
JESUS-TREE

By E. A. Farro

Microphone/Tree Piece

Select a large solid tree away from loud noises.

Wrap the microphone in a layer of 1/4 or 1/8 inch foam rubber and seal it in a plastic sack. Drill a hole of large enough diameter to accept the encased microphone to the center of the tree at a [convenient] height, and slip the microphone to within an inch of the end of the hole. Plug the hole with cement or other waterproof sealant. Extend the microphone wire inside to the pre-amp, amp, and speaker system.

—Bruce Nauman (1971)

Jesus comes to me in the form of an elm and tells me where I can find my little sister. She disappeared from our yard three days ago. Search parties come and go; neighbors stack casseroles and brownies on our kitchen counter. We don't eat. The police let me sit with their dogs. I bury my face against their warm fur and listen to their staccato breathing. At night the people leave, and I hold hands with mom and let her pet my hair. I sit in silence with Dad, not holding hands, but we secretly hold hands in our minds.

The Jesus-Tree tells me, "Go to the forest and you will see a cave." He shows me the path marked by certain fallen tree trunks and hills and views. I wake up and leave the house in my pajamas, a box of Oreos in my hand. I run down our block. The sun is not quite up, but the sky is starting to lighten.

Janet is only five, eight years younger than me, but we've always been close. We sit together, and Janet draws or builds Lego towers while I read about identifying trees—from their bark or the grain of wood in furniture. I want to be a carpenter or have a Christmas tree farm when I finish college.

I slow to a jog and replay what the Jesus-Tree told me. I come to the fallen white pine, climb over the trunk and then speed up as the path inclines. At an opening in the forest, I see the river. I turn right onto a deer trail. This is *the* path Jesus-Tree told me to take, I am sure. Below, the river is still and fog curls above the surface. I don't see a cave. Have I gone too far? Is a dream really only a dream?

"Janet!" I yell.

And then as loud as I can, "JANET!"

My throat aches from the running. The air is cold against my sweat.

My pajamas are muddy and damp on the bottoms. *I want my little sister back.*

"JANET JANET JANET JANNNNNNNN-ET!"

I wipe at the wetness on my face and yell. My voice starts to sound like yodeling.

"JJJJJYEEOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!"

Dirt and trees all around, the sun rising, light bouncing off the slopes, and the burn in my throat. "Janet!" I yell again. And then I see the opening. A dark spot in the dull limestone. I run over and scramble onto all fours. The ground is damp, and the walls crumble when I touch them.

"Janet?"

"Ryan?"

"Janet!" My heart explodes; I think I am peeing myself. "Janet, are you hurt?"

I can hear her move, but it is dark, and I don't have a flashlight to see. "Come here—I brought cookies."

I hear her crawl across the floor, and then she is a ball at my feet. I grab her and back out of the cave, into the yellow low-angle sunlight. I cradle her in my arms like a baby. "Janet, why are you here?"

She opens and closes her mouth; no sound comes out. Her lips are chapped and peeling, bloody on the sides. Her eyes look too big. I make sounds like my mother does when Janet cries, even though she is not crying now, just staring and blinking at me.

I give her an Oreo; she splits it open but doesn't eat, just clutches a half in each hand. Dark crumbs fall to the ground. I hold her body close. She smells of dirt and mildew. I want to get her home. I want to ask her about the Jesus-Tree.

“Everything is okay,” my parents say over and over, my mom stroking my back, my Dad wrinkling his brow. As if they can guarantee it by repeating themselves: “Everything is okay.” It has been more than a year since I found Janet in the cave. I ask my Dad about elm trees and Jesus, and he tells me how most of the elm in Minnesota were killed by a fungus when he was a kid. One by one, they died, and the great green canopy over every street in town was gone by the time he married Mom.

I get a job after school with a local radio show—I’m just the janitor, but I get to see all the recording equipment and learn about the music. It gives me something to talk about with kids at school. Everyone knows my little sister was kidnapped and that I had a vision and found her. Some of the boys tease me; one calls me *Gay-Ryan*. But I daydream about girls probably as much as I daydream about trees. Usually the dreams are of me and the girl climbing trees (and maybe me seeing up her skirt) and then making out in the tree. Sort of a group embrace, with me and her embraced and the tree embracing us both and feeling us touch each other.

The radio studio is slick, with music posters and millions of buttons. The show broadcast follows me as I go from room to room emptying trash bins with soda cans and candy wrappers.

