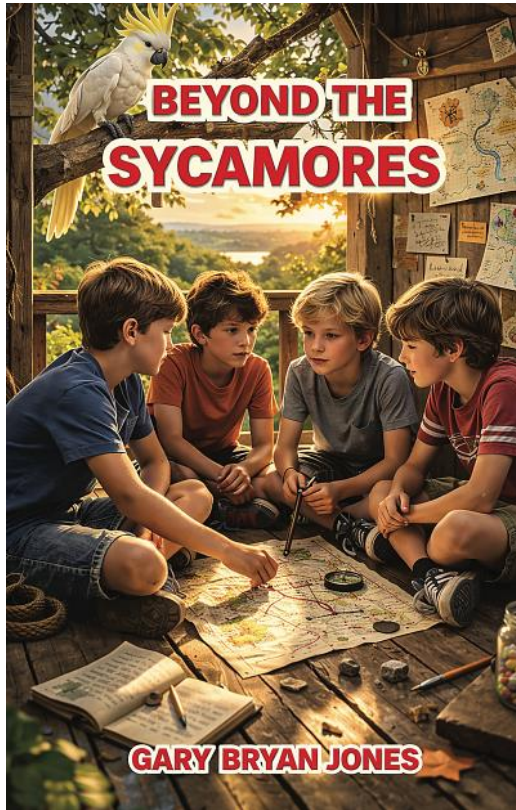




In the midst of life, there is death. While these depths are difficult to comprehend, this book bridges both worlds, reaching far beyond mere fiction.

Beyond the Sycamores

By Gary Bryan Jones

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BEYOND THE SYCAMORES

GARY BRYAN JONES

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Chapter One

The Treehouse Pact

Within the golden warmth of summer and the hushed wonder of winter snows, four boys lived in the fullness of childhood. Bound together by the West Virginia neighborhood they called home, they found their truest freedom in a treehouse that became their private world—a sanctuary for secrets, adventures, and shared dreams. Hidden among the leaves, they experienced days rich with laughter and discovery, the kind that quietly shape a lifetime.

They were four boys linked not by blood, but by an unshakable bond—the kind that forms only once, in the innocence of youth. Entering mortality just months apart, they stepped through life’s gateway as kindred spirits whose shared beginnings wove a connection that time and circumstance could never unravel.

Sharing this unforgettable journey were Sam Whitaker, the nine-year-old leader of the gang of four; his close friends and neighbors, Elias Ford, age nine; and Aiden Dalton and Rory Bryant, both age eight. They were different in every way that counted—in looks, temperament, and belief. And yet, somehow, they were the same where it mattered most.

The treehouse was their summer stronghold, built in the golden summer of 1954 by four boys armed with grit, wonder, and just enough lumber. It stood as a testament to imagination and the gateway to an enduring friendship among four boys still rookies at living.

Sam stood as the eldest of the treehouse “band of brothers,” the steady hand among them—a role that came as naturally as breathing. Loyal, thoughtful, and level-headed, he was the one who kept the others grounded when boyhood impulses ran wild. A natural leader, he carried within him a firm, inherited sense of patriotism and responsibility.

Of the treehouse gang, Sam was the talkative one, forever going on about General Eisenhower—how he aimed to be just like Ike someday, and how proud he was that the general had taken the White House. He was the one the boys could count on when mischief carried a little too far or when a grown-up’s voice hollered from down below.

Older than the rest by only a few months, he nevertheless took seriously his self-appointed role as their moral compass—more or less. His family lived a modest, middle-class life: his father worked long hours as a foreman at the Shenandoah Lumber Company, while his mother devoted herself to raising Sam and his two younger sisters. The Whitakers were devout Catholics, and their quiet, unassuming faith formed a steady undercurrent in Sam’s upbringing.

Yet Sam's attendance at Mass each Sunday stemmed more from duty than devotion. His heart never quite settled within the church walls; it belonged instead to the open woods. Gifted with a vivid imagination and a mind prone to wandering, he would have traded any sermon for the freedom of a muddy creek, where frogs leapt from the banks and the world felt wide, alive, and full of possibility.

And then there was Elias Ford. His days were marked not by childhood joy, but by the verbal and physical cruelty of a drunken father—a shadow that darkened all nine of his birthdays, every Thanksgiving, and each Christmas that came and went.

Still, when he climbed the ladder and ducked inside the treehouse, the weight he carried seemed to slip from his shoulders, and for a while he was simply one of the boys.

More than once, Elias confided to his treehouse buddies that he was secretly glad he didn't have any brothers or sisters. “‘Cause then they wouldn't have to go through the crap my mom and me put up with,” he'd say, his voice low and guarded. The other boys understood all too well what he meant by “the crap” that weighed on him. Though their hearts ached to help, they felt powerless—like soldiers watching a comrade fight a battle they couldn't join, no matter how badly they wanted to rescue him.

Elias was the dreamer of the group—the one who longed for a better home life yet depended deeply on the companionship of his friends. He often seemed lost in thought, his gaze drifting beyond the treetops as if he could see something no one else could. Yet whenever the others turned to him, he was never short on clever

ideas or steady solutions. Thoughtful, intelligent, and naturally gifted in school, Elias carried a quiet wisdom that balanced the wilder spirits of the band of brothers.

He wasn't much for talking. He'd sit quiet-like, listening closely to every word the others tossed around, as if he didn't want to miss a thing. He didn't have a whole lot to say himself, but you could tell plain as day he was happiest up there with his friends. Truth be told, Elias looked more at home in that treehouse than he ever did under his own roof.

An only child and the son of an alcoholic father, Elias came to see the other boys as his true family—something he otherwise did not have. He was a good kid through and through, the kind of friend you could always count on.

Aiden Dalton was the boy with the dynamic sense of humor and a fearless love of adventure—the wild card everyone wanted around. Just the sound of his name could bring a grin. He was brave to the point of recklessness, the kind of fearless you were grateful to have on your side.

He was a year younger than Sam and Elias and a bit smaller than the others, but he carried mischief in his pocket the way other boys carried marbles. Always stirring up a laugh, that one.

His pet sulfur-crested cockatoo served as the treehouse mascot, often perched on Aiden's shoulder as the two radiated pure joy and mischief. The big parrot's name was Crackers—and he flapped around the neighborhood as if he owned the place. Loud, bossy, and

full of personality, Crackers became the clubhouse's unofficial emblem, though he probably thought the boys belonged to him.

Aiden was a winning combination of wit, laughter, and courage. Raised in a Sunday-going Baptist family, he jokingly referred to himself as a "bush Baptist."

Rory Bryant rounded out the foursome. Tall for his age, with a strong back from chores on his daddy's farm, Rory carried himself with steady purpose. He wasn't above laughing along or joining in on a scheme, but there was a seriousness in his eyes—as though he already understood that childhood did not last forever.

Rory was the intellectual of the group, happiest with his nose buried in adventure novels and his mind roaming far beyond the treehouse walls. He kept a daily journal, recording his thoughts and observations with quiet discipline, and had no hesitation in setting the others straight when they mocked it as a diary—his sharp words making it clear that knowing who you were was nothing to be ashamed of.

An observer by nature, he was the thoughtful counterpoint to the others' noise and laughter. As the youngest of the band of brothers, he often listened more than he spoke, his wide eyes taking in the world around him. Inquisitive about life, he was the kind of boy who would lie on his back in the grass, wondering about the clouds or the stars, or take apart a pocket watch just to see how it worked. While the others charged headlong into adventure, Rory carried a gentler kind of courage—the patience to observe, the wisdom to question, and the curiosity that often led the group down unexpected paths.

