

# JOSH CLIMBS THE TREE OF LIFE

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table and wash the dishes, Barty kissed them good-night and retired to his room with The Star Beast..Like the chicken egg. As weary as she was, Agnes could not at once puzzle out the meaning of those four words. Then: "Oh. He's in an incubator..At last: the humiliating backless gown, the precious drugs, even a pretty nurse who seemed to like him, and then oblivion..No inquiring voice echoed off the passage walls, no accusatory shout. He was alone with the cadaver in this mist-shrouded moment of the metropolitan night-but perhaps not for long..Although the small tin-and-plastic harmonica was more toy than genuine instrument, the boy blew and siphoned surprisingly complex music from it. As far as Apes could tell, he never hit a sour tone..Jabbing his forefinger at each of the remaining treats, Barty said, "Pie, pie..".Avoiding the graveled driveway, on which he was more likely to scuff his freshly polished loafers, he approached the house across the lawn, beneath the moon-sifting branches of a great pine that made itself useless for Christmas by spreading as majestically as an oak..He had taken refuge in meditation, because he'd been frustrated by his continuing failure in the Bartholomew hunt and disturbed by his apparently paranormal experiences with quarters and with phone calls from the dead. More deeply disturbed than he had realized or had been able to admit..Lientery's work met the criteria of great art, about which Junior had learned in art-appreciation courses. It undermined his sense of reality, left him wary, filled him with angst and with loathing for the human condition, and made him wish he hadn't just eaten dinner..But with the silencer attached, the pistol was useful only for close-up work. After passing through a sound-suppressor, the bullet would exit the muzzle at a lower than usual velocity, perhaps with an added wobble, and accuracy would drop drastically at a distance.. "Most tornadoes stay on the ground twenty miles or less," Edom explained, "but this one kept its funnel to the earth for two hundred nineteen miles! And it was one mile wide. Everything in its path--torn, smashed to bits. Houses, factories, churches, schools--all pulverized. Murphysboro, Illinois, was wiped off the map, erased, hundreds killed in that one town..".When Agnes had asked him to deliver the pies, before she had set out with Joey for the hospital the previous day, Edom had wanted to beg off, but he had agreed without hesitation. He was prepared to suffer every viciousness that nature could throw at him in this life, but he could not endure seeing disappointment in his sister's eyes.. "In cases like this, the malignancy is often more advanced in one eye than the other. If the size of the tumor requires it, we remove the eye containing the greatest malignancy, and we treat the remaining eye with radiation..".When the subject shifted to card tricks and fortune-telling, Maria admitted to practicing divination with standard playing cards..For a while, Junior profited enormously from Tammy's investment advice, and the sex was great. As a thank-you for the hefty trading commissions she earned--and not incidentally for all the orgasms--Tammy gave him a Rolex. He didn't mind her four cats, didn't even care when the four grew to six, then to eight.. "Come with me," Paul Damascus said at once. "To Bright Beach. It is far away from San Francisco, and he'd never think of looking for you there. Why would he? You've no connection to the place. I've got a house with enough room. You're welcome. And you wouldn't be among strangers..".Every nerve in Junior's body was a tautly strung trigger wire. If something set him off, he might explode so violently that he'd blow himself into a psychiatric ward.. "If you're a dowser, better dowse," said Licky, coming up alongside him and looking sidelong into his face. "And if you're not, you'd better dowse all the same. That way you'll stay above ground longer..".When Max answered, Vanadium let out his breath in a whoosh of relief and began talking on the inhalation: "It's me, Tom, and maybe I've just got a bad case of the heebie-jeebies, but there's something I think you better do, and you better do it right now..".Those who had just met her and those who were overly charmed by eccentricity called her Seraphim, her name complete. Her teachers, neighbors, and casual acquaintances called her Sera. Those who knew her best and loved her the most deeply--like her sister, Celestina called her Phimie..His instructor, Bob Chicane--who visited twice a week for an hour--advised him to imagine a perfect fruit as the object of his meditation. An apple, a grape, an orange, whatever..He had been surprised to learn her age. She didn't appear to be that old. Thirty or not, Victoria was unusually attractive..Assuming that the boy had closed his eyes and was talking to himself, somewhere between his self-told bedtime story and a dream, Agnes retreated from the room, pulling the door only half shut behind her..Eventually, a braless blonde in shiny white plastic boots, a white miniskirt, and a hot-pink T-shirt featuring the silk-screened face of Albert Einstein, said, "Sure, I