around the front of the tree.

And there was no sign of its beginnings. I stared.

I told myself I had just been at the front of the tree and the ladder did *not* reappear there as it surely must, looking at it from this angle. I hurried around the tree, following the ladder as I went, and I found myself again at the front, seeing the original perspective. Then again around to the back of the tree where it vanished into the branches. It seemed that wherever I began following the ladder, its origins were out of sight, and it disappeared into the branches at either side. It was the most perplexing optical illusion, and I followed it two more times, coming up with the same conclusion each time.

What is it, Dad? my son asked. I grinned at him (and that grin I now feel was the start of it all, as if I had given his excitement the fuel and permission it needed to grow. God, had I but known.), and shrugged, feeling like an excited child myself. I had an idea, and I asked my son to run in the house. He did, dutifully, and I spent the time he was gone walking round and round the tree, following the ladder with my hand, losing it as it became too high, but marking the height of its disappearance and time after time I marvelled at the way the ladder just seemed to begin again at that height (which was always about four feet off the ground) without being visible on the opposite side.

My son returned. In his hand he clutched a red crayon, and I took it from him and began to retrace my steps, this time running the crayon along the edge of the ladder. When the ladder became too high to comfortably reach, I marked the height by running the crayon along the trunk itself, picking up the ladder again at the front, impossibly at the same height as it always had been. By the time I had walked around the trunk a further four times, there were five clear lines of red following the ladder's progress. *I must be stooping as I reach the front*, I thought as I made a sixth journey. But, no. I wasn't. I dropped the crayon. It hit me that the sensation was like running my hand around the sharp edge of a giant screw that was boring its way into the earth, so that, give or take depending on my speed around the tree, the height of my hand on the leading edge of ladder remained the same. But, unless I was having a massive leap away from all my senses, the tree did not seem to be boring its way into the earth. I was stumped.

You may think that the next logical step was to mount the thing and follow it upwards. Of course. But we didn't. Not then anyway. I ushered my son away from the tree, distracting him with promises of ice cream and movies and for a day or two, we almost forgot about the ladder.

And then he climbed it.

He was up it and gone before I knew what was happening. He had a glazed look on his face as if something had called him, hypnotising, and as I ran towards the tree, calling his name so loud that my throat was still hurting three days later, I saw him turn to look at me only once. The look I saw there chilled me then and does still, as I relive it for this account. He looked at once as if he knew exactly what he was doing, and at the same time as if he was being pulled away from all he knew and

loved, and his face screamed to me to stop him. The pleading I saw in his eyes, desperate helpless pleading as if it was a stranger on the ladder pulling him upwards rather than the power of his own legs, forced my own legs into a paroxysm of power and I cleared the distance to the tree in seconds. I was too late however, for as I reached the trunk and followed the spiral steps around it, I caught a glimpse of his shoe as it disappeared into the leaves. And then nothing. I ran, I circled the tree hopelessly in the vain hope that I would see him up in the branches, a cruel trick. Of course, I saw no such thing.

The ladder wound terminally onwards, ever spiralling, each revolution of the tree seeming to launch it into its ascent anew. Of my son, there was no sign. It was as if he had vanished. I screamed his name up into the branches, scanning their depths for a sign of him, but I saw nothing. The leaves continued their soft waving, and the breeze sighed through them and for a moment I imagined his voice calling me. I thought my heart would break at that moment. I gathered myself for the ascent, and had even stepped onto the bench at the tree's base, when I heard his soft step. I saw one foot, then the other and I stood paralysed, waiting.

Of course, it was him. His hair looked ruffled and was flecked through here and there with seeds and grass. There was a flush to his cheeks, the exuberant glow of a child at energetic play. I reached up to him, snatched him off the ladder and threw us both to the ground, sobbing and clutching him tightly. He was silent, and he shook, I presumed with fear, but as I separated us, and held him at arms length for the admonition that had to come, I saw he was shaking with laughter. Indeed, he seemed paralysed by it, tears coursing down his grubby face, his white teeth shining through the redness of his moistened lips. His silenced ended suddenly in a gasping inrush of air, and I heard the familiar cackle of his laughter. Despite myself, despite my fear and coldness that still caressed my bones, I smiled. The smile grew and I began to laugh with him, caught up by the infection rather than for any genuine humour. I felt his admonishment dissolving in that sound and I hugged him close.