The world seemed to move a little slower in 1954, when eight-year-old Rory Bryant lived with his family in a modest red-brick home in Shannondale, Jefferson County, West Virginia. There, the broad sweep of the Shenandoah River mirrored the vibrancy of youth and purpose. Golden grain fields, orderly rows of soybeans and tobacco, and sunlit apple orchards stretched toward the horizon, while West Virginia sunshine danced across the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. It was the kind of summer that felt endless—simple, full, and perfect in every way.

In the early summer of that year, high among the swaying sycamore branches, stood their alluring treehouse—a refuge, a headquarters, a world unto itself—where stories passed like currency in the cool shade. Oh, that treehouse—and what a treehouse it was. Cradled in the arms of a grand American sycamore, it became far more than planks and nails; it was a fortress, a clubhouse, a window to the world and beyond for Rory and his closest friends—Sam, Elias, and Aiden.

It was there that four boys met the world head-on—uncertain of the rules but quick to learn. This is where it all began, so many years ago: a time of youth and innocence, when bonds were forged and oaths were made... and kept.

On one particular summer afternoon, while the boys were gathered in their lofty treehouse, they made a lifelong oath to one another—that each would stand by the others, no matter what came their way.

Elias suggested their motto be, “One for all, and all for one,” and Sam proposed they seal the promise as “blood brothers forever.”

“Nobody’s taking my blood,” Aiden said quickly.

Rory, ever curious, asked Sam just how he planned to make this blood oath.

Sam explained that they would each take out their pocket knives, make a small cut on the index finger of their right hand, and then join hands—four palms pressed together—binding themselves as blood brothers forever.

Though Aiden was deeply reluctant, he could not imagine going through life without the close camaraderie of the other three. And so, despite his hesitation, he went along with it. There, with four small hands joined together in the treehouse that afternoon, an oath of deep allegiance was made—one none of them would ever forget.

It was a season stitched together with the small wonders of boyhood—bicycles clattering down dirt roads, pockets filled with marbles and unusual rocks they had discovered. With a slingshot slung from their belt loops and a small knife in their pockets, the boys were well armed to face each day’s adventure.

The treehouse was built in Rory’s family backyard near their orchard of golden apples, constructed by the four boys with a generous amount of quiet assistance from Rory’s carpenter father.

Rory’s father was a man often claimed by the demands of his days, yet never so consumed that he failed to carve out time for his wife and their two children, Ruth and Rory.

In the quiet chambers of his heart, Mr. Bryant knew that time with his children was a rare and vanishing treasure. As they worked together on the treehouse—wood creaking, sunlight filtering through the leaves, laughter drifting into the warm air—he felt the tender ache of knowing such moments would not last. He understood the worth of giving his children his time—precious, meaningful time—a treasure above all others, already fragile and beginning to slip beyond his reach.

On most summer days in '54, if anyone went looking, they would likely find those four neighborhood boys tucked away in their clubhouse, high in the arms of the sycamore.

Rory's sister Ruth, a few years older and endlessly exasperated by her little brother's antics, viewed the treehouse as the perfect escape from his constant pestering.

Despite all the richness of life, there were times when the weight of the world settled heavily on one or more of the boys. Yet whatever burden one carried, all four shouldered it together. "One for all, and all for one."

During moments of injury or illness, disappointment or disillusionment, it was often Rory who broke the tension. He had a way of lightening even the darkest moods with a saying he relied on whenever things went wrong:

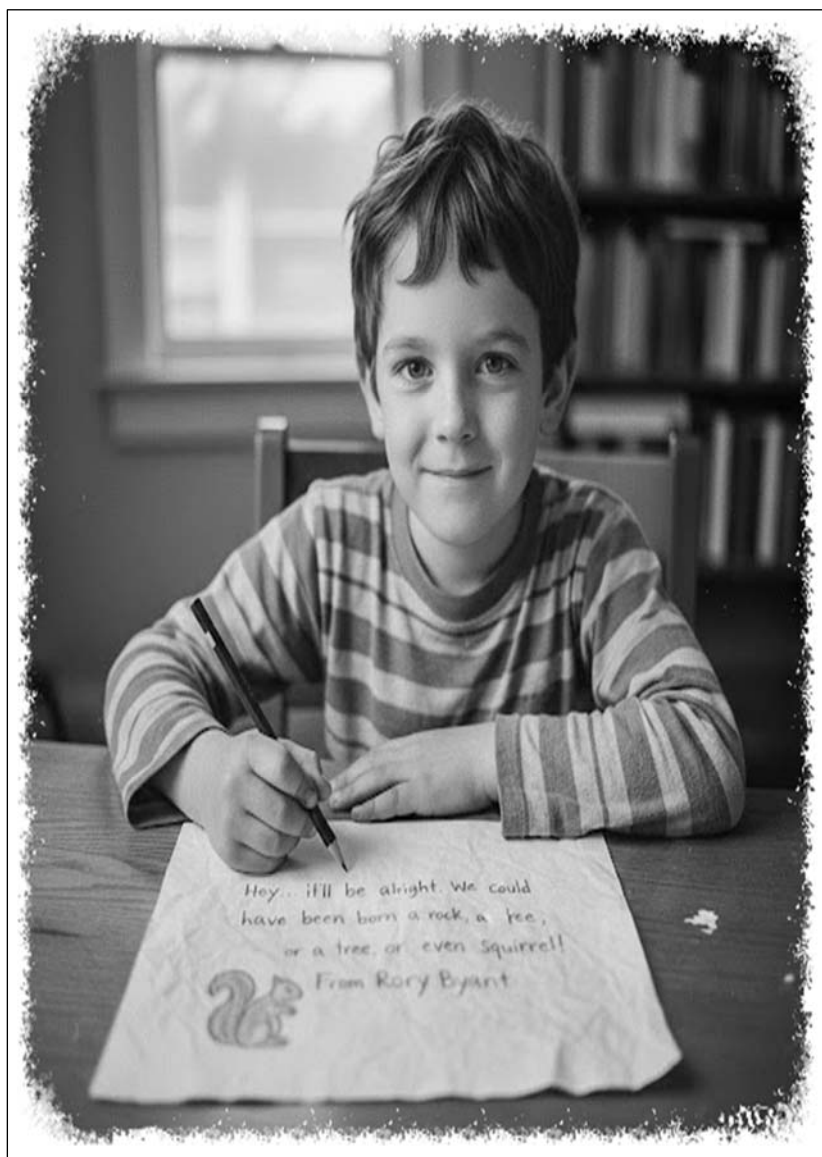
"Hey... it'll be all right. We could have been born a rock, or a tree, or even a squirrel!"

Whenever Rory offered his two-bit wisdom, the others would instantly chime in. After the mention of the squirrel, they would begin listing every creature they were grateful not to be: “a cow... or a pig... or a donkey... or a goat...” Soon the vivid imaginations of four boys were spinning an endless parade of critters until the worry that had weighed on them moments earlier was forgotten. In sharing the simple joy of being exactly who they were, their troubles lost their grip.

When they weren't up in their treehouse, the four boys could be found riding dusty backroads on their Schwinn and Huffy bikes, gallivanting through hills and green fields, hunting for slingshot targets, or combing riverbeds in search of arrowheads. Saturdays often meant a trip to the matinee for a thrilling double feature—and that was just the beginning.

Oh, what a time it was—what a magnificent time for all four of them simply to be alive.

Gary Bryan Jones



Rory Bryant

Back then, time moved more slowly, and everything around them felt like a unique wonder. They were young—full of exploration and mischief, fueled by Coca-Cola and curiosity, convinced the world was theirs to discover. Every day held the promise of adventure—of monarch butterflies, tadpoles, and bicycles clattering down dirt roads.. Every evening carried the smell of supper drifting from back porches and the flicker of fireflies rising from the tall grass like tiny floating lanterns.

