The Willow Tree

By: Zach Marquez

“Argh!!” Danny topples from the strong arms of the ancient willow, holding his imaginary bullet wound in the abdomen, smashing the inhabitants of his ninja turtle back pack as he lands harshly on his back.  Somewhere, much higher in the tree, the owner of the pinecone bullet is over-taken by the pride one receives when they’ve officially slayed their first zombie.

                “Haaa!” Nathaniel proclaims raising his meter stick rifle in the air, scaling the tree to take a good look at his first victim. Upon arriving at the giggle-suppressed Danny, Nathaniel gives him one last word of intimidation, ”Make sure I never see you or your zombie scum in my woods again, ya hear? Just then, a very suspicious twig snaps to his right. His meter of authority and only source of life is raised instantly and put into its striking position. Nathaniel scans his three o’clock and his nine o’clock, leaning his back up against the willow. Sweat pours out from his combover head and down past his moon glasses. Footsteps crunch over the snow just on the other side of his only ally in this zombie apocalypse. Silently he counts, “One….two…three.”

He swings around, scanning the field for his next victim but finds no target to unleash his wrath upon. He realizes his foolishness much too late as he’s seized by a pair of hands from behind and another pair of arms wraps around his gut threatening to crush the life out of him. His old faithful rifle is dropped as he wrestles his new enemies into the snow. They all growl and giggle as they try to take themselves seriously. At last, he is pinned to the ground by a crazed three-foot-tall zombie who goes by the name of Jacob, and an even smaller one named James.

Danny decides his wound was only slightly fatal, and now is the time for him to once again rise from the dead as zombies do. He walks to the defeated zombie slayer. “Any last words before we eat your human flesh?” he inquires mockingly.

                “Neigh, do your worst you filthy zombie. You’ll have to destroy me before I will ever come with you disgusting creatures,” Nathaniel attempts to spit towards his zombie enemy.

                “ I was afraid you’d say that. Boys you know what we must do.” Before Nathaniel knows what’s about to happen, they all dog pile him, simultaneously tickling the pee out of him.

                “Guys! GUYS! I can’t breathe! I’m going to pee!” pleads Danny as tears run down his face. “Ahahahaha! Please I quit you win, you win!”

The zombies jump in victory giving each other congratulatory hugs. Danny picks himself up, only to be greeted by his enemies with the warmest group hug. They all fail to suppress their giggles, for somehow in their innocent, first grade minds, they all have come to a silent understanding. They love each other, equally and unconditionally. Not the kind of love a married couple feels, but the kind that the closest of brothers feel. This friendship is now, and will forever be sacred. No matter what the future holds, they know that these are their boys. As they leave their battlefield to find another adventure in this beautiful winter after noon, they come to another silent agreement. These woods will forever be their woods. That old cranky willow will forever be their tree.

                Five grades and a tea spoon of hormones later, Danny Henderson, Jacob Hart, Nathaniel Halverson and James Diversus all rest upon the willow. James holds a slab of meat to his eye, Danny silently worships his football magazine, Jacob feverishly studies his vocabulary and Nathaniel continues to gaze into the sky, thinking of Bailey Goodman.

                “Boys,” Nathaniel demands the attention from his comrades. “I think I’m in love!”

                “Oh shut up!” they all join in chorus, tossing twigs and pinecones in his direction. He barely makes it under the shelter of his book bag laughing as he recovers.

                “Gentlemen, I don’t think you understand. Today she...,” He stumbles upon his words in an attempt to find the courage to say what he so desperately wants to say.

                “Well, out with it!” demands James impatiently.

                “Hey be quiet Mr. Black Eye.” Nathaniel gazes curiously at the slab of meat over James’s eye. “James you never told us how that happened.”

                “It was Fred Michaels again,” James confesses staring at the ground shamefully.

                “Fred Michaels?” recites Danny with as much rage as an arena bull. “What’d that miserable little coward do to you this time, James?”

                “I was drinking from the drinking fountain after recess, and he surprised me, knocking the wind out of me. He pushed me on the ground and called me some word that started with an N. Then he finished by landing a solid one on my face.” They all join in an angry chorus talking words of revenge, for no one can hurt one of the boys. “Forget it guys. I’ll be just fine. Nathaniel, you never told us what Bailey did today.” The boys all lean forward in eagerness.

                “Today, Bailey Goodman,” he begins trying to build upon the suspense, “held my hand.” The boys freeze in shock. Danny’s glasses drop off his face and Jacob’s book topples out of his grip.

                “Get him!” demands Jacob. They all trap him in one of their all too familiar dog piles, giggling like they used to in another lifetime that seems to have been centuries ago. They pick themselves up shaking the dirt off themselves, still teasing Nathaniel about his most current victory. Danny puts his arm around James, and the boys once again, stroll away, leaving another story to be told by Mr. Willow to the inhabitants of their woods.

