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Tempering

Of Tree Houses and Tragedies

Kylie Nielson Turley

The warm August twilight smells of garden-fresh tomatoes and yesterday's balmy summer rain. My son Caid is at a neighbor girl's birthday party eating pizza, while my other four children and their three little cousins spray each other with the garden hose and laugh. My sister, my husband, and I talk about news from home and the city pool waterslides, lounging in lawn chairs, lazily slapping a few lonely mosquitoes, and picking at the remains of dinner.

The kids want to try the zip-line again, so we tote the food back in the house, shove the table to the side, and get out the rock-climbing harnesses. The younger kids bicker about whose turn it is to go first, while the older ones trot through the garden patch and climb the wooden blocks nailed into the trunk of the big tree. My twelve-year-old son waits on the lower, walled-in tree house landing to help the little ones through the trapdoor, while my teenage daughter climbs to the zip-line platform where she can help clip safety harnesses onto the line. I watch the beehive of activity for a moment or two, then go inside to do dishes, make dessert, and return a friend's phone call.



I step outside with a bowl of cookie dough in one hand and a supply of spoons in the other. As I round the corner of the house, I hear the screaming: "He fell! He fell! Call 9-1-1!"

These thoughts I have in an instant:

"He" is mine.

One of mine.

The tree house.

Too high.

He's dead.

Dead.

Run to him.

My knee will collapse if I jump off the terraced garden ledge.

It's the last, stupid thought that shakes me.

I cry, "Who? Who?" but I don't know if I'm yelling or whispering as the sound rips my throat and rattles in my head.

Yelling, apparently. Because there is a pause, then someone—Kaitlyn?—shouts, "Caid. Caid. It's Caid. It's Caid," at the same time I arrive next to him. Months later, I wonder why everyone kept repeating words. I have no memory of dropping the cookie dough and spoons on the concrete driveway, sprinting across the lawn, hurdling the terraced garden ledge, and breaking through the small corn patch.

But I must have. Because suddenly I'm here. Frozen again. Staring down at my seven-year-old son lying on the ground.

He is moaning low-throated grunts like a strange, wounded animal and trying to curl up on his side like a potato bug. His eyes are closed, and he is bleeding profusely from somewhere on his head or face. His eye is swollen shut, but I feel a rush of relief.

He's alive.



I don't cry or scream. I take the cell phone from my husband and talk in what I remember as a calm voice to the emergency response personnel: giving our address, explaining what I see on the ground in front of me, repeating our address, saying "yes, he's breathing" four different times, and finally pushing the off button when the ambulance arrives. I remain stoic when I climb up into the ambulance, sit down, grasp the seat belt, click it, and hear the attendant in the back say, "That doesn't look good. He's going to crash."

A week later, a friend who happened to be driving by just as I was getting in tells me, "Oh, Kylie. The look on your face. . . . It was a look no mother . . ." I want to ask her what I looked like, but she starts crying too hard.



They say you can tell who a person really is in a crisis. If they are right, then I am small. I am a tiny, diamond-hard walnut of a person, obedient and docile, shocked. I lodge just below my breastbone, tight, curled inward, barely aware of my extremities.



The nurse I follow into the hospital says, "You can wait here," and I immediately stop, hovering in the doorway of the largest private space I have ever seen in an emergency room. My son is lifted onto the bed, strapped down,

and tied into monitors and machines by a dozen nurses and three doctors. My nurse is five steps into the room before she realizes I'm not behind her. She stops and pivots, and I can see the pity on her face.

"Oh," she says and unconsciously tugs a length of blond hair forward over her shoulder, partially covering her face. She gestures, "You can come in." I ghost inside, staying by the wall, well away from the purposeful doctors with their wires and tools. Sometimes I can see Caid between the chaos.

Minutes later in the CT Scan room, a doctor turns to me, "If we see what we think we'll see, we're going to stop the scan and LifeFlight him immediately to Salt Lake." I jerk my neck, nodding down then up, but my face is flat and expressionless. The nurse looks at me carefully and pats my back.

"Are you or your husband an EMT? You're handling this very well," she says.

"Thank you," I whisper mechanically, then think, *Thank you? It wasn't a compliment.* I glance down at my extra-large Idaho Falls Fire Department T-shirt and croak, "It's my sister's husband. My brother-in-law's shirt." It is the longest string of words I have initiated in the last half-hour. A lifetime. The whole world can change in a half-hour. I clear my throat before turning back to look at Caid through the glass windows.

The nurse keeps talking. Softly. She wants to get me a drink or a chair. She asks if I need anything, anything at all, water, perhaps, and she pats my back again.

"No," I say, but no sound comes out. "No, thank you," a bit louder.

