

I Climbed a Tree to Write This

Sarah Peterson

It's Minnesota fall. Red, yellow, brown, and gold cover the banks of the Mississippi, and the water is a chilly blue grey. The sun glints off the small, rippling wake left by a pair of ducks swimming and bobbing past.

I stand on the east bank of the Mighty Mississippi to connect myself to the Earth and inhale its insight. I am here to commune with nature, to become Nature Girl.

I am poised for inspiration. I have my notebook and pen, my iPod to provide inspiration-friendly, ambient music, a small non-fat latte, my fingerless gloves, oversized sunglasses, and my cell phone just in case. I look like a Serious Writer.

I walk along the bank as Nature Girl the Serious Writer. I should contemplate nature more often, but I never know what I'm supposed to be thinking about when I'm looking around at trees and plants and stuff. I don't see ripples as an extension of the tides and female cycles of the moon, and I don't see all the other symbols and metaphors around. I pick up some leaves so I look like I'm contemplating the circle of life.

I'm actually thinking about the training montage in *Rocky*, that one where Sylvester Stallone runs up all those stairs. If I weren't Nature Girl the Serious Writer, I'd be Rocky.

Then I see the dead tree. It is bent in half at the base and its trunk reaches over the river at a ninety-degree angle. I know that climbing this tree will force me into deep philosophical ponderings and that once I'm comfortably and stably perched in its branches, I will look like Nature Girl

the Serious Writer. And if I look like Nature Girl the Serious Writer, maybe I'll be her.

The trunk isn't high off the ground, so the risk of death is low. I set my latte on a thick branch and take off my fingerless gloves; I don't want them to get snagged on the bark. I secure my artsy cloth bag, grab onto the tree, and find my footing on its broken trunk. While pulling myself up, I put my hand dangerously close to a huge dead beetle. Huge. It's wedged into the wide grooves of the bark with one spindly exoskeletal leg sticking out, pointing to the sky. I jerk my hand away to avoid contact and knock my latte into the river. As I scoot my way along the tree trunk, I watch the cup float away. When I'm finally situated, I'm short two important Nature-Girl-the-Serious-Writer props. Still, I try to clear my mind of Rocky and commune.

I don't usually climb trees. I bet Sylvester Stallone climbs trees with one hand. There are probably wood ticks in this tree. My boxing coach A.J. hates wood ticks; he tells us about them all the time when we train outside. He says they burrow into your brain and make communities and the black wood ticks live in the projects. He used to have an afro, but he had to cut it because he thought the wood ticks were going to get in his hair and then into his brain. Wood ticks probably kill trees.

I don't really like trees anyway; they make me nervous. I can't identify any kinds of trees and I really don't like ones with trunks bigger than my waist. I hate trees in the winter because they look dead and depressing, and in the summer they're loud and rusty and look like ax murderers trying to get into my room. I have a tree outside my bedroom that's loud and scratches my window. One time I woke up to a scratching sound outside my window and at first I thought it was an ax murderer, and then I thought

it was that stupid tree, but it wasn't. It was a squirrel. The squirrel had jumped from the tree to my window and was climbing up the screen. All I could see was its fat, white, furry gut inching along. It was horrifying.

I've heard that possums are a prehistoric species distantly related to humans, but I'm pretty sure that's a lie. Evolution wouldn't do that to me. When I was in Washington D.C., I couldn't go to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History because there's a taxidermified possum there and I'm trying to never see a possum in my life. If Sylvester Stallone saw a possum, he'd punch it in the face. I can't stand to live in a world with possums so I have to deny their existence. They're terrifying.

I wonder if my latte is polluting the river. I wonder if the fish are getting caffeinated. I like to fish, but when I fish I hope I don't catch any fish so that I don't have to see them. When Sylvester Stallone fishes he wears one of those khaki fishing hats with all the hooks stuck to it. One time my high school boyfriend took me to the Albuquerque Aquarium and I saw a one-eyed fish. He tried to distract me so that I wouldn't see it, but I did. It was horrifying.

Owie, my finger kind of hurts. I cut it on this stupid tree and it's probably infected and now I won't be able to spar and Coach A.J.'ll be mad. Sylvester Stallone always spars with cuts: "Cut me, Mick."

I wish a barge would come by; I love barges. Last time I was here I waved to a barge man as he drove past but he didn't wave back even though he totally saw me.

I hear leaves crunching behind me. I turn around and two men, probably father and son, are walking toward me along the bank. They both have big, fancy cameras around their necks and I can tell they are communing with nature for real. They are Nature Men. The old man looks up

at me and smiles.

I smile back. Yes, I climbed this tree by myself with this notebook, this pen, this iPod, and this cell phone. Yes, I did have a latte. I don't have it anymore. Yes, I'm sitting by the rotting carcass of a huge beetle and no, it doesn't bother me. Sure, I like trees.

But I know what he sees when he looks at me. He sees a young woman perched in a tree listening to the water and writing poems about the whispering wind. She grew up in trees and especially likes the ones with trunks bigger than her waist. She does not fear squirrels, possums, or one-eyed fish. She fears nothing. She is not thinking about Sylvester Stallone in a fishing hat. Look at those sunglasses—she's probably an artist, but she doesn't have a small non-fat latte so he can't be certain. But he's pretty sure. He knows that she sees the ripples in the water as extensions of the tides and female cycles of the moon, and that she recognizes all the potential symbols and metaphors around. She is overwhelmed with the beauty of the natural world. She is Nature Girl the Serious Writer.

The young man passes under the tree and walks on down the shore, but the old man lingers, looking at me. It seems like he wants to say something. I take off my headphones and wait, but he doesn't say anything. He gives me an "I understand, you're communing with nature, me too" look, and walks under my tree.

I watch him jog to catch up with his son and I feel bad for deceiving him. I'm not Nature Girl the Serious Writer. I'm not thinking about nature, and I haven't written a single word. Still, I look down at my page with my most attractive Nature-Girl-the-Serious-Writer smile. Maybe I am communing with nature. Maybe he'll take my picture.