                Two more years graze by, and they are greeting their old creaky willow much more nervously than they are used to.

                “Guys,” breathes Jacob nervously. “If my mom finds out, she’ll hang me by my toe nails!”

                “Don’t be such a woman,” scoffs Danny trying to send an intimidating look through the darkness. “Besides the girls should be here any second.” Just then the boys hear the voice of excitement, fear, answers to pubescent prayers, guilt and pleasure all at the same time. Four of the scariest things they’ve ever seen come into view: girls past curfew.

                Nathaniel takes Bailey Goodman’s hand and runs somewhere deep into the woods. The other boys stand, paralyzed. The boys have imagined what this day would be like, but they never imagined it was a possibility. Girls. In their woods? An uncomfortable look runs across James's face as he painfully musters the only three letters inside his skull.

            "Hhhh," he stumbles, trying to form the noises coming from his mouth into words. "Hhhhey." He pauses, contemplating whether that was what he originally set out to say, and at last nods in affirmation looking very pleased with himself. He retreats to the sanctuary of the boys, and Danny steps onto the battle ground. This is his area of expertise.

            "Ladies," Danny begins quite unctuously," glad you could make it. I'm surprised such sweet things didn't just get eaten up in a dangerous place like this. Maybe you should come stand a little closer. We only bite sometimes." The girls whisper among themselves laughing and peering at each of the boys.

            "Are you Danny Henderson? “ inquires the front of the pack of women.

            "Yes. Looking’s free. However, touching on the other hand--" he chuckles nervously.

            "You're on the football team. You like, take the ball and run into the point place. We have a cheer for you in the cheer squad. It goes: D-A-N-N-Y Danny Danny that's our guy! Who are they?" she points her finger back toward Jacob and James as if viewing some disgusting specimen.

            "Oh, them? They're just some guys I pass time with. You'll probably recognize James’s feet from sticking outside the dumpster. You won't recognize this kid," he slaps Jacob on the shoulder, "because this is the first time in this decade that his face isn't glued inside a book." Danny misses the pain on the boys' faces because he's too busy receiving the choir of laughs the girls reward him with.

Hours pass as Danny continues to play upon the girls' desire for his attention. Only their oldest friend, Mr. Willow, notices as James and Jacob slip over to the other side of their old sacred playground. The boys don't recognize the illusionist on the other side of the tree. They both feel a pang in their hearts, followed an un-spoken law not to show it. In that moment, the blood of part of their old childhood slowly trickles out. Jacob pulls out his note cards and a flashlight and begins to study while James tries to think of how he will avoid Mr. Michaels tomorrow. The rest of the night slips away from them as well as many more years, leaving their old friend Willow with a sour taste in his mouth.

            Graduation robes and chords decorate the young men as they rest upon the tree, not daring to stand upon the strong body of their willow. They are young men now, and life has taught them this is no longer acceptable. They speak of careers, of new life, of marriage, of family, of travel and of college.

            "I can't wait to wear that Crimson jersey!" repeats Danny for the seventh time.

            "Really? This is a surprise to us all!" James says sarcastically, but a bit malevolently.

            "I think someone’s a bit jealous," returns Danny arrogantly.

            "Easy guys," soothes Nathaniel. "Jacob, your speech was amazing. I don't think Princeton knows what treasure they’ve found."

            "Thanks man," returns the serious voice of Jacob. "Watch out astro-physics department, here I come. You and Bailey are going to love Mexico, and I know those organizations need all the help that they can get." They continue to make small talk about their futures. Danny decides it's the right time to show them his graduation present to the boys.

            "Good sirs, I'd like to make a toast to our quartet," he declares, pulling a bottle of whiskey out from his crimson tide bag. They all chuckle, as men do, and politely decline his offer. "Well, hold on now," he pauses suspensefully. "You haven't seen the best part!" He pulls out another gift, slightly smaller in mass, and much more lethal in appearance. In his hands he holds a zip-lock bag of white powder. Instantly their old woods are filled with angry voices and harsh words.

            "Danny get rid of that right now. man. I'm warning you," threatens James.

            "Oh grow a pair, you coward. What are you gonna do huh? Sic your daddy on me? Well maybe you should meet him first." The words slice through James like a cold blade.

  "Danny, don't do this. Get rid of that now!" Jacob grabs for the bag, but Danny has the athletic superiority. Just like the sound of a gunshot, the sound of knuckles crushing across eye-socket fills the air. James crumples to the ground holding his eye, resembling a younger James from ages ago. The boys recognize James in this position because they've been forced to see him in it so many times now.

Danny looks down upon him with only a millisecond of guilt running across his face before the poison takes over again. "I hate you," the words run coldly and viciously from his lips. He turns and walks away without a glance backwards at his childhood playground, his brothers, or father willow.

The next few hours consist of the remaining trio saying their last goodbyes to each other before they start their new lives. They each make those half-honest promises to call each other and tell each other everything that goes on. They will "Stay in touch.”

