

Ten-year-old Pax and his best friend, Jayni, enter a magical realm of bewitching creatures in search of a mysterious man who might be able to heal Pax. Readers develop empathy and a theology of suffering that equips them to both face difficult circumstances and love others who are experiencing hardship.

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1

The Climbing Tree

Pax Jackson was a ten-year-old boy who didn't know if he'd make it to his eleventh birthday.

He had gray eyes, a bald head where thick curls used to grow, and a little more of his dad's dark skin than his mom's fair complexion. He also had a nagging cough that rattled his bony body and kept him up at night. Instead of shoving his homework into his backpack and rushing to catch the bus home from school that afternoon, he sat on the back deck of his family's log cabin, dangling his feet over the edge and watching a fat lizard do push-ups in the warm sun. With the sound of his own wheezing loud in his ears, he didn't notice the squeak of the school bus brakes on the street out front.

Jayni Suko was a petite ten-year-old girl with almond

eyes and paper-straight black hair. Stepping off the school bus, she bent forward under the weight of a bulging backpack as she made a detour toward the house next door. She bounded up the driveway of Pax's home and hurried around to the backyard.

"Pax!" Jayni ran up the steps of the deck, dropped her backpack, and sat down beside her friend. She studied Pax's face. "We missed you at school. This a bad day?"

"Yeah." A smile peeked out through the dark circles around his eyes. "What'd I miss?"

"Not much. Miss Halpin gave me your homework but said if you weren't feeling up to it, don't worry. She'll help you catch up later."

Jayni pulled two tattered textbooks out of her backpack and a few wrinkled worksheets and plopped them between her and Pax.

Pax only glanced at his homework, then turned away.

Jayni followed his gaze out over a sloping hill peppered with pine trees.

Jayni was the youngest daughter of the Suko family who'd moved next door to the Jacksons almost twelve years ago. The Sukos and Jacksons had become fast friends, and when Pax and Jayni were born two years later, the neighborhood had grown a little louder and a lot more fun.

Jayni looked over at Pax. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Pax’s voice softened. “I’m glad you’re here.” The friends sat in silence. The lizard darted away and disappeared under the deck. Pax took a deep, rattly breath.

“Do you think you could make it down to the Climbing Tree?” Jayni asked. “I can help you.”

“’Course I can, Spitfire. And I don’t need any help.”

Spitfire was Pax’s nickname for Jayni. He’d read it once in a book about dragons and knights, and it seemed to fit his friend who was as fiery and fearless as a dragon.

Jayni laughed as she hopped up. “I just have to be home by dinner, so we’ve got two hours. Let’s go!”

Jayni reached down for Pax’s hand, but he pushed it away, eager to prove he was stronger than he looked.

The two friends descended the deck steps and scampered down a small bank covered in crunchy pine needles. Their footfalls stirred the scent of a thousand Christmas trees into the warm spring air. Pax paused to catch his breath along the way. Ten steps forward, a right at the boulder, a hop across the stream—and there stood the Climbing Tree, like a giant with an oversized head of shaggy hair.

They’d discovered the enormous oak when they were just six years old, and they’d been returning ever since—to

dream up stories, build forts, and talk about important kid stuff, like the proper ratio of ketchup to French fry. Sometimes on the weekends or holidays, they'd pack snacks and books and blankets, and read under the expansive branches till the sun got sleepy.

This is also where they'd had their biggest fight, the summer they were seven. And where they'd run to take refuge two years ago—on the day Pax got his diagnosis.

Jayni beat Pax to the tree and lifted a thick, drooping branch high so he could pass underneath. But Pax grabbed the branch himself and waited for Jayni to enter first. She shot him a withering look but marched inside anyway. When Pax let go of the branch, it swished and thudded against the ground. Now safely beneath the canopy of branches, the children headed straight to their favorite spots. Pax chose a low broad limb and slung his body over it like a sloth, arms and legs dangling free.

Jayni scrambled up three limbs above him, leaned back against the trunk, and in a British accent declared, "Behold the Queen of the Climbing Tree! You there, young man, who are *you*? How dare you enter my royal court without permission!"

Pax rolled his eyes, and a smug smile played around his mouth. "Your Royal Fakeness, I am *King* of the Climbing

Tree. You have been found out. Guards, seize her!” He paused to cough before commanding, “Off with her head!”

Jayni’s eyes flashed, and she was about to fire back at Pax when she heard a loud rustling sound above her.

“What’s that?” she asked, craning her neck to look up into the dark maze of branches.

“Sounded like a bir—” but before Pax could put the *d* on “bird,” they heard a peculiar voice say, “Dad-gum it! This tree gets harder to find every time!”

The complaint was punctuated by a wild flapping and the sound of a bell, like the fire alarm at school.