Caid begins moaning and trying to curl into a fetal position. They let me go in and try to comfort my unconscious boy. I reach into the metal machine and gingerly stroke his naked shoulder like he is again a soft, premature newborn. His skin is warm, and I realize that I have not touched him. I did not hug him when he came home from the neighbor girl's birthday party; I did not even notice when he got home. When he was bleeding in the dirt at my feet, I was too afraid. Have I ever touched him? I feel like someone hits the back of my knees with a crowbar, and I teeter forward, almost collapsing onto his gurney beside him.

His skin is warm, I think. Still warm.

Step back, I tell myself. Step back.

The walk to my side of the glass window is a marathon of space and determination.

Behind the glass, I wrap my arms in front of me. My mouth presses together, and my forehead freezes in deep wrinkles, but my eyes move constantly, flicking between the doctors' faces and the computer screen, back and forth, faces then computer—searching, searching.



LifeFlight helicopters are tiny. A small seven-year-old boy strapped tightly on a child-sized stretcher must be shoved—hard—twice and clicked in like a puzzle piece. The patient’s feet are forward, mere inches from the pilot’s knees, and belted snug in their frame. The attendant’s arm can easily brush the patient’s face in the back, reach for life-saving medications, give an injection. The EMT can see heart and respiratory changes on the small traveling monitors and, if he sees changes, can instantly glance to see if the patient is bleeding from his ears.

It’s a fourteen-minute flight from Provo to Salt Lake.

“Drive carefully,” they tell the parents. A well-practiced line.

The drive takes an hour and ten minutes if one follows the speed limit and the traffic is light.



I have been upset before, but halfway to Primary Children’s Medical Center in Salt Lake City is the first time in my life that I completely lose control. After forty minutes of silence, my husband suddenly whispers, “You’ll find out soon enough. They were going triple down the zip-line.”

The words electrocute the shallow hold I have on myself. A small part of my brain knows even then that “triple” means carelessness to me, and the threatening hell of anger and blame ignites my panic.

“Oh, God,” I moan. “God, God, God.”

I suck in a breath and continue whimpering, “God. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

I do not know if I am swearing or praying. I only know that the words tear out of a part of me I have never known before. My eyes are dry, my voice is gritty, and I cannot stop retching, “God, God. Oh, God,” while we drive through the streetlight-pocked night. My husband says nothing.



There is another story, a parallel story. The first moments are the same. The screaming, the terror, the sheer unlivable reality. I see my son lying on the ground, and, as the relief of seeing him alive washes over me, the words of his baby blessing flood my mind, “He has a God-ordained mission to accomplish.” As I speak on the cell phone to 9-1-1, as I get in the ambulance, as I stand on the edge of the emergency room, the words echo over and over, “God-ordained mission, God-ordained mission, God-ordained mission.” In that small, tight part of me, I grasp the lifeline and cling mightily. This situation *will not* stop God’s plan for my son, however it turns out. The idea is a cushion, even while fear of what *might happen* suffocates, gags, smothers, overwhelms.



It turns out okay. Maybe I should have told you that in the introduction. Caid is okay. Multiple skull fractures, hemorrhaging brain tissue, and a traumatic brain injury take time to heal, but he is healing. His vision is poor

now, though he likely would have needed glasses sooner or later anyway with two near-sighted parents. Missing three weeks of school and having complications with memory will make anyone struggle in school. Two months after the accident, doctors declared that Caid's eyelid was drooping, rather than his eye sagging into his shattered eye socket. We decided Caid was not ready for another surgery or more pain, especially for something merely cosmetic. His droopy eyelid gives him a bored, sleepy look if you see him from his left side, but that's fine. He's okay.

Two months later is when I sit to write and remember, to somehow pull a string or two of sense from the tangled mess of the last sixty days. I stumble for words. My typical writing style is cheeky and slightly sarcastic, but poking humor has deserted me for obvious reasons. My words are either melodramatic or flat, sharp or empty; nothing is right. The essay unwrites more than it writes, and my slow paragraphs melt into weeks and months. I begin to realize that while I have moved on and continued living, part of me was left behind, camped out on the tiny calendar square of August 19, 2010—waiting. Waiting for the blow. Waiting for my fears to unfold. Waiting for my child to die.



The argument that my mother-fears are irrational holds no weight with me. I will show you a twenty-two-foot-high drop from a tree house onto a railroad tie that is rock hard, skull-shatteringly rational. My children might die. I might stand frozen beside, too scared to hold them in my arms as they bleed and moan and quit breathing. It could happen.



Time graciously blurs things. Six or eight months later, you do not think about death or *might have happened* on a daily basis, nor do your children. You think of carpool, lessons, homework, and dinner. You contemplate who needs good friends, whose turn it is to read scriptures, what to have for (another) dinner, and how to make the house payment. Your children talk, eat, sleep, work, and whine, and you do, too.