In the effervescence of childhood, trivial moments expand into treasures, where even the smallest details feel luminous and deeply cherished.

In the long, unhurried days of summer, the boys could often be found wandering along riverbanks and shallow streams, searching slowly for clusters of milkweed. Each was fascinated by the plant—not so much for the milkweed itself as for what it quietly attracted.

Every plant was examined with careful precision, as though the boys were investigators in a forensic lab. Long, broad leaves were studied closely for tiny holes or ragged edges—tell-tale signs that something had been feeding there. Gently, almost reverently, they would turn each leaf over, searching for a small green caterpillar or a pale green cocoon, perfectly camouflaged and hidden in plain sight.

Armed with a large glass jar, they would leave the caterpillar or cocoon attached to the plant, carefully placing the stem inside and carrying it back to the treehouse like a prized discovery. There it would remain—safe and watched over—while the boys checked on it day after day, waiting.

Then, one morning, the miracle would appear. From the cocoon would emerge a monarch butterfly—brilliant, delicate, and impossibly alive. After a day or two spent among the treehouse gang, the butterfly would stretch its wings and lift into the air. As it flew free, the boys would cheer, their voices rising with excitement as they watched it begin its journey through the world.

From the monarch, the boys learned a few simple truths: that life is beautiful; that it is brief and fleeting; and that though one may feel like a caterpillar today, bound to the earth, change is always possible. With time and patience, one can grow wings and soar.

And there was something else they learned. The plant that had fed and sheltered that beautiful monarch was not truly a weed at all, nor did it produce milk. Life, they decided, was often about perception—and how easily human beings misunderstand what truly matters.

Looking back at those four boys so long ago, it is clear that everything that followed those golden summers had purpose—perhaps even a greater one. Those were the days that taught them about friendship, about making oaths and forging bonds, and about growing up and facing life head-on.

The boys did not realize it then, but every true friend they were blessed to have did not come by chance, but by some grand and divine design—meant to enrich their lives. It is the kind of truth that is rarely understood until much later.

Each of them, though unaware at the time, was stepping into a new realm—a path that would lead toward self-awareness and the quiet discovery of truths hidden in plain sight, though seldom seen.

During those glorious, sun-drenched summer days in West Virginia, the boys often gathered in the lofty branches of the sycamore. Though they came from the same neighborhood, their home lives could not have been more different.

Those were the precious, lazy days of summer—when school and books felt like a distant memory. The boys gathered in their treehouse, or “the clubhouse,” as they sometimes called it. It was there that lasting bonds were forged—the kind that time could not break.

They were the only boys in Jefferson County with a real, live sulphur-crested cockatoo as a pet. In all likelihood, they were the only kids in all of West Virginia with a sulphur-crested cockatoo named Crackers, who proudly served as their treehouse mascot.

Aiden and his parrot lived just a couple of blocks away. With strong, steady wings, Crackers often soared between the Daltons’ home and the Bryants’ treehouse. Over the course of that golden summer, the clever bird had already picked up an impressively wide vocabulary, mimicking the boys’ laughter and shouting back their favorite phrases from high in the branches.

Crackers had the uncanny—and often annoying—habit of picking up on tone and timing, interrupting at the most inconvenient moments. Just when the boys were deep in a lively conversation, he

would shriek, “Hey! Listen up, listen up!” his squawk cutting through their chatter like a fire alarm.

A typical gathering in the clubhouse found the four boys chatting and trading their prized Topps bubble gum baseball cards. For just a nickel, they could buy a pack that included a stick of stiff, flattened pink gum and six colorful cards featuring player stats and team information. Cards of legends like Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, and the iconic “Bambino,” Babe Ruth, were among the most coveted.

When they weren’t trading cards, chewing gum, or debating the World Series, the boys turned to other pressing matters—life on Mars, the latest monster movie, their Saturday matinee heroes, and whether Bigfoot might actually be real. And, of course, Crackers would periodically cut in with a raucous, “Hey! Listen up, listen up!”

On a typical summer day, the four boys would whittle away at pieces of oak with their pocket knives, deep in conversation about the truly serious matters of life—such as how the entire city of Metropolis could possibly fail to recognize that Clark Kent was actually Superman.

That naturally led to lively debates over whether Lois Lane had feelings for mild-mannered Clark or the Man of Steel. Their chatter zigzagged from one television or comic book icon to the next—the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and Howdy Doody.

All four boys sheepishly admitted to having a crush on Lois Lane, though they debated whether she would ever look twice at a bunch of kids from West Virginia.

These were days never to be forgotten.

The boys knew, however, that not every day brought sunshine and bubble gum.

One afternoon, Elias showed up at the treehouse with a black eye. He claimed he had fallen, but the others were not so quick to believe him. They pressed him for the truth, their silence speaking louder than their questions.

When they discovered it was old man Ford who had punched Elias during a drunken rampage the night before, Aiden and Rory grabbed their baseball bats, ready to go “do justice.” Sam talked them down—though, truth be told, he had entertained the same thoughts of revenge.

Aiden Dalton was wiry and quick, younger than Sam and Elias and the same age as Rory. It was early one summer evening when the usual mischief was running its course that Aiden cooked up a plan that would land all four boys in trouble.

While the others crouched behind a hedge, stifling their laughter, Aiden crept up the porch steps of Jake Mendenhall’s house. Jake was the neighborhood grump, notorious for yelling at kids who so much as let a shadow touch his manicured lawn. In one hand, Aiden carried a paper sack filled with dog poo. Quietly, he set the bag down on the porch, struck a match, and touched it to the top of the

paper. As the edge caught fire and a foul-smelling flame flared to life, he banged hard on old man Mendenhall's door—then bolted into the darkness, sprinting back to the bushes where his buddies were barely holding in their laughter.

The door sprang open, and Mr. Mendenhall stomped out the flame—only to smear dog poo all over his shoes, as four mischievous boys burst into laughter from the shadows.

But every action carries a consequence—a lesson young Aiden Dalton was about to learn.

The following morning, there was a knock at the Dalton residence. When Mrs. Dalton opened the door, she was surprised to find a sheriff's deputy standing there, asking to speak with her son Aiden about a complaint of property damage.

As it turned out, Mr. Mendenhall had been watching from his living room window the entire time, witnessing Aiden's stunt with the dog poo and fire. He was furious—and eager to press charges for vandalism, trespassing, and the unlawful disposal of dog poo.

Be that as it may, Mr. Mendenhall's fury paled in comparison to the wrath of Aiden's parents. Though Aiden narrowly escaped the jaws of the legal system, he felt the full force of the Dalton family justice system. His parents were determined to dole out punishment to the fullest extent. Aiden was marched over to Mr. Mendenhall's house by his father to offer a sincere apology for his reckless and inconsiderate behavior.

He was grounded for a solid month, with one exception—his father’s stern order that he report to Mr. Mendenhall’s house every Saturday to mow the man’s sprawling front lawn. For the next four weeks, the roar of the mower and the sweat on his brow became part of the price of his mischief.

When Sam, Elias, and Rory heard about Aiden’s punishment, they rallied around their friend with a resounding, “One for all, and all for one.” Every Saturday, they showed up alongside him to help mow the lawn and rake leaves, turning the chore into a shared adventure.

Over time, the boys came to understand that Mr. Mendenhall was not the grumpy old man they had imagined. He moved with a painful limp, a lasting reminder of wounds carried home from the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in France during World War I.

His wife had passed away a few years earlier, and his children had long since built lives far from home. He was not unkind; he was just weary, hurting, and profoundly alone. While Aiden was indeed a magnet for mischief, he possessed a good and decent heart. His remorse was genuine, and as the weeks passed, time softened the edges of his mistake. Looking back, the infamous “night of the dog poo” never failed to bring a grin to the faces of the four boys—and, truth be told, eventually coaxed a reluctant smirk from Mr. Mendenhall himself.