know her. Had some classes with her. She's nice enough, but she's kind of nerdy, especially for an Afro-American. I mean, they're never nerdy--am I right?".Glancing at the plump pie in Edom's hands, the gentleman replied to Agnes in a musical yet gravelly voice worthy of Louis Armstrong: "You must be the lady Reverend Collins told me about..".The striking resemblance between this artist and Seraphim, as well as the facts in the biographical sketch under the photo, argued that the two were sisters.. "Yes," she assured him, though her gaze had dropped from his mouth to his hand, so small, which she held in hers..Yet, with no recollection of rising from his chair, he found that he had shouldered his backpack and crossed the room. The three men looked up expectantly..Holding the pistol, fully extending his right arm in execution style, the gunman approached the fallen minister..At eleven o'clock Saturday morning, having just settled in the hotel after arriving from St. Mary's, they were waiting for the SFPD to deliver suitcases of clothes and toiletries that Rena Moller, Celestina's neighbor, had packed according to her instructions. While waiting, the three of them took an early lunch--or a late breakfast--at a room service table in the living room..Kneeling at her side, Junior placed the decorative pillow over her lovely face and pressed down firmly while Frank Sinatra finished "Hello, Young Lovers," and sang perhaps half of "All or Nothing at All." Victoria never regained consciousness, never had a chance to struggle.. "No. Rowena dropped those names after the twins' first year. She and I were the only ones who ever used them. Our private little joke. Even the boys wouldn't have remembered..".By Thursday, September 23, due to Junior's accident and surgery, the draft board--which had reinstated his I -A status after he'd lost the exemption that had come with his former job as a rehabilitation therapist--agreed to schedule a new physical examination in December..slow breaths, and then she pointed at the windshield. "The hospital's that way..".This ended any hope of romance, and he was disappointed. A less self-controlled man might have seized a nearby bronze vase--fashioned to resemble dinosaur stool--and stuffed her into it or vice versa..In spite of its dazzle and power and comfort, however, the car was not able to lift his spirits as he cruised the hills of the city. Somewhere along these darkly glistening streets, in these houses and high-rises clinging to steep slopes awaiting seismic sundering, the boy was sheltered: half Negro, half white, full doom to Junior Cain..The ship of night floated over the city and cast down nets of darkness, gathering millions of lights like luminous fishes in its black toils..Saturday morning, he walked to a drugstore in town and purchased eight decks of cards. With four, he passed the day re-creating, again and again, what he'd done at the dining-room table the previous evening. The four knaves never appeared..He fished the sound-suppressor from a jacket pocket, drew the pistol from his shoulder holster, and began to screw the former to the latter. He misthreaded it at first because his hands had begun to shake..After taking a preliminary statement from Celestina, Bellini left to romance a judge out of bed and obtain a search warrant for Enoch Cain's

residence, having already ordered a stakeout of the Russian Hill apartment. Celestina's description of her assailant was a perfect match for Cain. Furthermore, the suspect's Mercedes had been abandoned at her place. Bellini sounded confident that they would find and arrest the man soon. A mere silhouette against the fluorescent glare, Vanadium stepped into the hall. The bright light seemed to enfold him. The detective shimmered and vanished the way that a mirage of a man, on a fiercely hot desert highway, will appear to walk out of this dimension into another, slipping between the tremulous curtains of heat as though they hang between realities. A moment ago, he'd slammed into Angel's room, and that was loud, but this boomed louder, thunderous enough to wake people throughout the building. According to the newspapers, the police also credited him with the murders of Naomi, Victoria Bressler, and Ned Gnathic (whom they had connected to Celestina). He was wanted, too, for the attempted murder of Dr. Walter Lipscomb (evidently Ichabod), for the attempted murder of Grace White, and for assault with intent to kill Celestina White and her daughter, Angel, and for the assault on Lenora Kickmule (whose foxtail-bedecked Pontiac he had stolen in Eugene, Oregon). Edom marveled at Agnes's ability to rise above the past and to transcend so many years of torment. She was able to see the house as simple shelter, whereas to her brothers, it was—and always would be—the place in which their spirits had been shattered. Even living within sight of it would have been out of the question if they had been employed, with options. Junior didn't want an apology. The offer of a free lunch—or an entire week of lunches—didn't charm a smile from him. He had no interest in taking home a free apple pie. Downstairs again, as Agnes reached the foot of the stairs, she began to worry that she