But there are moments.

They catch you.

One minute you are walking briskly to the car to go pick up your elementary school kids, the next you are standing rigid, staring across the frozen yard. The tree house rattles, vacant and icy in the winter wind, and you think, *Merciful God. It is so high. So very, very high.*

There is the now-familiar choking rush of revulsion, gratitude, pain, and fear.

Spring is coming. It will get warm, the grass will turn green, and your kids will play outside again. You will have to decide, to choose. Tear it

down? Climb up and conquer? Safety and protectiveness or openness and pain? The problem is that now you know you cannot avoid the pain.

You pivot, walk to the car, get in, and drive. When the kids ask for music, you turn it up loud. You belt out words, even when you do not know the right ones.

A month later, the home insurance company informs you that homes with tree houses are uninsurable.

“Sorry,” the agent says. “It looks like a nice tree house. You have until December to remove it or find a new company.”

Relieve. You do not have to choose. There will be no mature, wise decision-making process, and no responsibility for the choice. Supposedly humans yearn for freedom, but you feel relief. The choice is made—by someone else, for you. Rip it down.



We pass the one-year anniversary of Caid’s accident. I prepare myself for personal crisis, but we are busy buying first-day-of-school supplies and going camping—things we missed last August.

On a random day in September, the insurance company reminds us again that the home will not be insured next January. Tearing down the tree house turns into a family party with cheering and trivial photos as the lumber platform clings willfully to the tree long after numerous nails and support beams are pulled out, doubtless an absurd analogy in the making. My husband must resort to a chainsaw and a sledgehammer before the thing crashes to the ground. When two-by-fours and one-by-eights lie twisted and mangled in the spot where Caid fell, I have my prescribed moment—feeling nauseous and blinking fast to keep the tears down. I feel slightly silly: what happened to Caid was only a near miss. A could-have-been. An almost. Why the tidal wave of tragic emotions when there is no catastrophe? He is alive. Okay. Fine. We just had a horrific evening, a really bad week, and some months of recovery. *There is nothing to mourn*, I think, *nothing to grieve for. Nothing.*

Just the vain imaginings that faith means pain does not hurt.

Just the realization that God’s idea of “okay” might be my worst nightmare.

Merely the delusion that things going bad will shield me from things going even worse.

Simply the understanding that knowing any of this does not mean I am safe from learning it again in deeper, more excruciating ways.



I plan to make the kids haul the tree house to the dump, but a picnic on Squaw Peak comes up first—a “hot dog picnic,” the kids declare, so we need wood. Not one to waste, I send my sons out to the wreckage with screwdrivers, hammers, and instructions about rusty nails and watching where

they step. A few hours later I am looking over Utah Valley with the smell of smoke seeping into my clothes and hair and a sunset smearing the sky in pinks and reds.

My husband and children are engaged in the ritual tanning of marshmallows, but I sit on a hard rock and stare, watching the flames waver and dance, feeling the warmth on my cheeks and palms. The tree house wreckage burns well. My husband pitches three more chunks on the fire. He will stack it too high, and the marshmallows will burn, just like always. It usually annoys me, but tonight I feel contemplative.

I am afraid I live too defensively now, arms braced in front to protect me from the blows. It is because I know the secret: the immediacy of death, of pain. Maybe tomorrow or next week. Maybe next door or in my backyard. Maybe my kids, my mom, my husband, me. Caid's accident—it was too big, too life-changing, but, if I am honest, not really; most days run pretty much the same as before. The fire is blazing, and Caid's marshmallow flames red then blackens. He starts whining, and I think, *God-ordained mission? Really?* Kaitlyn throws him a new marshmallow, but he continues to whine, then kicks the dirt. They say traumatic brain injuries can exacerbate aggression, even years later.

I feel vaguely guilty about wallowing in my feelings. Since it worked out, maybe I'm faithful. Or maybe I just kept breathing through a shallow, choiceless endurance. The smoke breezes my way, and I cough, swiping my hands vigorously as if to stir an air current counter to nature's will. I know I can live through impossible moments by the grace of God. But I do not want to. I fan the shadowy air again before the smoke drifts lazily in another direction and the sun finishes tucking behind the mountains across the valley. The night air will chill shortly, and we are not dressed to stay.

"Start packing up," I say. All five children immediately start bickering about who gets to make the flames hiss away under streams of water. I press my hands against the ragged surface of the rock to push myself up and suck in a breath of mountain air, preparing to sort out the fight. Then I pause.

I am different now. I know this moment for what it is: there are five. Five bickering, beautiful children. The miracle wafts around me like campfire smoke, hazy and indistinct, but strong and pungent enough to sting my eyes. I will smell it for years.

This essay by Kylie Nielson Turley won first place in the *BYU Studies* 2012 personal essay contest.