Rory Bryant was the youngest of the four. Though the clubhouse stood proudly in his own backyard, he was more reserved than the others and always felt privileged to be part of the gang. He was an

endearing boy to watch that summer. A bit clumsy at sports and occasionally awkward in his navigation of life, he nevertheless tried his best. To Rory's credit, he seemed blessed with a kind of sixth sense—a quiet awareness of things the others could not quite see. When he spoke of unseen, sacred matters, the others never doubted him. They simply knew he was telling the truth.

Rory faithfully kept a daily record of events in pencil, his notebook filling steadily with quiet observations and thoughtful detail. To a casual reader, his entries might have seemed ordinary—even dull. But perhaps they were something more: the early scribbles of a larger story, the humble beginnings of something remarkable yet to unfold.

In addition to the treehouse nestled high in the sprawling sycamores of Rory's backyard, the Bryant family tended a large crop of Golden Delicious apples. Their orchard stretched across twenty fertile acres of rich West Virginia soil, secured by a tall chain-link fence.

When Rory was still a toddler, his parents invested thousands of dollars in planting and nurturing hundreds of young apple trees. They dreamed that within four years, the orchard would yield a steady harvest, sustaining the family for generations.

The greatest threat, they believed, came from the white-tailed deer that roamed the valley in vast herds. To guard against them, Mr. Bryant built a sturdy and costly fence, confident the orchard was safe. And indeed, that first winter, when the deer descended into the valley and pressed against the barrier, not one broke through. Mr. Bryant was proud—and certain his investment was secure.

But as the snow melted and spring arrived, pride gave way to horror. Most of the tender seedlings had died. Upon closer inspection, he discovered the culprit: voles. All winter long, the tiny rodents had tunneled unseen beneath the snow, gnawing bark from seedling after seedling until the trees withered and died.

The irony was cruel. Though he had spent thousands to keep out the mighty deer, it was the smallest of creatures that devastated his orchard of dreams. The loss was a bitter blow, and Mr. Bryant vowed never again to overlook the smallest threats. He took swift measures to protect the remaining trees, and though the years ahead brought additional hardships, the orchard eventually flourished into a thriving business.

Mr. Bryant often reminded Rory of a lesson hard won: “Strong fences will keep the deer away, but it’s the little things in life that can destroy an entire orchard.”

It was his metaphor for life—that a man might slay his dragons in triumph, yet still be undone by the quiet work of a single vole beneath his feet.

Rory’s father believed that in all good things there are oppositions, and that a man must remain watchful and resourceful, meeting challenges by honorable means whenever possible.

When the apple trees finally began to bear fruit, a new adversary appeared. Each late spring, crows descended upon the orchard, eating the small apples, stripping branches, and threatening the

family's hard-earned crop. The orchard, already tested, faced yet another trial.

It was during one such crisis that Mr. Bryant found an unexpected solution. With Mrs. Bryant's blessing, he opened an old chest filled with more than two hundred Christmas cards saved from holidays long past. Rather than discarding them, he saw possibility.

Rory and his older sister were given the task of punching a small hole at the top of each card and threading a string through it. Armed with a roll of tin foil, they carefully cut out shiny silver stars and pasted one onto each side of every card—two hundred or more—until their fingers ached and the kitchen table shimmered with glittering scraps.

When spring arrived, the cards were tied along the top wire of the orchard fence. As the sun rose higher, they danced and flashed in the light, flickering brilliantly in the breeze. The crows, unsettled by the movement and shine, kept their distance, and the apples were spared.

From those early efforts to save a struggling orchard, a new tradition was born in the Bryant household. Each Christmas, cards from loved ones were displayed throughout the living room. Then, when spring returned, those same cards—now adorned with fresh silver stars—were hung once again along the orchard fence.

It became a way of remembering loved ones, celebrating ingenuity, and—not least of all—forgetting about the crows.

And as for the orchard's success—every Halloween the neighborhood children knew exactly what awaited them at the Bryant house: crisp, golden apples straight from the trees.

One favorite summer pastime of the treehouse gang—especially during those long, lazy days—was hunting for discarded soda bottles. Scouring streets, alleyways, and backyards, they gathered every glass cola bottle they could find. Each one earned a two-cent refund at the corner grocery store, just enough to help bankroll their Saturday matinee adventures and their ever-growing stash of Topps baseball cards.

Another cherished pastime was fishing along the banks of the nearby Shenandoah River. Whenever they could persuade—or bribe—one of their parents to drive them there, they would spend the better part of the day by the water's edge. Beneath the wide West Virginia sky, they felt they were truly living—caught up in laughter, mischief, and the unspoken bond of friendship that made those days unforgettable.

On one such trip—chauffeured by Sam's mom—the boys endured their familiar safety talk from Mrs. Whitaker, who reminded them she would return promptly at four to collect them. With her final "Be careful!" still hanging in the air, the car doors flew open and four restless adventurers spilled onto the riverbank.

The morning sun glimmered on the mighty Shenandoah, its slow current whispering against the reeds. The scent of wet earth and honeysuckle hung thick in the air, and the boys, poles in hand and hearts light with freedom, felt as if the whole summer stretched before them, waiting to be lived.

Though the sun shone brightly, a brisk wind swept through the river valley. The boys barely noticed; their spirits remained undeterred, for they knew adventure waited just ahead.

Along both banks of the river, flocks of river ducks stood scattered in quiet ranks, each facing into the wind. The sight did not escape Sam's notice. With casual wisdom, he remarked that the birds understood something essential about the world: they met the wind head-on, refusing to let it ruffle their feathers—something, he mused, humans would do well to learn.

As the morning wore on, the wind gradually subsided, leaving the river calm and bright. Yet despite the perfect weather, the bass simply would not bite. After more than an hour without so much as a nibble, the boys slipped their poles into the grass and went off in search of adventure elsewhere.

Following a narrow trail that wound along the riverbank, they wandered upstream, laughing and skipping stones until they rounded a wide bend. There, a thin column of smoke curled skyward from a distant campfire.

Instinctively, the boys fell silent.

Their pace slowed; their footsteps softened.

They moved now with purpose and mischief—like scouts on a secret mission, or cowboys creeping up on an unseen foe.

Coming upon a towering oak whose roots coiled like sleeping serpents, the boys huddled behind its broad trunk and peered toward

a thin wisp of smoke rising through the trees. Beyond a small clearing, a bearded man in tattered military fatigues and a timeworn hat crouched beside a smoldering campfire, sipping from a dented canteen cup. He looked rough and weathered—like someone who had been out there a long time, shaped by an unforgiving wilderness.

There was a quiet pride among the four boys, a shared thrill in knowing they could see without being seen. For nearly twenty minutes, they watched him, whispering in low, excited tones about who he might be and what had brought him there.

“Maybe he’s a drifter—a hobo,” one said.

“Or maybe a bank robber... or a soldier gone AWOL,” another offered.

Theories piled atop one another until someone muttered what they were all half thinking—that the man could be an escaped prisoner or a runaway from some “nut house,” or even worse—a murderer. Whatever he was, none of them were eager to find out just yet. The spirit of adventure tugged at them, but so did a healthy dose of fear—and for the moment, curiosity would have to wait.

The boys crouched closer to the oak, each shadowed movement of the man sending a shiver through them. The forest seemed to hold its breath; even the birds were silent. Occasionally, the man glanced up, his eyes scanning the trees as if he sensed he was being watched—though they were hidden well enough.

A stray ember drifted upward, glowing like a tiny warning in the morning light. The crackle of burning wood sounded unusually

loud, echoing in the stillness along the riverbank. Each boy felt the hair rise on his neck, the thrill of discovery now mixed with undeniable tension.