One day I open the *Blue Studio* door; the room is silent except for the swish-swish of the DJ’s pants and the gentle taps and slides of his feet. His bald head shines with sweat, and his red moustache wiggles as he sings a soundless song. I don’t know if I should stay or leave.

He looks up and calls out, “Hey!”

“Hey,” I call back, my foot in the door. “Don’t you need music to dance?”

“I got music inside me.” He twirls around, snaps his fingers. “I am Joe.”

“Like a song stuck in your head?”

“Dancing is another way of talking. What about you kid?”

“Ummm, we square dance in gym sometimes.” I step back and let the door close. I peek in a few minutes later, and he is sorting records, but his whole body still sways like he is on his own invisible ship.

Later, Joe calls me in to do the weather report. A few weeks after that, without warning, he holds out the microphone and tells me to ask a question. “Which oak tree turns red in fall and which oak turns yellow?” I ask and hear, as an echo back from the live radio. It takes a half hour of Joe and I giggling at caller guesses before an older woman gets the answer. (Pin oak (*Quercus palustris*) turns red and valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) turns yellow.)

The Jesus-Tree is now a cartoon character in my mind—or two parallel characters, because I can’t sort out the tree portion and the Jesus portion. Had it been an elm costume over Jesus, blond hair and blue eyes peeking above the trunk?

I sneak out one Sunday morning; I owe communion to someone. I go to a Catholic church; the Jesus above the altar is bloody. I sit in a pew and wait. I don’t have much to ask for. I got Janet back, and if I hadn’t I probably would have lost Mom and Dad, too. We would have always been searching and waiting.

I ask the Jesus above the altar, “What if I had found the cave too late and Janet had been dead inside?”

He just says, “Feed me!”

One night I carry the trash to the dumpster in back of the studio and I find some recording equipment. It is just sitting in the back alley next to a ripped-open trash bag and amidst the overpowering smell of urine and rotten banana. I run back in, say, “Joe!” He is doing a backward-sliding step in the studio. He stops moving but does not look at me. I can hear my heartbeat, all irregular. He spins around, throws his hands up, and says, “Hey, Kid!”

My body is keenly aware of the blue and red light and the warm stale air. I am full of shivers. He tells me to take the equipment, like he is giving me a three-day-old newspaper; he nods and then waves me over with his hand, “Wanna try moonwalking?” I grab a mop and run out.

When I get home that night I stop in Janet’s room and say, “How are you?”

“Good.” She smiles.

I stand on one foot and then the other. Usually I relish this part of the day, but I am anxious to set up the equipment. *My own recording equipment.*

I go to my room and record myself singing, “I’d like to be under the sea in an octopus’s

garden in the shade . . .” I step side to side as I sing, counting in my head, *left foot, right foot, left foot*. The next day I record Janet jumping rope while yelling, “Hakuna matata, ain’t no passing phrase.”

Joe helps me set up a secret radio-station frequency so I can broadcast. Janet and I take turns making shows upstairs while the other one listens to the radio out on the front porch. After a couple weeks we run out of things to record.

I walk down to the bluffs, weaving through the woods on deer paths. I expect a tree to be familiar, to speak with me, or to send me a message. I stop and sketch a superhero tree—a linden tree (*Tilia americana*) that smuggles maps of hidden treasure in its spiraling leaves. I use the side of my pencil to smudge the shadow of the tree and its superhero cape.

And that is when it hits me.

I run home and pack a bag with a hammer and a drill and a microphone and batteries and a radio, and I head down to the river. In the woods I walk slow, measuring wind and water sounds. I walk up to pine (*Pinus*), birch (*Betula*), even a chestnut (*Castanea*). I know there are no elm (*Ulmus*) in our forest, but I still look. Of all the trees to come in a dream, why would it be one that does not actually live near me? I sit down on a stump, and I put batteries in the microphone and the radio. The river is bright and blue below.

I walk up to a large oak (*Quercus*). I lean my body against it and press my ear to its trunk. The bark has thick linear ridges running up and down. I peel off a piece and put it in my mouth. It tastes acidic and spongy.

I use a knife and a hammer to peel large sections of bark, and I clear an area about five inches by five inches. The wood beneath the bark is pale and soft. The drill cuts through, easily making clean holes. I claw at the wood with my fingers and the back of the hammer to widen and join the holes.

The sun drops below the forest on the other side of the river, and I realize it must be dinner-time. We have an unspoken rule about never being late. Each night we gather for dinner. Each morning we gather for breakfast. We all watch Janet. It is as if we think someone might grab her if we stop watching.