Pax forced himself up into a sitting position, and he and Jayni stretched and strained to see who was at the top of their tree.

The vexed voice spoke again. “Oh, rot and rubbish! These wattles will be the end of me!”

More flapping disturbed the leaves overhead, another shrill bell sounded, and a few brown feathers floated downward. A disheveled bird popped down through the upper branches and began to hop toward them, circling the trunk branch by branch, as if descending a winding staircase.

Pax and Jayni froze. Had this bird just been . . . *talking*? He was an odd-looking thing: his bottom half was rooster-

brown, his top half snow white, and every single feather was frizzy and out of place, as if he'd just been struck by lightning. His black eyes bulged and rarely blinked. But his most striking feature was what dangled from the end of his black beak: three, long, rubbery strands that whirled and whipped with his every movement. A leafy twig had become tangled up in one of them, and the bird kept scratching at it with his claws and shaking his head violently, trying to free the thing.

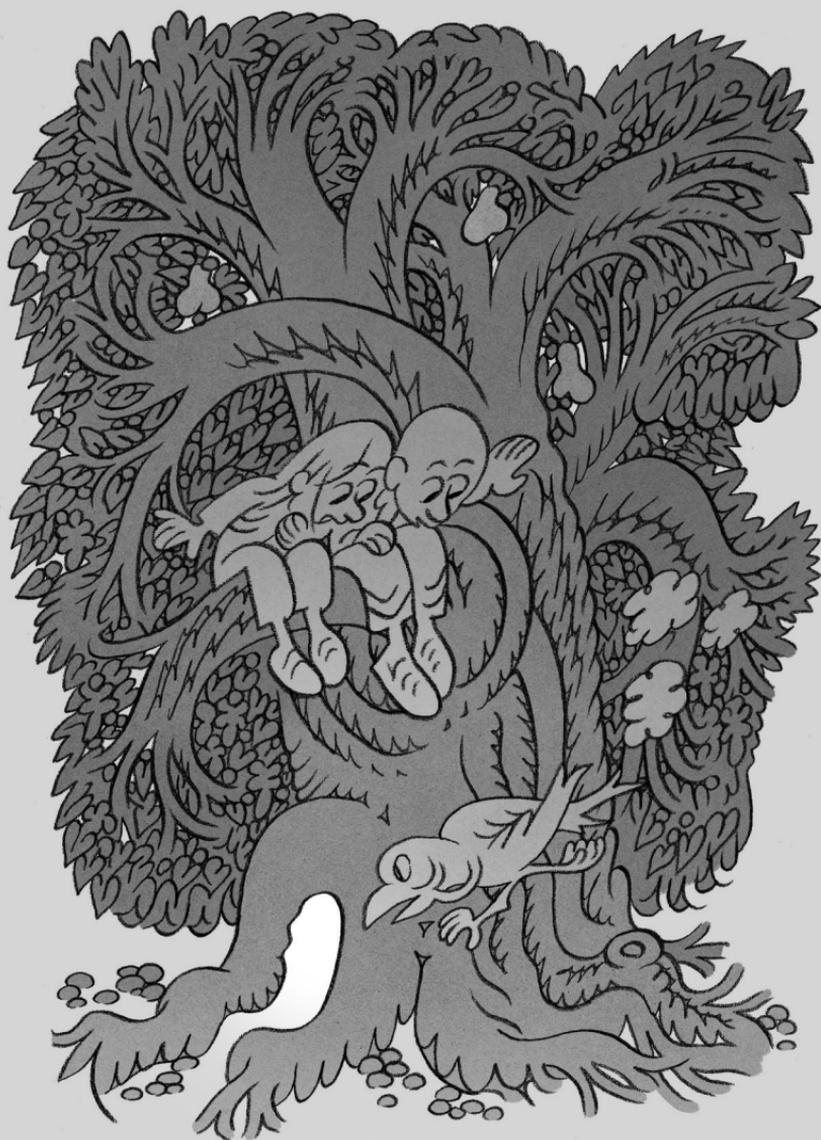
Down and down he came, muttering all the way, feathers flying. He ran right over Jayni, who sat still as a statue, and right past Pax, then spread his wings and fluttered to the ground.

“Now where is that blasted thing?” He bent low, cocked his right eye to the ground, muttered again, shuffled through some leaves, clawed at the tangled twig, then pecked at the ground. “Agh! Well, I am up a creek without my cattle!”

Pax's and Jayni's shocked looks changed to amusement. Pax raised an eyebrow and silently mouthed at Jayni, *without a paddle?*

Jayni nodded, then bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Both children were considering whether to go on in silence or to speak up and reveal themselves when the



bird latched onto a piece of bark with his beak and tugged at it violently. The Climbing Tree quivered and quaked, and—as if a talking bird hadn't been shocking enough—the trunk miraculously swiveled open, revealing a gaping black hole no bigger than the bird.