From this moment on, someone hits the VCR into fast-forward. Mr. Willow sees plenty of James, Jacob and Nathaniel in the next handful of years and lifetimes:

"I do,” repeat Nathaniel and Bailey as they stand proudly beneath the willow.

"Daddy daddy look at me," chime the carbon copies of the three men as they play upon their fathers’ old willow.

"Once upon a time....there were four boys," begins James as he shares tales of zombie apocalypses, dragon wars, princes and princesses and many of his favorite adventures with his baby boy. Slight traces of gray reside in James’s hair.

"Now this tree here is made up of billions and billions of smaller parts called atoms," lectures Jacob to his twins.

            Through all these new life times and while all these new journeys and adventures are being added to the boys’ book of life, no one has heard from Danny since that old nightmare beneath the willow. They only see his crimson Jersey running touchdowns on the television,and basking in the glory just as he always wanted.

            Years later, as whiskers begin to take over his face as well as the misery that his life has become, Danny receives an invitation. He first tries to remember last night, making his way through a sea of bottles and unsterile needles. He puts the invitation under the kitchen light of his motel and sees that it's some sort of an invitation to an event for James. Before Danny knows what's happening, he finds himself taking an all too familiar walk into his old woods. He can hear the Gospel choir singing its soft hymns. As he gets closer to his old loyal friend, Mr. Willow, he sees something his eyes have pleaded to see for so many years.

            "Hey Buddy," Nathaniel is the first one to speak.

Danny doesn't speak, but he doesn't need to. They know what he needs to say and have already heard it. That was always the power of the boys...his boys. He looks into their faces. That seriousness in Jacob’s face is just as present as it was when they were still young and handsome. Nathaniel still has that dreamer’s gleam dazzling in his eye. He searches for the other face he is so desperate to see. Both of his brothers look over to their right at a wooden box by their old willow, for they can see the panic in his eye. Silent still, they walk him toward hell on earth. Danny recognizes Ms. Diversus as she slowly and shakily walks from this tomb, dabbing her eyes dry. His attention is brought back to the box, not believing that he's really going to see what everyone’s expecting him to see. His body sinks into the Earth as his eyes make contact with the inhabitant of that box.

            James doesn't greet Danny. His body lies there in a black suit, hands folded across his abdomen. Danny wonders if James is still angry because he hasn't acknowledged Danny’s existence yet. Danny struggles to believe what he's seeing and begins to tremble. Jacob puts a supportive hand to his back. The truth slowly sinks in to Danny.

            "James Diversus," he begins reciting in his head, “is gone. Gone too soon by the hands of an alcoholic, just like me. My quiet beautiful brother is dead, and I never got the chance to tell him how much I love him, and now I never will." The trembling only grows worse, until Danny hears a familiar sound. Just like some saving grace, echoes start to sound around him. Not too far from him, he sees three small boys tackling another boy, causing him to pee his pants. He sees them again swinging from that old willow tree calling themselves baboons. He sees a small little Jacob reading by the tree, and he sees young Nathaniel gazing out into the sky dreaming as he does. He sees James and himself as boys, planning their crusade into the dragon castle. He sees their snow fort sanctuaries and their thistle brush summer huts. He sees mud pies and water balloons all soaring through he air. He hears the boys’ beautiful, beautiful chorus of laughter, and he tastes summertime ice-cream. He smells springtime rain in their woods, and damp wet leaves of autumn. He feels pubescent--young, careless and wild again. He looks around and sees all his boys with him once again, and even though they are in these old bags of bone and skin, these are his boys, his brothers and his greatest gifts from God. Danny, is no longer a slave to misery because in these woods, these beautiful woods next to this old cranky willow, Danny is free. He looks down at James again, now fully believing what he is seeing. He sees the wrinkles next to his eyes from all the times the boys laughed until they cried and couldn't breathe. Danny is about to break that old rule they all silently came to so many years ago. He begins to cry. These tears don't run with grief or sorrow. They run for joy of finding his brother to say one last goodbye and to tell him what he always needed to say.

He puts his hand on James' hand. The only sounds in this November chill are the soft humming of the gospel choir and Danny’s feeble voice. He takes a moment to try to put his feelings into a form of vocabulary. It comes short and simple, but direct. "I love you Buddy. I always will." The weight of the world drops from his shoulders. "I'll see you soon, James." The boys watch as their brother is slowly lowered into the ground next to their old willow. They toss dirt down into the hole where their James will peacefully rest. They don't toss dirt on a goodbye forever, or a goodbye at all.  This is a communion of the bond that made these boys brothers. It is no more than a simple period on one more sentence that will be engraved into their book of stories. As they stroll away from this sacred forest, they are reminded of the many silent agreements they made so many lifetimes ago. These woods will forever be their woods. These boys will forever be their boys. That cranky willow, that old, tired, creaky willow will forever be their willow.