I go back to the oak the next afternoon and work on the hole. When it is deep enough

Where are you anyway? Some friend's sofa, flipping through the "smart" reading they left on the coffee table? Better yet, in the bathroom, checking out what your friend reads when he is in the bathroom? Well, he read this mag already. Or at least, he read the parts he most wanted to read on the first pass. So take it! He'll get another one pretty soon, anyway. And you'll feel daring and a little crazy because, you're not a thief or anything. Well, except for today, you thief. Unless you're in the bookstore. For crying out loud, don't steal it from the bookstore. It's seven lousy bucks and we need bookstores, you know. Scofflaw.

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and wide enough I slide the microphone in. I spread superglue on the bark and press it back onto the wood to cover the hole. As fast as I can, I run to a different part of the forest and take out the radio.

Burrrrsoochuckburrrr.

The tree purrs and stutters and taps with static. I think of my circulatory system with blood and air and heart pumping. I try to breathe with the tree. I think about the tree's capillary action pushing water up and nutrients down. I picture the flow of liquid. Back home, Janet and I play the sounds in fast forward and try to imagine the formation of annual rings.

I broadcast the frequency so that I can listen in my parents' car. I play it for Joe at the studio. "Cool kid, very cool. Dance to that." But he doesn't dance; he squints his eyes as if he were trying to see inside the sound. I imagine people in their garages turning on their radio and hearing this internal flow of sun and dirt and water. *Burrrrsoochuckburrrr.*

After a few weeks the static sound becomes a background noise. I have to remind myself to think about it.

Janet and I visit the oak tree together, and we add it to our map—the map with escape routes.

One night I am in bed reading *Dune*.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO."

I jump up, my heart pumping. Finally, all my waiting is paying off! There is a long peal of laughter, and then another voice joins in.

"Yes! Right there!"

"Jesus?" I say.

"Ohhhhh," a female voice calls out as if she is in pain.

I look around, embarrassed. Am I hearing things? Am I so lonely?

"You love me; please say you love me."

"I *do* love you."

It is the radio! Someone is at my tree—*someones, and they are talking, and I can hear them.*

"Janet!" I run into her room. She looks up, a toy truck in one hand and a stuffed rabbit in the other.

"Janet, the oak tree!"

"Is it Jesus?"

"No, people. No, the microphone. There are people at the tree, and I can hear them."

The next afternoon, Janet runs down to the tree. I sit on our porch; the kitchen radio

in the window broadcasts the *burrrrsoooooo-chuckburrrr* of the tree purring. Usually I go with Janet to the forest. I can't stop chewing my thumbnail. What if the people at the tree are back and Janet runs into them? Or what if the kidnappers are in the forest looking for her? She insisted on going alone, and I didn't want to scare her; she *actually* thinks everything is okay.

I kick the porch rail. I check the radio; sit back down on the steps. I rest my chin on my hands, elbows on my knees. I am missing soccer practice.

"Ryan? Ryan?" I jump up.

"Hey, Ryan, I am just going to eat my cookies here and collect a few acorns. I saw a bird. I found a quarter."

"Janet! Are you okay? Do you want me to come?" I say to the kitchen window, to the air, to the radio broadcasting out and not collecting my words, not shooting them back in space to where Janet is sitting with her juice box and stack of black-and-white cookies.

"Janet." I keep talking. "Janet, I get so scared sometimes. Still. I still get scared."

I stand up and kick the porch. I wish I had set up a radio and a microphone for me to transmit messages to the oak or to a person sitting with their back against it. All that time I was waiting to hear something, and it never occurred to me that I could have said something—to the tree or to the pleading voices.

My legs twitch; I can't be still. I want to go down and meet Janet. I kick the side of the house again and again until my toes are bashed and bruised. My foot throbs, and I have to force the air out to breathe. I stand still, my heart thudding like a herd of stampeding cows. A giant dragon cloud crawls by in an otherwise blue sky.

Eyes closed, I look into the sun until red circles burn through the lids. I whisper a little louder each time, "She's okay; everything's okay."

And that is when my body takes over.

I slide the toe of my left foot backward, then my right. I shake my hips and throw my hands in the air, dancing to the tree purring on the radio and my own chant, *okay, okay, everything okay*. I see blue blotches everywhere in the air, the electric impulse from the sun still etched on my retina or brain or just the made-up memory, long after the moment has passed. ❧