had done too thorough a job on the khakis and that the extent of the damage would raise suspicions. The poster announced an upcoming show, titled "This Momentous Day," by the young artist calling herself Celestina White. Dates for the exhibition were Friday, January 12, through Saturday, January 27. Sliding Victoria's chair away from the table, he turned her to face him. He adjusted her body so that her head was tipped back and her arms were hanging slack at her sides. The night was holding its breath again, the previous breeze now pent up in the breast of darkness. Cupping Angel entirely in his big hands, smiling at her, he said, "Oh, no, Mrs. White, this looks like a healthy young lady to me. No medicine required." He was astonished that adoption records would be sealed and so closely guarded when a child was being placed with a member of its immediate family, with its mother's sister. Although first-rate, the surgical team wasn't able to reattach the badly torn extremity. Tissue damage was too extensive to permit delicate bone, nerve, and blood-vessel repair. With no clear awareness of having left the guest room, Paul looked down the enclosed stairs. Mrs. Cain's little boy felt small, weak, sorry for himself, and terribly alone. The detective was still here, but his presence only aggravated Junior's sense of isolation. He'd been a godsend to Celestina, because his love of children and a new sense of fun that he'd discovered in himself were showered on Angel. He was Uncle Wally. Waddling Wally, Wobbly Wally, Wally Walrus, Wally Werewolf. Wally Wit Duh Funny Accents. Wiggle Eared Wally. Whistling Wally. Wrangler Wally. He was Good Golly Wally the Friend of All Polliwogs. Angel adored him, adored him, and he could have loved her no more if she had been one of the sons that he had lost. Overwhelmed by her classes, her waitressing job, her painting, Celestina could always count on Wally to step in to share the child rearing. He wasn't merely Angel's honorary uncle, but her father in all senses except the legal and biological; he wasn't just her doctor, but a guardian angel who fretted over her mildest fever and worried about all the ways the world could wound a child. To the windows, then, drawing all the blinds securely down. And still, irrationally, she felt watched. When he returned to the kitchen to add ice and sherry to his glass, he looked up White, Celestina in the San Francisco phone directory. Her number was listed; her address was not. The cop weighed too much to be carried any distance, the blanket proved effective, the decision to drag him was wise, and the whole process was value neutral. Edom, who had never made it big, medium, or little, watched his sister blur before him. He strove to contain the shimmering hotness in his eyes. His love was not for magic, and his pride was not in any skill he possessed, for he possessed none worth noting. His love was for his good sister; she was his pride, too, and he felt that his small life had precious meaning as long as he was able to drive her on days like this, carry her pies, and occasionally make her smile. Certain that he was overreacting, Tom nevertheless left the kitchen as a cop, not a priest, would leave it: staying low, knife thrust in front of him, clearing the doorframe fast. Thick fog distorted all sense of time and place. At each end of the block, pearly hazes of light marked intersections with main streets but didn't illuminate this narrower passage in between. A few security lamps—bare bulbs under inverted-saucer shades or caged in wire—indicated the delivery entrances of some businesses, but the dense white shrouds veiled and diffused these, as well, until they were no brighter than gaslights. Instead of immediately killing anyone, Junior returned to his apartment on the afternoon of December 29, and went to bed, fully clothed. To calm down. To think about focus. For a moment, Junior drew a blank on Renee. Reluctantly, he trolled the past and fished up the painful memory: the gorgeous transvestite in the Chanel suit, heir or heiress to an industrial-valve fortune. "You must've slipped this one in my pocket when you first came in here," Nolly deduced. Naked, dripping, he roamed the apartment. As on the night of December 13, the voice seemed to arise from thin air: ahead of him, then behind him, to the right, but now to the left. "I don't know anyone named Bartholomew." He decided that the truth, in this instance, could not harm him. Barty's release from Hoag Presbyterian had been delayed by an infection, and thereafter he had spent three days in a Newport-area rehabilitation hospital. Rehab consisted largely of orientation to his new dark world, since his lost function could not be recovered by either diligent exercise or therapy. . . . That discord sets up lots of other vibrations, some of which will return to you in ways you might expect. . . . Lord, listen to me—but I've really got to know if you can, if you are, how you feel, whether you feel, I mean, whether you think you could feel—". After Victoria had departed, Junior lay smiling at the ceiling, floating on Valium and desire. And vanity. "I'll show you some. That's what Gelluk's after. The ore of watermetal. Watermetal eats all the other metals, even gold, see."