Finally we stood and I looked close at him, the laughter subsiding, his eyes trained first on me, but ever glancing towards the ladder, quick and furtive. *What happened? Where did you go?* I asked him, feeling foolish but unable to rephrase the question so that it made sense to me. *Dad, why didn't you come with me?* was his reply. *It was fun. Loads of fun!* I must have frowned at this, for he focused solely on me for a moment.

What happened up there? I asked again. I just played! But it was so much fun, Dad! he replied. The chill of fear began to return, and God help me, for an instance I looked at my son and I swear I had to stop myself looking for the birthmark at the crown of his skull for proof that it really was he who had returned. *But you were only gone for seconds!* I said feebly. *Don't be silly, Dad.* he said as he walked back to the house, absent-mindedly brushing grass seeds from his hair. *It was hours. Two at least! Why didn't you come, we could've played together?!*

He left me standing at the base of the oak tree, speechless.

In a fit of foolishness, of reckless curiosity, I asked him that night of what he had seen, of where the ladder had ended. I wanted to know. *The ladder doesn't end, Dad. I got off in a field and played there for hours. The sun was shining and there was grass and trees and footballs and everything!* I asked him what he meant when he said the ladder doesn't end. *I mean it keeps going. It just carried on until I couldn't see it anymore. Round and round and round the tree. It must be a long walk to wherever it really ends. Do you want to come with me, Dad?* he asked. I said no, and that I never wanted him to go back there. I said that we have trees and grass and footballs and everything he would ever need or want right here. I said that the ladder was dangerous and that until we knew what it was and where it came from, I didn't want him anywhere near it. He reluctantly agreed, and yet his next words confirmed to me that it would be hopeless trying to keep him away. *OK, Dad. I'll see if he can come to play down here.* I stared at him. *Who's 'he'?*

My friend, he said.

My God, I remember thinking. *Just how long was he there? For me it was a matter of agonising seconds, but he is talking like he had hours to play and to even make friends. Just who the hell was up there? Is up there still?*

That night, after my son had gone to bed, I took a glass of wine outside and sat looking at the ladder in the failing light. I walked cautiously down the garden, and felt immediately foolish doing it, and sat with my back to the tree. I shut my eyes and tried to relive the afternoon's events. I found that the panic and fear I had felt was slipping away (although I wasn't sure that it wasn't the wine helping me in that regard). Had my son really been gone for hours, instead of the seconds I had experienced? I even contemplated the notion that I had had some kind of seizure or mental block. I drank and as the sun set and the darkness really set in, I heard the noise. It was like the soft hooting of an owl,

which would have been no surprise, but it sounded like it was from another place. By that I mean another... ..

I can't describe any of it without sounding like a mad man. It sounded so ethereal and distant that it could have been coming from another dimension. It didn't sound like it occupied the same space as the other natural sounds around me, the cars and the wind and the rustle of leaves above my head. I can't explain it any further. I unconsciously shifted my position so that I half faced the tree and I looked upwards into its darkness. I could see almost nothing of the ladder itself, save for the few feet directly above my head, but it seemed to be emitting light, the faintest fluorescence, its passage through the trees marked with a blue aura. Whereas the solid ladder seemed to vanish into the tree, this aura seemed endless, and looking up at it was like looking into a spiralling image reflected from mirror to mirror, over and over. It had no end that I could see. I coughed, more to break the unearthly silence that had descended, and at that sound the haze vanished and I was left looking up into the tree like some deranged night-time bird spotter. I shook my head to clear it and went back inside, but not before the faint hooting started again. This time it was accompanied by hissing and growling that came from nothing I could imagine, nor would want to. Despite myself, by the time I reached the back door, I was moving at a healthy jog.

At breakfast the next morning my son has a wild-eyed look about him, as if the dreams of the night were with him still. I asked him about them, and he said nothing. I saw him glancing past me, through the open kitchen window. Down the length of the garden. I said nothing of my experiences of the previous evening, not the eldritch light, the noises, the feeling of impenetrable depth up into the branches. As I cleared away the breakfast things, I watched my son play in the garden, thinking that to deny him access to the garden and the ladder would only increase his desire to get there. There was an almost deliberate skirting around the tree and the area surrounding it, but I did not fail to notice the looks he shot towards it. I wasn't so far away that I could not hear him catch his breath each time he came within four feet of the tree. My heart caught at each of his stopped breaths and I imagined myself running from the kitchen, just too late to grasp his heel as he disappeared into the tree. He showed no inclination, however, of climbing again. I began to relax and brewed some tea.