Whispers were barely audible, yet their words carried weight.

“What if he notices us?”

“Or worse... what if he isn’t alone?”

No one dared take another step forward. The man moved slowly and deliberately, his shadow stretching across the clearing, almost reaching where they crouched. Time seemed to elongate, the minutes heavy and slow, as if the river itself had hushed in anticipation. Something about the way he shifted—about the way he stared into the smoke—made the boys certain the stranger’s story was darker than they could imagine.

Finally, sensing the growing eeriness of the moment, Sam whispered, “Let’s get out of here.”

Without another word, the boys slipped quietly back along the river trail, retracing their steps downstream to where they had left their fishing poles.

Once safely back at their familiar spot, they resumed casting lines into the water, though the earlier tension lingered in their conversation. Between talk of fishing, baseball stats and comic books, their words inevitably returned to the strange man upstream—whom they now referred to simply as “the hobo”—each

of them curious about the mystery behind the shadowed figure in the smoke.

By the time Mrs. Whitaker returned to pick them up, the boys had landed six bass between them. Elias, Aiden, and Rory each carried home a respectable fish, while they insisted Sam keep the remaining three as payment for his mom's gas—the generosity that had made their day on the river possible.

They told their parents about the mysterious figure along the riverbank and were met with the same urgent admonition: stay far away from him.

Just a week later, the boys once again found themselves being dropped off at their favorite fishing hole on the Shenandoah—this time by Aiden's dad. Mr. Dalton reminded them he would be back around five o'clock and called out, "Go catch a monster fish!"

As the Dalton car disappeared down the dirt road, each boy had the same unspoken thought: Forget the fishing—let's head upstream and see if the hobo's still there.

And that's exactly what they did.

Hiding their fishing poles in the brush, they moved slowly and deliberately along the riverside trail. They imagined themselves on a secret mission—a small patrol searching for the enemy while hoping not to be seen. Before long, they came upon the spot where the stranger's camp had been just a week earlier. The rock-lined fire pit was filled with cold charcoal, proof that the hobo had lingered there for some time.

They crouched low for a “listening halt,” every ear alert and every mouth closed. For this treehouse band of brothers, that kind of silence did not come easily—but today, they knew it was necessary.

Hearing and seeing nothing, they decided to press farther upriver, still hoping to catch another glimpse of the ragged stranger. Time slipped by quietly as they hiked, the river whispering beside them, until nearly an hour later a thin plume of smoke appeared ahead, curling up from the trees along the water’s edge.

Pushing through the brush, they caught sight of the campsite—and there he was again: the same unkempt, bearded man, crouched by his fire, seemingly lost in thought.

A few minutes later, the hobo stepped into the thick undergrowth and vanished from view.

The boys remained on high alert.

What was this guy doing? Who was he, really? Perhaps he was more than a simple drifter. Maybe a madman. Maybe a killer. After all, they reasoned, good men didn’t live alone by the river dressed in rags. This guy was running from something... or hiding something. Maybe even hiding bodies.

For a long moment, none of the boys spoke. The only sound was the low murmur of the river and the occasional caw of a distant crow. Elias glanced at Sam, who crouched in front, eyes fixed on the brush where the man had disappeared.

“We should go back,” Elias whispered.

“Not yet,” Sam hissed. “Don’t you wanna see what he’s doing?”

Aiden, unusually cautious, shifted nervously. “What if he sees us? What if he’s got a gun?”

Sam didn’t answer right away. His pulse thudded in his ears. The thrill of mystery tugged at him—stronger than fear, stronger even than reason.

“Just a few more minutes,” he finally said. “Then we’ll go.”

The boys crept forward a few steps, hearts pounding, every snapped twig sounding like thunder beneath their feet. The smell of smoke grew stronger. Somewhere nearby, a branch cracked—sharp and deliberate.

They froze.

No one breathed.

For one fleeting second, Sam thought he saw movement—a shadow crossing between the trees, dark against the glimmer of the river.

And just like that, the thrill vanished, replaced by a jolt of fear so sudden it made his stomach lurch.

“Run,” he whispered.

And they did.

The four boys tore down the river trail, each convinced that something dark and terrible was chasing them—the very embodiment of evil itself.

In their frantic retreat, they reached a fork in the trail and veered into the thick forest, crashing through underbrush and away from the river. Branches whipped at their faces as they ran, hearts hammering, until at last they stopped—breathless, wide-eyed, and certain they had put a safe distance between themselves and the stranger.

For a moment, no one spoke. The forest stood eerily still except for their ragged breathing.

Then Sam looked around—and froze.

Elias and Rory stood beside him, gasping for air.

But Aiden—

Aiden was nowhere to be seen.

He was missing. MIA.

Meanwhile, back at the campsite, Aiden Dalton lay unconscious beside a flickering fire, its orange glow dancing across his face. A grizzled man with a thick, unkempt beard tended the flames, his military fatigues faded and frayed, bearing no name or branch of service. Nearby rested a stuffed olive-drab canvas bag with the name **DENTINO** stenciled across it—a silent remnant of another life, another time.

Beyond the Sycamores



From the shadowed fringe of the forest, a great white-tailed buck stood in quiet vigil. His antlers, crowned by sunlight filtering through the leaves, gave him an almost regal bearing as he watched the scene unfold—silent, motionless, wise to the ways of both man and nature.

In his hasty retreat, Aiden had tripped on the trail and struck his head on a boulder at its edge, knocking himself unconscious. The man in fatigues had watched the other boys flee, leaving Aiden motionless behind.

He carried Aiden back to the campfire and applied a pressure bandage to his head to stop the bleeding. Then he spoke gently to the boy while waiting for him to regain consciousness—and for his friends to return.

As Aiden slowly stirred, confusion clouded his thoughts. His head throbbed, his vision blurred, and for a moment he couldn't remember where he was—or how he had gotten there. The crackle of the fire and the faint scent of smoke grounded him just enough to realize he wasn't alone.

The man with the grizzled beard leaned closer, his tired eyes set deep in a face weathered by time and hard living.

“What's your name, son?” the man asked, his voice rough but not unkind. “Where do you live? Do you know what day it is?”

Aiden hesitated, his voice weak and uncertain. “Aiden Dalton. Shannondale, West Virginia. Monday... I think?”

“My name’s Rocco Dentino. I’m from Virginia. Served with the Army in Europe during the war. Don’t worry—you’re safe with me. I ain’t gonna hurt you.”

“Hi, Mr. Dentino. Pleased to meet you.”

“No need to call me ‘Mr.’—Rocco is just fine.”

Dentino knelt beside him and spoke in a calm, gravelly voice. “You’ll be all right, son. Looks like you took a hard hit to the head—maybe a concussion. The best thing you can do now is stay put. Help will be coming soon.”

Aiden nodded weakly, his eyelids heavy. “I just need to rest for a bit,” he murmured, his voice barely audible over the crackle of the fire.

But Dentino reached out, resting a rough hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “No, don’t sleep yet,” he said firmly. “You’ve got to stay awake for a while. A head injury like that needs watching.”

The man’s tone was steady—almost reassuring. Yet something in his eyes, shadowed by the firelight, left Aiden unsure of what was truly going on.

Dentino was a World War II veteran, hardened by warfare and the grueling ordeals he had endured—the horrors he had witnessed. The war had left its scars, and the demons he carried afterward were battles he had been losing quietly for far too long. He shunned people, craving the solitude of the river and the silence it offered, speaking to no one and answering to no one.

But today was different.

Today, he needed to keep Aiden awake—and that meant breaking the barrier of isolation he had built around himself for so long.

