

"This Girl Climbs Trees"
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Logos Publishing House edition Oct 2013

Chapter 1

January 1979, age 13 and two months(ish)

I'm not afraid of climbing trees. I once cherished a majestic maple that stood solidly on our front lawn, guarding the house like some armored knight. That maple was the first tree I ever climbed but not the last. Still, it will forever be my favorite. My first best friend.

No other tree on the block stood taller, leafier, or greener in spring, nor turned as many beautiful shades of orange and brown in fall. If there were an award for the most beautiful climbing tree in Santa Nina, California, the Mills' maple would surely have won, hands down.

Its bumpy brown trunk provided nature's best stepladder up to my favorite branch. This gentle long arm extended lovingly toward my bedroom window inviting me to climb up the tree onto its sturdy branch any given sunny day, just to lie on my stomach, arms dangling, denim-covered legs bent at the knees, crossed at the ankles, and feet clothed only by dirt and sap.

Somehow, my pixie-cut brown hair seemed always to invite a few stray leaves. Never in all my years have I experienced more bliss than on the motherly limb of that maple tree.

Tree-lying started when I was eight and ended three years later when it became tree-sitting because the hard branch hurt my new, my changing, my (you know, b-o-o- you know). Dad had the tree uprooted two weeks before I turned 13, said it had some sort of terminal disease.

Such are the problems of the female tree-lyer.

The name on my birth certificate reads Maclyn Elizabeth Mills, but ever since I can remember, people have called me Mac. Then last year I started signing homework Eliza Mills, Esq. I decided I deserved a bit of moving up in this world. (Didn't matter to me that esquire is meant for boys.) And if the only way I could do it was by changing my name, so be it. I don't think my family thinks much of it. In fact, Eric's the only one who calls me Eliza.

Here's the silly naming story. Everyone has one. This is mine.

Dad: Let's name our only little girl after a beautiful woman, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis.

Mom: How about after my best friend from high school; you know, the one who killed herself when she didn't make the cheer squad. Madeline.

Me (had I a voice): This is kinda morbid people. Sure, I get the intent and all, but come on, a little compassion.

Parents: Why don't we combine the two names? Yeah. Maclyn. Sounds kinda like a fish, but it's the sentiment behind it all.

See why I prefer my second name, Elizabeth? Eliza. I think it sounds so much more grown up. Because as hard as I try to convince myself that a name is a name is a name, I just can't fall in love with MACLYN. Doesn't Eliza sound better? Maybe you have a name that doesn't please you. I say, change it. Remember, you are the one (not your sappy parents) who has to go through life with it. I think that by age 13, I ought to be able to call myself whatever I want.

This is my life so far. And because of some recently developing events, I felt an urge, maybe a calling, to share my world with, well, with the world. It's funny that what is helping

me understand life right now is death. That's just wrong.

What's it all about, anyway? Life. Deep thought like this calls for an elevated view of the world. That's why I'm a tree-climber.

Now I'm not your everyday tree-climber. It's a whole kind of out-of-this-world experience for me. Foot to bark, hand to twig, and body to branch sends me into some other place. It's like the tree and me are one. I trust the tree to hold me; the tree trusts me not to chop it down.

Surely, it won't hold my dad's insanity and one sharp axe of Tim's Lumber against me. Will it?

As far as I can tell at this point, there're just a few things you need for this twisted journey of life. Start with a belief in yourself, a trust of your own instincts and a dash of honesty - no, not a dash, a heaping tablespoon - because if you're not honest with you, your instincts will lie, and then you've had it.

Trusting your instincts and climbing trees share a common truth - you don't know anything until you try. You won't know if your instincts lie or if you can't climb a tree unless you take that first step. And always remember tree-climbing rule number one:

No Tree's Too Tall

Those aren't the words of some ancient mystic. They're my words. The words of a sometimes confused 13-year-old girl, daughter of a behind-the-times dad and one lipstick-wearing mom, sister of four very protective brothers, and best friend to the smartest girl on the West Coast.

I take what life hands me and move forward. So what that the cutest guy on the block might not like girls. So what that Joe Basketball still thinks playing sports is the ultimate way to spend his time. So what if I take the world seriously. So what.

It's the world that better watch out. Not me.