I carried the drink into the garden, along with my usual weekend newspaper, and selected the bench at the top of the garden to begin my week-long perusal of it. I had been reading for perhaps ten minutes when I sensed rather than heard a change in the dynamic of his playing. My heart stopped and I stood suddenly, lukewarm tea spilling into the grass. A large drop fell onto the paper, where it ran the ink like blood from a bullet hole. I stared at my son.

He stood at the base of the tree, one hand resting casually on the leading edge of the ladder. His hair blew in a wind, but the wind seemed to blow *downwards*, as if it was coming from directly above him. He nodded slowly, and a wide grin split his face. He spoke, but the words were lost to me. They should not have been. I should have been able to hear him clearly, but I couldn't. I started towards him, shouted his name, *Walk towards me!*

It seemed he heard me at the last moment, turned to me, and as I saw the look on his face, I broke into a run. It was the look I had seen the last time he had climbed. Pure fear. He seemed to be imploring me to catch him, stealing glances up the ladder so that I was sure he was seeing something up there. He spoke a word, and for the life of me, I was sure it was not English. I have not heard its like before or since that moment. Its guttural bubbling sound was utterly alien coming from my son's mouth. I saw his eyes roll upwards until they were white, and as he started to slump forward, I threw myself at him in a vain attempt to catch his fall. I was beaten to it, however.

A long arm snaked downwards, fastened on a shoulder, and pulled sharply on my son's body. The hand at the end seemed too long, and thinking back now I know I that I had convinced myself that I saw pink flesh and dark dusting hair on the back of it, and not that dark indigo scaling horror. I know now that it was no human hand that snatched my son. I collapsed onto the grass and stared weakly up into the depths. I saw nothing. No sign of my son or the thing that had taken him. The worst thing of all, perhaps, is that apart from that crawling malevolent word he uttered before he fainted, my son made no noise. There was no cry as he was taken, no sign that he even knew what had happened. Good god, I wasn't even sure if he was alive. I sobbed into my cupped hands and raced back to the house, my first instinct to phone for help. I stopped myself with my hand in the receiver of the telephone. What on earth would I tell the police? That my son had been snatched up into the canopy by some monster that used a never ending ladder as its route through the tree? They would take me away as soon as look at me.

I walked in a daze back to the tree, fearful now that I would see my son's slumped body at its base, drained of life, and the creature (if that is what it was) crouching above him. The area around the tree was free from such visions and that was somehow worse. I reached the ladder and craned up into the darkness. Nothing. I started back to the house, desperate to do something, knowing there was only one thing that I could do. I fought with myself for minutes, precious minutes that I knew could mean the difference between finding my son and not. I curse those wasted minutes now.

Fast, so as I could not stop myself, I rushed back to the start of the ladder, and leapt the first three rungs, running up it using feet and hands. At first I did not take in my surroundings, but it soon became clear that I should have easily cleared the height of the tree, and hadn't. I slowed my ascent, and looked to either side.

I saw a vista so strange and alien to me that I nearly lost balance on the rungs of the ladder. Unthinking, I stepped from it and the ground beneath my feet seemed to thrum as I made contact with it. The earth here was a deep shade of ochre, nothing strange in that, but the grass shooting through it was the colour of spun glass, transparent and yet catching the dull light and throwing out spirals of twisted rainbows in every direction. I reached my hand to it, and snatched it back quickly as the edges parted my skin like razor blades. No playground this, then. As much as I wanted to stay and explore, despite the obvious challenge, I knew (and prayed) that my son was not here and so moved on up the ladder. There seemed no end, each rung a door to as new and equally alien a landscape as that first. A breeze ruffled my hair. I smelled something in that breeze, familiar. It smelled faintly of ice cream and heat and joy, and I recognised the scent of my boy. Like a dog after a trail, I moved my head this way and that, until I thought I had detected a lightly stronger scent off to my right. I shut my eyes to focus on it, and stepped off the ladder.