Injured and alone, cut off from the camaraderie of his treehouse gang, Aiden Dalton understood that the man before him was no hobo. He was a soldier—a man with a name.

As the unlikely pair waited for Aiden's friends to return, Dentino and Aiden fell into a meaningful conversation.

Rocco Dentino spoke to the boy as though at a confessional, his voice low and haunted. Sunken eyes and trembling hands betrayed the weight he carried as he recounted the endless thunder of artillery shells at Normandy, the friends he had watched die, and the horrors that lingered long after the fighting had ended. He spoke of returning to a grateful nation—one that appreciated his sacrifice yet overlooked the bitter reality of wartime shell shock—and of a life forever shadowed by memories that refused to fade.

Sergeant Dentino had never spoken of his past—not like this. Not until today. As he looked at Aiden—so young, so untainted—he wondered whether, by some strange twist of fate, the boy had been sent to him as a lifeline, a reminder that even the most wounded souls might still find redemption.

Aiden, who had once dismissed the man as nothing more than a ragged hobo, now saw him in a different light—an American soldier, scarred and battle-worn, carrying wounds invisible to the world.

It was clear now that this forgotten soldier was intent on helping Aiden recover and return safely to his family and friends.

The two, once strangers brought together by chance, were strangers no more. Time and circumstance had woven an unexpected bond between them—a shared humanity born of compassion and need.

Though deeply grateful for the boy's gentle presence—for his open heart and nonjudgmental spirit—the combat-hardened veteran knew time was not on their side. Nearly three hours had passed since Aiden had struck his head on the rock, and Dentino felt a growing urgency: the boy needed medical attention—and soon.

Suddenly, the stillness of that sacred moment shattered with the roar of a rugged Willys Jeep tearing down the overgrown riverside trail. The vehicle burst into the clearing with the Jefferson County sheriff at the wheel, while two deputies crashed through the brush on foot close behind.

“Step away from the fire and put your hands in the air—now!” the sheriff barked, his .357 steady and trained on the ragged figure before him.

This was not the first time Sergeant Dentino had stared down the barrel of a gun—but this time it was different. The man holding the weapon was not an enemy on foreign soil, but a fellow American—a brother-in-arms who did not yet realize they were on the same side.

The soldier rose slowly, hands raised, stepping back from the fire as ordered. The sheriff kept his revolver trained on him, eyes never wavering.

“Turn around. Hands behind your back.”

Dentino complied without resistance. A moment later, the metallic click of handcuffs broke the silence, and the World War II veteran was in custody.

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Aiden was taken to a nearby medical clinic, where a doctor treated him for a mild concussion before releasing him into the care of his relieved parents. The doctor assured the Daltons that, with a couple of days’ rest, their son would make a full recovery. Aiden, meanwhile, wore the white bandage around his forehead like a badge of honor—a proud reminder of an adventure that had nearly cost him more than a good story to tell.

Dentino was taken to the city lockup, where the sheriff and two detectives questioned him for hours. They suspected him of kidnapping Aiden and were determined to build a case. His unkempt hair, weathered face, and tattered fatigues only reinforced their suspicions—proof enough, in their eyes, that no good could come from a drifter like him.

All four boys—Sam, Elias, Aiden, and Rory—maintained that Dentino had never harmed or threatened them, and that they had fled the campsite after being spooked by a deer.

After Aiden struck his head on the rock, the other three boys—unaware of his fall—had plunged deeper into the forest’s tangled thickets, losing both their bearings and their friend.

News of Aiden's injury raced through Shannondale like wildfire, each retelling twisted and exaggerated, crafted to shine a spotlight on the storyteller rather than on the boy's misfortune.

A wave of anger rippled through the town. Residents clamored for authorities to press criminal charges against the riverside "hobo." Calls for justice rang out—kidnapping, child endangerment, demands to "lock up the fool and throw away the key!" Outrage mingled with fear, and the townspeople's voices grew louder with each passing hour.

After several days in the jailhouse, Dentino was finally released. If the sheriff felt any remorse for suspecting him of kidnapping, he showed none. No apologies. No acknowledgment of his military service—only the cold swing of the door sending him back into a homeless world. Nothing more.

As Dentino walked away from the jail, he was spotted by Aiden, who ran toward him with uncontainable excitement.

"Hi, Rocco! How've you been?" Aiden asked.

"Well," Dentino replied with a wry grin, "considering I'm no longer a jailbird, a lot better now."

Aiden's face grew earnest. "I'm really sorry everyone accused you of all those bad things. I kept telling them you didn't do anything, but some even said I'd been brainwashed."

Dentino's expression softened, touched by the boy's words. "Yeah... life can be unfair. It can dump on any of us at one time or

another. Since I got home from the war, every day's been a hard one. But you know what, Aiden? You don't realize it, but you changed my life that day you got hurt out there on the river. Caring for you gave me purpose. And more than that—you didn't judge me. You didn't slap a label on me. You actually listened. You heard me... understood me. And that, kid, made all the difference."

Dentino wanted to linger, to savor the rare connection they had formed, but he was keenly aware of his surroundings—the prying eyes, the wagging tongues, the judgments that never fully disappear. Before stepping away, he placed a hand briefly on Aiden's shoulder and said quietly, "I'll be praying for you."

Aiden, slightly taken aback by the sincerity, met his gaze. "Likewise."

"Well, I'll be seeing you around, Aiden. Thanks for everything," said the Army veteran, his voice calm but carrying the weight of battles fought—both outward and within.

"Where will you be going?" Aiden asked, his eyes wide with concern.

Dentino hesitated, as if the answer required more than words. He looked down, then back at the boy who had somehow pierced the walls he had built around himself.

"I don't rightly know," he admitted softly. "Maybe somewhere I can be useful... maybe somewhere I can just disappear for a while. Either way, kid, I'll carry today with me. You reminded me there's still a reason to care—still a reason to keep moving forward."

And with that, Dentino walked away—away from a place he had once defended with every ounce of himself, yet never truly felt he belonged.

Too bad there aren't more like Aiden in the world, he thought, the words heavy with quiet sorrow.

Slowly, he made his way back toward the banks of the Shenandoah, toward its quiet trees and the echoes of a life he had lived—and still yearned for. Just another soldier fighting a battle for happiness and long-forgotten self-worth. There, a man once known to the world slipped away from society and vanished into the shadows, carrying with him the weight of battles fought—both the ones others witnessed and the ones no one ever would.

The boys remained close throughout their elementary school years, bound by friendship and by the treehouse they called their own. All four did well in school, though they were split by grade level—Sam and Elias together in one, with Aiden and Rory a year behind in the next. The small gap hardly mattered; when the final bell rang, they were inseparable once again.

Beyond the essentials of “reading, writing, and arithmetic,” they were learning quieter lessons—how to fit into society and get along with others, even those who dressed differently, behaved differently, or thought in ways unlike their own.

A case in point came one day in elementary school, when Aiden, Rory, and their classmates were told by their teacher, Mr. Henderson, that they were going to play a game. Perhaps the teacher

initiated the exercise in response to the town's recent misconception that Aiden had been kidnapped at the river—an error that had sparked finger-pointing and unfounded accusations against an innocent man. Even so, Mr. Henderson wisely chose not to mention Aiden or the events along the Shenandoah.

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He explained the rules carefully: he would go around the room of thirty-two students and whisper to each one whether they were a witch or an ordinary person. Then came the challenge:

“Form the biggest group you can without letting a witch in. If even one witch is part of your group, you all fail.”

In an instant, the room pulsed with nervous energy as the teacher bent to each student, murmuring either, “You are a witch,” or, “You are not a witch.”

For Aiden and Rory—who had built a lifetime of loyalty and trust between them—the task was hardly daunting. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, they whispered to one another, “Are you a witch?”