“Oh!” gasped Jayni and Pax at the same time.

Startled, the frizzy and frazzled bird jerked his head up, sending the tangled twig into a tailspin. On spying the children, his beak opened wide and let loose that awful bell sound. “What! Oh, rot and rubbish. Just my luck. I suppose you both were there the whole time? Saw everything?”

Pax and Jayni couldn't find their words yet, but they slowly nodded.

“Well, I'll be a monkey's brother. Why do these things always happen to me? Collywobbles! You'll both have to come with me, I'm afraid. I can't leave you here now that you've seen the doorway.” He stuck out a wing to wave them inside.

Jayni summoned her power of speech and stammered, “But . . . this is *our* tree. We've come here for years, and . . . it's never done *that* before.”

Pax, who was terrified of tight, dark spaces, quickly added, “I'm *not* going in there.”

Am I seriously arguing with a talking bird? Pax wondered.

Maybe he had fallen asleep on the tree limb, and this was just a strange dream. He'd soon wake up and tell Jayni all about it, and they would laugh together.

The bird cleared his throat and ruffled his feathers. "I'm sorry, but you absolutely must come with me now. What a mess! We'll have to see Declan. He'll know what to do."

"You can't force us to go anywhere!" declared Jayni.

The whole weird encounter was leaving Pax suddenly drained, so he was relieved that Jayni had spoken up.

The bird let out a huff and narrowed his bulging eyes. "Young lady, it's time you faced the musical. The reality is, this is a top-secret tree whose roots lead to great wonders and mysterious places and a healing man, and I can't just have you two—"

"A *healing* man?" interrupted Pax, perking up.

"Why, yes, of course. Ah, gimcrack! I suppose you haven't heard of him *out here*."

The bird scratched at the tangled twig still dangling from the rubbery beak rope, and he blew his bell again. "Agh! These snag-nabbit wattles!"

Pax was deep in thought about the healing man as Jayni climbed down from her limb, enchanted by the magical creature. "Where are you from? How did you get here?"

But the bird was swinging his head back and forth due

to the twig, so Jayni bent forward and reached toward his beak. “May I?” she asked.

He blinked in surprise, and then said, “Well, um, I suppose so. You look as harmless as a glove.”

Jayni giggled. “I think you mean a *dove*.”

She carefully unwrapped the twig from the wattle, which she didn’t at all like touching—it felt like wormy rubber bands.

“Ahhh. Such sweet relief! Well, thank you, thank you kindly,” crooned the bird. With one claw he stroked all three wattles, then fluffed his feathers and sighed.

“Where are you from?” Jayni repeated.

“Mademoiselle, I am a three-wattled bellbird from—ehhh, I’m not sure if I’m allowed to tell you where. But it’s not far from here. Not far at all.”

Jayni wondered why he couldn’t tell her where he was from, but before she could open her mouth to ask any more questions, the bird was prattling on again.

“Ah, look at me forgetting my manners. Mother would be so disappointed. My name is Wilmer. How do you do?” The bird attempted a tottering bow.

Jayni smiled. “How do you do, Wilmer? My name is Jayni, and this,” she said, pointing up into the tree, “is my friend Pax.”

While Jayni and Wilmer had been chatting, Pax began to feel something he hadn't felt in a very long time. That tiny spark of hope that had been snuffed out by long months of illness suddenly blazed into a forest fire. Somewhere out there was a healing man, and Pax wanted more than anything else to be healed.

"Let's go with him, Jayni," Pax said suddenly.

Jayni's eyes widened as she turned around to stare up at Pax. Pax—her friend who was always exhausted, who didn't want to do anything more daring than climb the first few limbs of their tree, whose sense of adventure had been lost ever since he got sick two years ago. This was the old Pax talking, and she liked it.

"Yes! Oh, Pax, let's do it! Let's go!"

"Quite right, then. You've finally come to your senses. Off we go," said Wilmer, turning toward the doorway and muttering. "This is a fine metal of fish, but Declan'll know what to do."

Kettle, thought Pax as he climbed down from his tree limb and stepped toward the black hole. *A kettle of fish*. He watched cautiously as the frazzled bird hopped through the opening. Then he watched in amazement as the black hole grew larger for Jayni, who stepped in behind Wilmer without hesitating.

Pax crept up to the very edge of the doorway. Peering in, he felt a blast of damp air hit his face. He could see nothing, but smelled a strong scent of dirt and rain. Pax stood motionless, except for his heart, which beat fast with both hope and fear. *A healing man. A healing man*, he silently repeated. He closed his eyes, forced his right foot forward, and stepped inside the oak tree.

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