—and we're from different worlds, which I respect. I respect you and your wonderful family ... your centeredness, your certainty. I want to do this only because it's what I owe you." with an encircling and suggestive lick, and then licked his lips, too, when the cold steel slipped free of them. The way one does research into nonexistent history is to tell the story and find out what happened. I believe this isn't very different from what historians of the so-called real world do. Even if we are present at some historic event, do we comprehend it—can we even remember it—until we can tell it as a story? And for events in times or places outside our own experience, we have nothing to go on but the stories other people tell us. Past events exist, after all, only in memory, which is a form of imagination. The event is real now, but once it's then, its continuing reality is entirely up to us, dependent on our energy and honesty. If we let it drop from memory, only imagination can restore the least glimmer of it. If we lie about the past, forcing it to tell a story we want it to tell, to mean what we want it to mean, it loses its reality, becomes a fake. To bring the past along with us through time in the hold-alls of myth and history is a heavy undertaking; but as Lao Tzu says, wise people march along with the baggage wagons. "It was... the only dream that mattered," Joey

said. "You ... loving me. It was a good life because of you." This device, which could automatically pick any lock with just a few pulls of its trigger, was sold strictly to police departments, and its distribution was tightly controlled. On the black market it commanded such a high price that Junior could have bought the better part of a small Sklent painting for the same bucks..Aware of the dangers of dehydration, he drank a bottle of water and put two half-gallon containers of Gatorade in the Suburban..A residual tension drained out of Junior. He was somewhat surprised that he had still been concerned about the song..Her mother and father still resided in a world where Phimie was alive. Bringing them from that old reality to this new one would be the second-hardest thing Celestina had ever done..Agnes added this stop to her route at the request of Reverend Tom Collins, the local Baptist minister whose folks unthinkingly gave him the name of a cocktail. She was friendly with all the clergymen in Bright Beach, and her pie deliveries favored no one creed..could not be a person of the best intentions. Doctors and nurses wouldn't monitor their patients with the lights off..He hurried the length of the diner, pushing past waitresses, checking out all three of the possibilities, but of course, none of them was the dead detective--or anyone else Junior had ever seen before. He was looking for--what?--a ghost, but vengeful ghosts didn't sit down to a meat-loaf lunch in the middle of a hauntin.Other rooms were furnished as sparsely as those in a monastery. Indeed, the dining room contained nothing whatsoever..The roses filling the countersunk vases in the comers of Joey's gravestone were not Edom-grown, but they were Edom-bought. He had visited the florist himself, personally selecting each bloom from the inventory in the cooler; but he didn't have the courage to accompany Agnes and Barty to the grave..He turned over the two most recent discards. Neither was a jack of spades, and both were what he expected them to be..Downstairs, two shots cracked, and an instant after the second, an explosion shook the parsonage as though the long-promised Judgment were at hand. This was a real explosion, not the impact of another runaway Pontiac..Like a spring-loaded novelty snake erupting from a can, Junior exploded up from the chair, nearly knocking it over..Junior was not immune to traditional logic, but in this case he recognized the superior wisdom of Zedd's philosophy. His dread of Bartholomew and his gut-level animosity toward a child he'd never met defied all reason and exceeded simple paranoia; therefore, it must be purest, infallible animal instinct..A quick tug on each pants cuff revealed no ankle holster, which was how many cops would choose to carry an off-duty piece..Ford dealership, which he'd closed for business until three o'clock: lamentations, lunch, and moving reminiscences of the deceased shared among the shiny new Thunderbirds, Galaxies, and Mustangs. That venue would provide Junior with the witnesses he required for his reluctant, tearful, and perhaps even angry concession to the Hackachaks' insistent materialism..Grace and Celestina fell at once into the rhythms of kitchen work, not only brewing the coffee, but also helping Agnes with the pies..Stepping into her digs was like passing through a time machine into another century, traveling in space, as well, to the Europe of Louis XIV. The expansive, high-ceilinged rooms overwhelmed the eye with the rich somber colors and the heavy forms of Baroque art and furniture. Shells, acanthus leaves, volutes, garlands, and scrolls-often gilded decorated the museum-quality antique Bombay chests, chairs, tables, massive mirrors, cabinets, and etageres.

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