It felt like stepping back onto the land around my house. Smelled the same too. There were noises here, as those I had heard from the base of the tree, hooting and exuberant whistles. I opened my eyes, and saw the table off to one side, the one I am sitting at right now, sitting in a patch of bare ground. The earth was the red colour of the Australian outback. To all sides, I saw fields upon fields of deep yellow corn, alongside tall trees that stretched into infinity. Beneath all of it, the redness of the earth

looked like sunburned skin from which the corn grew like hair. I thought I saw movement in the corn, shadows and flitting shapes that leaped and cavorted among the dusty stems. I stared harder but this only served to blur the edges of my vision and so I looked away. On the table I saw a pen and paper. Hooked over the back of the chair that accompanied the table, as casually as if it had been at home, was my son's jacket. I rushed to it, expecting to find something, some warmth in its cloth that would give me a clue. It was cold, and as I drew nearer, I saw splashes of mud coating it. I grabbed it up and crushed my face into it. I shouted my son's name again and again until my voice cracked and failed me, the sound thinning as it raced across the expanse. Clouds of dust and dried corn husk rose from the fields as if in response to my calls, but I neither received, nor expected, further reply.

I sat heavily at the desk, feeling the chair creak under my weight, and spread my son's coat out in front of me. I absently picked at the flecks of dried mud, thankful it was not blood.

I looked down at the red ground, not wanting to see the way my hands shook, not wanting to see the way they looked in the pallid yellow light of this place. My mind was filled with voices, all clamouring to be heard, all saying one thing or another, all mine. I bit down hard on my lip to snap myself out of this destructive thinking. Blood slowly filled the gap between my lower lip and my teeth and as I tasted the bitterness of it, my eyes found something on the ground at my feet. A tiny depression in the hard soil, no more than a fingers length. A swirling pattern in the middle of it, concentric circles the size of a small coin. I jolted in the chair so hard that my thighs caught painfully on the underside of the desk. I stood suddenly, tipping the chair backwards, and still clutching my son's jacket, I sank so that my face almost touched the earth. The voices in my head quietened suddenly. I knew this pattern. I had seen its like rendered numerous times in mud on the floor of my kitchen. It was my son's shoe print, I was sure of it, and now that I had seen one, I seemed to see them all. Some were only traces of the print, some more full, and they led in a weaving pattern away from the desk and into the cornfields. What my eyes also found, and what I tried to not see, were the prints next to them, crossing them, scuffing them out. They looked vaguely bird like, long and slender with three distinct trailing scratches at the front each, as if made by three claws dragging with each footstep. I stood and looked around. Apart from the desk and the ladder shimmering blue in the air next to it, all was red earth and yellow corn.

Without stopping to think, I tucked the arms of my son's jacket into my jeans and started following the footprints.

The going was hard, strangely so, as if the very ground was holding me back. My feet seemed to drag, and I had the strangest thought that if I possessed sharp claws, they would leave that weird little dragging scratch in the earth like the ones I was following. When I looked down at my feet I saw that the redness of the earth had crept up the legs of my jeans almost to the knee. I thought, no, I knew, that when I looked away the ground would be reaching up again, grasping my legs, slowing me down. I called out my son's name suddenly, not liking the hoarseness of my voice, but calling again anyway. A flock of birds exploded from the cornfield, black as crows but twice their size at least, oily blueness shimmering from their wingtips in the low sun. They were a way off too, and I had no desire to see them up close. I watched them depart with no little relief. I allowed myself to think that the noise they made as they flew, the barking calls they made unlike any crow I had ever heard, the hissing as their wings exited the dry corn, completely masked the call made by my son as he answered me. Despite their racket, I almost heard him, I am sure of it. If I had made the sound up in my head, would I have added details like the obvious sound of his distress, and the low guttural rumbling that could only have come from his captor?

I began to run then, mimicking the birds' flight with my own, obliterating the footprints and the claw prints, tearing my legs through the grasping soil, seeing a red rain of dust flick from the ends of my shoes as each left the ground. The low rumble that I imagined was the voice of my son's kidnapper grew louder and I almost thought I saw a flash of indigo scales as it sped away through the corn field. I screamed as loud as I could manage as I ran, the name of my son becoming indistinct, morphing into a single strained syllable of wrenching pain. I thought I heard him again then, all trace of the hypnosis he seemed to have been under gone and simply fear and anger and sadness and loss remaining. I urged my legs to move faster and sensed the ground under my feet responding to this as the creeping redness reached to my knees and then further, clawing at my thighs. Still I ran. Hours passed, or seemed to. My watch was still running, but I wasn't sure I could trust its timing. In the blink of an eye, hours would pass, and then time would slow so that I seemed to cross vast distances in mere seconds. I heard the shuffling steps of the kidnapper at every twist and turn of the corn plants, and as they slowly merged and then vanished into forests of deep green trees, the sounds grew quieter and eventually stopped altogether. I slept when I literally