Bound by their treehouse pact and their blood-brother promise, they asked again—quietly but firmly.

And again, with greater resolve, each answered no.

Both accepted the other's word without a flicker of doubt. Their trust was absolute.

With that certainty established, they began looking for others to join their group of two—though always with deliberate caution.

Across the room, suspicion ran wild. Students interrogated one another—"Are you a witch? How do we know you're not lying?"—their voices sharp with doubt. A large cluster of so-called "non-witches" formed quickly, but the group soon fractured under the weight of finger-pointing and mistrust. Those who looked nervous or hesitated even slightly were shunned and left out, their uncertainty mistaken for guilt.

Meanwhile, Aiden and Rory held firm in their group of two. To them, the rest of the class seemed shaky and unreliable. None of those other students had shared the bond of the treehouse gang, and without that bond, trust was hard to come by.

At last, the teacher called for silence.

"Okay, it's time to find out who the witches are. Witches—raise your hands!"

Not a single hand went up.

Instantly, the room buzzed with chatter. Some accused the teacher of making a mistake; others grumbled that the game wasn't fair. Then the teacher raised his hand for quiet and said, "Tell me—were there any witches in Salem? Or did people simply react to what they were told?"

The class fell silent, the weight of the lesson settling in. That day, they learned more than arithmetic or spelling. They learned how suspicion and gossip can destroy trust, how fear can divide a community, and how quickly judgment can turn neighbors against one another.

The boys had watched their entire community—an otherwise good one—begin to come apart at the seams. An innocent man the town never truly knew, a man who looked different and lived with little, was marked and labeled much like those accused during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

Well-meaning folks, cloaked in robes of self-righteousness, whispered from the shadows with slippery tongues, using cheap talk to entertain and enlighten themselves at the expense of Rocco Dentino. Two-bit gossip spread like wildfire on the wind, and before long the community stood divided. The venom was loud in the mouths of those who spewed it, but it spoke even louder about the character of those who chose to spread it.

As for Aiden and Rory—their memories lingered on the man by the river's edge. No longer a ragged hobo in their eyes, he had become a United States war veteran—a soldier who had served his country with courage and integrity, a man with a name: Rocco Dentino.

As they walked away from class, a quiet realization settled in: what we do not understand, we fear—and fear, unchecked, can breed chaos and conflict. It wasn't witches or hobos that posed the greatest threat; it was fear itself.

The boys realized, too, that it wasn't just about the strangers they encountered along the riverbank, but about how they chose to see others—and how, in the end, each would always stand true to the other.

Four boys. Four lives. Four stories unfolding in a world brimming with possibility. Each a rookie in the game of life, wide-eyed and wandering through a time and place unlike any other. Different in many ways, yet bound by the same era, the same hometown soil, and the same restless spirit of youth.

Each year—filled with wonder, wild exploration, and the quiet stirrings of deeper thought—slowly faded into treasured memories and unbreakable bonds. And yet, looking back, how quickly those golden days slipped through their fingers.

As the boys grew older, they began to feel the shifting seasons of life.

The times were changing, and they felt it in their bones. What once was would never be again. The golden summers of mischief, matinees, and treehouse secrets were fading into memory. Though their paths would soon diverge, the bond they shared—sealed by laughter, loyalty, and coming of age—would remain with them always.

They didn't realize it then, but that warm afternoon in late August of 1960 would be the last time all four boys would gather in the treehouse. They lounged in the familiar wooden hideout, chatting idly about the world beyond their small town. Overhead, Aiden's

cockatoo perched like a silent sentinel, as if eavesdropping on their conversation.

Somehow, the treehouse felt smaller than it once had. Maybe it had shrunk with time—or maybe the boys had simply grown.

But something felt different that day. Elias wasn't his usual self. The boy who was typically full of jokes and energy sat unusually quiet, his eyes distant, his posture weary. Sam, ever watchful, finally leaned in and asked what was wrong.

Elias hesitated, his voice quivering when he finally spoke.

“My dad... he's dead.”

The words spilled out as if they had been dammed up far too long. His hands trembled in his lap, and he clenched them into fists to hide it.

The others froze. They knew Elias's father—the smell of whiskey on his breath, the bruises Elias never explained, the fear that lingered around him like smoke.

Elias's voice cracked. “I thought I'd feel... relieved. But I don't. I just feel empty. Angry. Sad. Like all those years he could've been a father, he just wasted away in a bottle. And now it's too late for him to fix it. Too late for me to ever hear him say he was sorry.”

His chest felt heavy, his thoughts heavier still. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, but the tears came anyway. The treehouse—usually alive with laughter—felt unbearably still.

Sam muttered a curse under his breath, then leaned forward, his voice low but fierce. “He doesn’t get the last word, Eli. Not anymore. You do.”

Aiden, restless and emotional, slammed his fist against the wall. “He should’ve been better to you. He should’ve dang well tried.” His voice cracked, too, anger spilling over because he couldn’t stand seeing Elias like this.

Rory, quiet and wide-eyed, shuffled closer until his shoulder pressed against Elias’s. He said nothing, but Elias felt the steady weight of him there.

Elias drew a shaky breath, his voice raw. “All I ever wanted was a dad who cared. And now... now I’ll never have that.” A bitter laugh slipped out. “Guess I just needed to say it out loud—to someone who’d actually listen.”

And in that treehouse, with three boys who weren’t his blood but felt like brothers, Elias finally let the tears fall. For the first time in a long while, he wasn’t carrying the weight alone.

He reflected on their adventures, their laughter, the bond they had forged in that treehouse. Then, with a voice softer than usual, he thanked them—each one. Perhaps sensing, deep down, that this might be their last gathering there, he made a quiet proposal.

During the darkest moments of his life—when his alcoholic father had been cruel or simply absent—they had been his real family. Not just friends, but brothers. And families, he said, should stay together. Always.

Then Elias looked at each of them and said something they would never forget: he meant forever—not just here, but into whatever came next. Beyond the sycamore trees. Beyond the clouds. Across green hills and past the distant sunset.

He spoke again of his father, his voice low and uncertain. His father was gone. He wondered aloud where his dad truly was—not just where his body would lie, but where his spirit had gone. Now that the poison of alcohol no longer gripped him, was he finally free? Was he, at last, happy—wherever he was?

Then Elias said something none of the boys expected.

“I forgive my dad,” he whispered. “For everything he did to my mom and me... and for everything he didn’t do, but should have.”

Tears welled in his eyes—the first time any of them had ever seen him cry.

It was a moment of reconciliation—with sins of commission and sins of omission alike.

Through his tears, Elias looked ahead. Junior high and high school were just around the corner. Life was about to pull them in different directions, and deep down he feared they might never all be together again. These boys weren’t just friends—they were family.

That was when Elias reminded them of the oath they had taken years earlier, right there in the treehouse. Their secret ceremony. Each had drawn a pocketknife, made a small cut, and joined hands—a blood bond of brotherhood, sealed forever.

Of course they remembered—how could they forget? Sam joked that Aiden had been the “wimp” of the group—not because of the oath itself, but because he had been squeamish about cutting his own finger.

The boys chuckled, reminiscing fondly about how Aiden had nearly backed out altogether.

“He almost didn’t make the cut,” Rory said with a grin—“both literally and figuratively.”

Elias continued, his smile fading as his voice softened. “I wish I’d made my dad promise that if he ever died, he’d try to reach out to me somehow—just to tell me what it’s like on the other side. But we never had that conversation.”

Sam shifted uneasily, trying to lighten the mood. “Yeah... I don’t know—that sounds kind of creepy,” he said. “No offense, but I think I’d go bonkers if a ghost ever showed up just to talk.”

“Not if it’s your dad,” Elias replied softly.

