

Annex 8

One Step at a Time

It was unbelievably hot that July day at my grandpa's cottage. 57 years later, I can still feel it. I was with five other boys. We had gotten tired of playing marbles and burning leaves with a magnifying glass.

"Hey!" said Alex. "It's been a while since we climbed the big oak tree!"

"Let's go!" said another.

I hesitated. I wanted to be brave and adventurous like them. But at age 8, I was a fearful, sickly child, one who doubtless took to heart my mother's admonitions to be careful.

"Come on," said Julien, my best friend. "Don't be a baby."

"I'm coming!" I said, hurrying to catch up.

We found ourselves in a clearing. At a distance stood a magnificent oak. The closer we got, the bigger it seemed to me. It towered like a giant over the surrounding trees.

One by one, the others heaved themselves up onto the first branch, then climbed to the top of the hundred-year-old giant, which stood over 60 feet high. Breathless and sweating, my heart beating furiously, I tried to follow them. Each was perched atop a chosen branch, looking down at the others climbing up.

When I joined them, I gripped the branch tightly with both arms, not daring to look down. The others sat on the edges and rocked, making me feel seasick.

Laughing, they climbed down and jumped on their bikes to return home.

"Wait for me!" I cried, my throat tight with fear. "I can't—"

One of them shouted, "See you!"

The others laughed. They turned back to gaze upon me.

"You can stay up there if you like," taunted Alex. "We left you lots of room." Julien looked worried, but he left with them.

I shot a glance downward. My head spun. The thought of climbing down was impossible. I would slip, tumble and die. I heard sobbing. For a moment, I wondered who was crying, then realized it was me.





The hours passed. Night began to fall. Fear and fatigue had rendered me silent. I lay on my stomach, paralyzed.

With the dusk, a first star twinkled in the sky. The foot of the tree was cloaked in shadow. Suddenly, from across the glade, a thin ray of light pierced the darkness. I heard Julien's voice, and then my father's. My father! What could he possibly do? At his age and with his stoutness, he would never be able to climb up and help me!

My father shone the lamp upward at me.

"Come on down from there right now," he said. His voice was calm. "Dinner's waiting."

"I can't!" I sobbed. "I'll fall and die!"

"Listen to me," said my father. "Don't think about the height. Just think about the first step you need to take. That's easy. Look at where I'm beaming the light. See that branch to your right?"

"Yes," I said, creeping toward the edge.

"Turn around. Put your right foot on the branch to your right. Don't think about what you have to do next. Just trust me."

It didn't seem impossible. I stretched out my right foot, groped hesitantly, and . . . there. Got it.

"Perfect," said my father. "Now put your left foot on the branch beneath, where I'm shining the light."

I did as I was told. And, one step at a time, I climbed down the tree. Before I knew it, I was back on the ground, buried in my father's arms. I snivelled a little but felt strangely proud of myself.

How many times in my life have I despaired, envisioning a goal that seemed far too distant and monstrously difficult, before remembering that lesson learned so long ago in the old oak tree? Don't look all the way down to the ground: just focus on where you have to place your foot. And after you complete that one step, complete another and another until you get where you want to be. Only then can you contemplate the obstacle in full, and rejoice in having conquered it.