had no strength to stand, but the sleep was fitful and seemed to last no more than minutes. My watch said differently however, and a day, and then two seemed to pass. I felt time's progress in the growth of stubble on my face, but in nothing else. I did not eat and I drank what water I could find in the forests, praying I would not sicken before I had found my son.

It was perhaps two days, or maybe two and a half when I eventually saw him, I was so shocked that for a moment I didn't recognise him. He stood some distance from me, on the edge of the forest as it turned back to the red dusty ground. I was close enough to see streaks of tears cutting through the dirt on his face. Close enough to smell him. He stood with his head bowed, and as I scanned around for his tormentor, I saw nothing. I looked back to my son, heart racing, words drying in my throat, and I reached for him. He caught my eye suddenly, and the look in his eyes stopped me cold. It was blank fear, and yet he seemed to be telling me something with tiny movements of his head, shaking this way and that. He looked to his right and then left and again shook his head. I saw a grimace of pain cross his face then, and he crumpled slightly. As I looked to either side of him, and he was lost to the periphery, finally I saw what he was telling me. From the corner of my eye, I saw.

The creature was not gone. It stood, its many-jointed, bowed legs dripping moisture and a glistening swollen sac of a body depending from them, its arms wrapped around my son, scaled hands at his throat. It shrouded itself somehow from me, so that when I looked back to my son, it vanished. And yet now I had seen it, I couldn't *un-see* it. I gagged with the fear and revulsion, with the pain of seeing my boy harnessed by such horror. The thing tugged at him and he stumbled against the soft body. A mouth opened on its flank, more a raw wet hole than a mouth, but from it issued the same gargling sounds I had heard my son speak in the moments before his abduction. I wasn't sure if it was talking to me or my son, but I saw him nodding gently, and I sensed his fear subsiding, or at least abating for the moment, both in his eyes and the set of his body. His hands, that had been fisted tightly this whole time, slowly unclenched, and I was close enough to see tiny white crescents on his palms where his fingernails had dug in.

Go back, Dad he said, and my heart stopped at the sound of his voice. *Go back to the ladder and wait for me.*

I began to protest, but days with mere mouthfuls of liquid had turned my voice into a silent scratch and I'm not sure he would have heard even if I had continued. As it was, he held his hands out and implored me. *Dad, please! Go back. Wait at the ladder and I will find you. I'll be back, Dad. I promise. I love you, and I'll be back. Now GO!*

The creature wrenched my son onto its back suddenly and now I saw it fully. I gagged again and started running towards the spot where they had been standing, but I was too late. They vanished in a cloud of red dust, and I heard him shout as they went.

I'll be back, Dad

I sank to my knees and watch them leave, the dust settling just enough for me to glimpse the bright red of his tee shirt before it was shrouded in distance and mist and dry, cracking corn plants. My raw cry of loss followed them where I could not.

I am back at the table, back where I began my story. I wait for my son as any father would. It took me less than a day to find my way back, and I followed what markers I could remember and what footprints remained. The birds were back in the cornfield, their cawing and flapping sounding like the crackle of fire in the dry vegetation. I hold in my mind the sound of him and the sight of him and the smell of him, and I know he will return to me. He promised and I believe him. There are sounds in the distance, have I mentioned that? They seem to be getting closer. I have moved the desk right to the point where the ladder is visible through the trees.

I had a moment of inspiration and tied his jacket, which miraculously remained with me this whole time, to the last rung of the ladder that I stepped off. I think I might search for him on further rungs and in further worlds, or even go home. Just for a while, and I know now, or think at least, that I can find my way back here. I have written my son a note explaining what I have planned, but he promised me, and I believe him. *I'll be back*, he said. I need to be here when he does.

The jacket, still tied to the ladder, is flapping in a soft breeze. It reminds me of home, and the sound, like a kite or a flag in summer, comforts me. Every few minutes, I leave off writing and walk a distance and start calling my son.

So far I have heard nothing, but he promised.

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