What followed was a long, winding conversation about the afterlife.

Sam offered his theory. “If people who died could come back to visit, we’d have heard about it by now.”

“Maybe,” Rory said thoughtfully. “Maybe some do come back. Maybe they watch over us... maybe they can communicate. But maybe it’s not that it’s a secret—it’s that it’s sacred. And sacred things aren’t meant to be shared with just anyone.”

He spoke with quiet certainty, as if he knew something the others didn't. But if he did, he wasn't saying how.

The discussion continued—Aiden's cockatoo unusually silent above them—until Elias leaned forward and proposed another oath.

He barely began before Aiden interrupted. "I ain't cutting myself again!" The outburst sent them into laughter.

But Elias wasn't joking. His voice grew steady and sincere.

"We're already blood brothers—once a blood brother, always a blood brother. No need to do that again," he said, glancing at Aiden. "But I'm proposing something else... a new pact. Right here, right now.

"Whichever one of us dies first—we do everything in our power, with whatever forces exist beyond this life, to come back and tell the others what it's really like... on the other side of the sunset."

As Elias finished, the others sat in stone silence, sensing this was no ordinary talk—that it was sacred.

"And then," Sam added quietly, "whoever's second to go... he makes every effort to reach out to the two still living. And when the third passes, he does the same—returns to tell the last of us what to expect when that mysterious day comes... the day we're all together again."

An eerie silence followed. The boys sat suspended in a moment balanced between the morbid and the marvelous. A strange

heaviness settled over the treehouse, as if the world outside had hushed to listen. They found themselves wrestling with the unthinkable—who would be first to leave this life, and who might be the last?

Their thoughts circled back to Elias's father. Where was his spirit now? Had he finally found peace, free from the poison that once consumed him? Was he watching from some unseen place, listening even now, straining to reach his son?

And if he could, what words would he speak?

Perhaps a trembling confession: *I'm sorry, son. Sorry I chose a bottle over you. Sorry for scarring your childhood and breaking your mother's heart. I never meant to ruin what I was supposed to protect. Please forgive me. Please... forgive me, son.*

The hush broke when Rory—solemn and uncharacteristically serious—raised his right hand, much like a Boy Scout salute.

"I, Rory Bryant," he declared firmly, "give each of you my solemn oath: when I die, I will make every effort to return and tell those still here what it's like in heaven."

Rory lowered his arm, and Aiden raised his.

"I, Aiden Dalton," he said with unexpected gravity, "swear before you—my blood brothers—that when I die, I'll do everything I can to return and tell whoever's left what it's like in heaven... or wherever I end up. But hopefully, I ain't the first goner!"

The boys burst into laughter at Aiden's half-serious vow—but they took it to heart all the same.

Elias and Sam followed, each offering his own solemn promise. Then, as if sealing something sacred, the four boys threw their hands together in a final “huddle shake,” like a team before taking the field.

Overhead, the sulphur-crested cockatoo let out a piercing screech—“Carry on! Carry on!”—like a witness from another realm, stamping the moment with unexpected approval.

It was a beautiful summer day, the kind that lingers like a fading photograph—and the last the brotherhood of four would ever spend together in that treehouse. They didn't know it then, but it was the end of something rare and fleeting. It was a good day to be alive—and a day they would carry in their hearts forever.

In late autumn of that year, Mr. Mendenhall slipped peacefully from this world in his sleep. Those who knew him offered gentle smiles at the news, comforted by the thought that his long solitude had finally ended—that he was at last free from the heavy chains of loneliness that had bound him for so many years.

The men who rendered military honors at his graveside were young, sharply dressed soldiers—separated by years, wars, and conflicts from the days once known by the old soldier now resting beneath the earth.

And the days moved on. The winds of change continued.

More Adventurous Stories **by Gary Bryan Jones**

The Man from Booger Hollow (Published 2025)

Hitchhiking from the lower forty-eight to the wilds of Alaska, one boy's journey becomes an adventure that will change him—and the stranger who helps him—forever. The Man from Booger Hollow is a story of survival, destiny, and the unexpected ties that endure across distance, hardship, and time.

Whispers from the Trail (Published 2024)

When a plane crashes in the remote Talkeetna Mountains of Alaska, several children are left orphaned and vulnerable. Their fate takes an unexpected turn when a solitary old man living along a quiet riverbank discovers he is their legal guardian. Thrust together into an unlikely family, they must navigate the harsh wilderness, confront hidden dangers, and unravel mysteries that bind them. In a land where survival is never guaranteed, courage is forged, bonds are tested, and the wilderness whispers its truths.

The Dragons of Denali (Published 2023)

In the untamed wilderness of 1800s Alaska, a young couple chases dreams of adventure and fortune—but the frontier is unforgiving. When a volcanic eruption shatters their world, they discover that the dragons of life are real—and deadly. Survival will demand

Gary Bryan Jones

courage, resilience, and a confrontation with forces far greater than they ever imagined.

Eleven Days (Published 2022)

Set in the Alaskan wilderness during a brutal Arctic winter, Aafes, a small Alaskan Husky, disappears along the historic Iditarod Trail, pursued by a hungry wolf pack. For eleven harrowing days, she battles blizzards, icy terrain, and relentless cold, relying on instinct and determination to survive. Based on a true story from 2007, this gripping tale of endurance and loyalty will warm your heart and remind you that even the smallest hero can overcome the impossible.

Lost in the Alaskan Wilderness (Published 2021)

This remarkable true story recounts the disappearance of Aafes, a beloved dog lost in the unforgiving Alaskan wilderness during the winter of 2007. Despite extensive land and air searches, she vanished without a trace—until eleven days later, when two courageous bush pilots risked everything to bring her home. Filled with adventure, suspense, and unforgettable true Alaskan moments, this story captured hearts around the world.

The Enchanted Forest (Published 2020)

When a Montana mining executive boards a small commercial jet bound for Nome, Alaska—with his wife and two children—it begins as an ordinary business trip. High above the frozen Bering Sea,

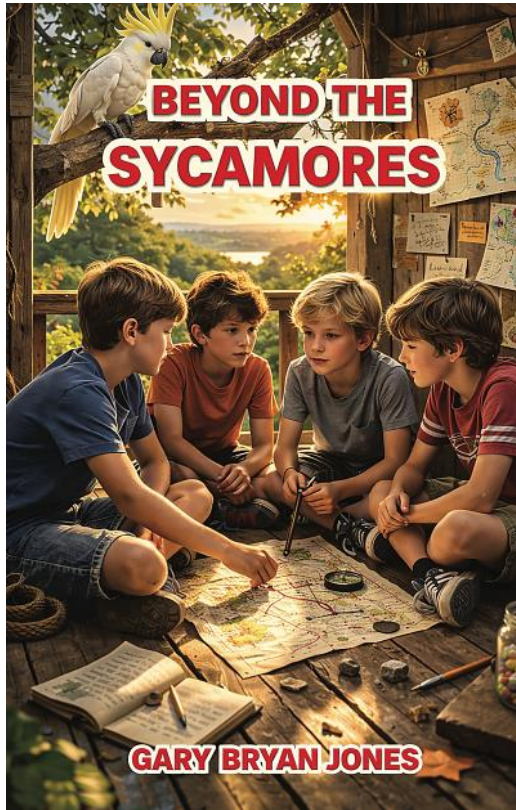
disaster strikes. What follows is a gripping fight for survival in one of the harshest environments on earth. At its heart is a young boy's unshakable longing to return home—a yearning that becomes his lifeline in the face of fear, isolation, and overwhelming odds.

Winning the Iditarod (Published 2005, 2010, 2025)

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In the midst of life, there is death. While these depths are difficult to comprehend, this book bridges both worlds, reaching far beyond mere fiction.

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