

## Stephen

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## Stephen

Robyn Holly Taylor-Neu

Stephen. Stephen. Stephen.

He awoke suddenly. Tried to sit up. Fell back, poleaxed by a gut-deep pain. Eyes watering in the sunlight that filtered through the window. Stephen blinked rapidly. For a tense twenty seconds, he gaped at the nearness of his feet, before realizing that those twin peaks were, in fact, his knees. The room's ventilation system had a peculiar, animal whine. Stephen dared the sun's shards once more. Bony fingers pressed the glass. Gasps of colour, reddening leaves. One. Two. A third (orange), was dislodged and spun away, out of the frame. Leaves. Stephen let his head fall back. He stared up into the uniform holes, the ceiling's neat perforations. Mass-produced stigmata.

Leaves. Only a few clung. These brushed Stephen's hair as he wrapped his palms around a low branch. He hung back, resting on his shoulders, and walked his sneakers up. Looping a leg between branch and trunk, he levered himself upright. Bark scraped the soft skin of his thighs where the shorts rode up.

" . . . seven, six, five . . . "

Stephen tucked his feet beneath him and stood against the trunk. He stretched for a higher branch, stepped up, reached, stepped again.

" . . . two, one . . . "

Stephen rested his spine against the tree's. He peered down through the laddered branches.

" . . . here I come."

The orderly dots pulsed nauseatingly. Stephen's tongue against his teeth gathered thick strands of spit, mouthmatter. He rubbed away the maggoty threads with the back of one hand. Turning his head, Stephen saw a white paper cup, marked with an anarchist's *A* and a burr of black letters. Eva? Eve. The first syllable of his mother's name, the phonetic core of his own. Again, Stephen glanced towards the window. What time was it? The sky offered no answer. Stephen turned his gaze upwards once more.

Cheek pressed to the bark, Stephen listened. A churn of traffic, not close. Rustling leaves. He strained for a sign: voices, laughter. He squinted in the dying rays of sun. Although the leaves were scarce now, there were enough to ablate his view. Was the game over? Stephen worried at his lower lip. If it wasn't over though . . . He could almost, almost hear voices. Yes. Definitely. Maybe. Stephen adjusted his toes along the narrow branch. Shifted a hip against the trunk. Maybe, he did not care if the game was done. He could perch here forever. Here, drifting with the tree's deep, diaphragmatic sway. Shutting his eyes, he was on a ship. A crow's nest. He felt ill. His mother would soon be here. There. At the school. With eyes still shut, Stephen could see her.

She would be shading a hand against the sun's glare, swerving into the school parking lot, landing across two stalls. Pausing to examine the iPhone in her lap before shrugging off the seatbelt. Stephen imagines her charging into the rec hall. "Hannah!" From across the room, his gilt-headed sister looks up, skips joyously, leaps joyously into his mother's arms. "How was your day? What did you do?" His mother smooths down flyway wisps of Hannah's hair. "Do you have your EpiPen?" His sister—little suck—takes his mother's hand and leads her towards the coatroom.

In the seatbelt's clasp once more, Stephen's mother hesitates. Maybe. Key in the ignition.

"Where is Stephen?"

"He was grumpy."

Stephen's mother sighs. Rolls her eyes. Probably.

"Maybe he won't come home."

"We can only hope."

The air had turned cool. Stephen shivered and pressed his hip against the bark. He wrapped his arms around the tree's trunk, squeezed, felt its roughness through thin cotton. Imagined the wood peeling up to receive him, folding around his sacrum, his protruding spine and shoulder blades. Given time, moss would blanket, then cloak, then shroud him. Stephen inhaled, tasting the crispness of the

air, redolent of dying leaves. Felt his diaphragm against the bark with each breath. He could hear the tree's branches creak, the leaves whisper. A gurgle from his stomach reminded him that it had been hours since anything solid has passed his lips; (this is not true, technically—the first bite of his lunch had, in fact, passed his lips in both directions.) Nauseous most mornings, Stephen had managed half a glass of milk and a handful of almonds before leaving the house. Had been looking forward to the sandwich and apple that his mother had prepared, but with the first bite, his stomach turned. Cheddar. Ok. Lettuce. Ok. Mustard. Ok. Wonder Bread. Tolerable. Miracle Whip . . . treason. After depositing the unchewed mouthful into his palm, Stephen peeled apart the layers. His suspicions were confirmed. Thick, gelatinous, gobby, slightly translucent in a plasmatic, mucusoid way. Its whiteness was alien, perverse. Stephen almost gagged again, noting how it coated the bread and lay slick upon the slabs of cheese. Carefully, he tucked the plastic wrap back around the sandwich. His stomach burned and he blinked back tears. Was immediately ashamed of his own weakness. His mother had simply forgotten. Easy enough to do. Except she knew. He would just not eat it. Ok. He contemplated the apple. It would just make him hungrier he reasoned. Appetite? Let sleeping dogs lie. As those around him gathered garbage and swept crumbs from their desks, Stephen dropped the fruit into his backpack. He ducked down and pretended to rummage through the bag while his classmates filed out of the door. Alone, he moved towards an adjacent desk, pulled the drawer out as far as possible, and shoved the plastic-wrapped package towards the back, beneath a wedge of papers. Stephen slid the drawer back in. He allowed himself a small smile.

Ten hours later. Gurgle. The rumble and burn gave him a sick satisfaction. His mother is so concerned with what Hannah eats that she does not care if Stephen does. So he won't. Easy. He squeezed the trunk again, harder, squeezed his eyes shut. His mother's profile swam before his mind's eye once more.

He could see her slanting a hand against the sun's glare, swinging into the lot. Moments later, soaring through the double set of double doors. She sweeps into the large recreation room and scans for her children. Hannah, she finds immediately, sitting at a round table, feet dangling, flaxen head bowed. Under her mother's gaze, Hannah gravely selects a crayon from the neat row. Yellow. As Stephen's mother resumes her survey of the room, the half-smile fades from her face. "Hannah, where is your brother?" Stephen's mother's brows come together, the colour flees her tightly-drawn lips. Hannah shrugs out of her reverie, or just shrugs. She packs the crayons into her pencil case as Stephen's mother seeks out a supervisor.

Perched in the tree, Stephen felt suddenly, unbearably ashamed. The sun—molten, yolky—sat upon the line of the horizon. Vermillion bled into violet, darkened to indigo. By now, his mother would surely be here. There. There.

Here. The sheet clung damply to Stephen's back. Sharp inhale. In the tremor of his eyelids, he imagined that he could feel his pulse. His right shoulder and collarbone were made of wax. Hard, flesh-coloured, sensationless. Stephen did not bother trying to move his fingers. He craned his head sideways again. The coffee cup was perched upon a stack of file folders and bracketed by a pair of spindly arms. Drugstore variety reading glasses, built for a face somewhat wider than his mother's.

Stephen's hands were moving, his feet shifting even as he made up his mind. Below him, in the dusk, the tree's rungs resolved into a black mass. His confidence and grace had faded with the sun's light. Bark flaked beneath his heels and Stephen burst through the cage of branches. He soared up towards the ground.