

The Precarious Limb

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Phil Schilling watched storm warnings creeping across the bottom of the screen while he sat on the living room couch with his wife, whose favorite television program was about to begin. Their county did not appear among the names of counties scuttling by, which made Phil question the point of the unrelenting creep of words. They wormed along, proclaiming the type of weather threat, the affected areas, and the suggested precautions. Then the words slunk by a second time. Minutes later, the process began anew. It interfered with Phil's appreciation of the medical drama, in which a calm doctor suggested a patient would recover if treated with pills, while an excitable doctor wanted to try a tricky operation he was not qualified to perform but which he claimed represented the patient's only hope.

Phil once lived a lively life of the mind as an aspiring member of the English faculty at a large university, but he'd jumped off the tenure track a year ago. At first, he insisted he'd been forced out by trendy

theory and identity politics, but he'd come to accept that his dissertation was late and not brilliant enough. He ended up working on a cemetery grounds crew and earned nearly triple what he would have made teaching on a per-course basis at a community college. After an exhausting yet enlightening summer — he learned how to do everything but operate the backhoe — the funeral home chain that owned the cemetery moved him up to plot sales and then into marketing. In a few days, he would reach the three-month mark in this new job, at which point he stood to gain full-time, permanent status and a twenty percent raise. Now that he had a job in the *real world*, as he once called it, he had plenty of time to sit around in the evenings, watching television whenever his son, eight-year-old Nathan, did not seize control of the tube for video games. With this show, Phil usually took an interest in the orchestration of medical professionals' soap operas and bloody messes crashing through emergency-room doors. In some cases, the professionals faced decisions in which either choice contained elements of wrong and right. While admiring these dramatic elements, Phil winced at the implications of his musings. Yes, with the collapse of his long scholarly enterprise, the years of hardship and suffering of fools, he had achieved a new consciousness that would have made him a star academic — he found merit in television!

Halfway through the program, the storm warning expanded to include their county, which only aggravated Phil more, because the weather outside remained calm. Distracted and, at last, resigned, he sought sleep. "I'm packing it in," he said.

"You're going to miss it," Anne said. "Somebody's going to die, or nearly die, and somebody else will get into a heap of trouble." Phil shrugged and waved goodnight.

During the night, the wind came up, and thunder and lightning kept Phil awake. A driving rain drummed on the roof, intensifying with frequent wind gusts. Anne rose and shut the windows. “Sounds pretty bad,” she said when she crawled back under the sheets.

“I don’t think much of anything will happen, do you?” Phil asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s a matter of wind, rain, thunder and lightning — where it hits and how hard. Who could possibly say?”

The wind built to a howl, and hail strafed the windows, which did give Phil pause. He thought Nathan would plod whiningly into their bedroom, trying to disguise his fear of thunder with some other complaint. But Nathan did not appear. Lately he seemed to be growing up a little. He had taken to calling everything *stupid* and frequently asking *Do I have to?* These thoughts comforted Phil as he drifted in and out of sleep through the tumultuous night.

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Phil awoke to find branches, leaves, and assorted debris cluttering lawns in the neighborhood. He surveyed his property and found a few twigs here and there, but his roof and his trees remained intact. In the back yard, he looked up into the great side-by-side maples. They looked sound, too. The lack of damage relieved Phil; cleanup always wasted so much time. He did notice a disorganized clot of branches and some peeling bark in one of the maples, but he dismissed the apparent mess as nothing more than a temporary windblown tangle.

His wife poked her head out the back door, and Phil said, “I told you nothing would happen.”

Midway through her morning sequence, she had her wet hair wrapped in a towel. “How’d you get so lucky?” she said.

The previous year, when Phil went to work in the cemetery, Anne scrambled to find a job with benefits and landed one in the accounts receivable department of a cell-phone startup. Despite the hectic schedule, she'd been happier ever since: she didn't exactly approve of Phil mowing lawns and filling in graves, but at least he'd freed himself from the university, and now they had two substantial paychecks and fewer worries. Nathan even liked the few hours of day care they had to arrange for him. In this light, Anne's question took Phil aback. It sounded more like the old Anne, doubting and, at times, spiteful. "What do you mean *I got lucky?*" he asked.

"You're the one who dozes in the face of danger." She looked around, no doubt for neighbors who might see her in her pre-primped state, then ventured into the back yard. He hugged her. She unfurled the towel and shook out her hair, sprinkling Phil. "Our ship comes in this week, right?" she asked.

"I wouldn't go that far," Phil said. True, he would get a big raise contingent upon a favorable review at the end of his three-month *probationary* period, but that money merely would put him at the salary the company promised when it promoted him. He always thought of the kind of job he had now as impossibly mundane, mediocrity's last resort. It was a letdown from last year, when the cemetery rescued him from the wreckage of his hopes. Life at the cemetery — pulling one's own weight, lending a hand, setting goals and accomplishing them as a team — such refreshing concepts. But that cemetery summer now seemed like nothing more than a vaguely recollected dream. Nowadays, he had to control himself at work so as not to snicker at the abysmally absurd corporate group-think he faced every day — differing only in content from the

oppression of faculty politics! “It’s not that big of a deal,” he said.

“It’s more money than we’ve ever had,” she said. “I say we celebrate. Long live the funeral factory!” They kissed, and, still standing, Phil wrapped a leg around Anne’s leg, and Anne curled her free calf around Phil’s unoccupied thigh — a relatively new pose that Phil traced to Anne’s newfound contentment.

Nathan appeared at the door, giggling. “Why do you do that if I can’t watch it on TV?” he asked.

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That evening, Phil arrived home and found Anne playing with the cats in the back yard, encouraging them to jump for a string she twirled from the end of a flexible wand. She spotted Phil through a window and beckoned for him. Still carrying his casket catalogs and strategy binders, he stepped out to the patio. Anne looked up into the maples and pointed. “What’s that?” she asked.

“What?” He squinted in the direction she was pointing.

“It’s a branch,” she said. “It’s broken off, and it’s stuck up there, all tangled in the trees. It’s a really big branch.”

Phil kept looking and at last recognized the branch in question. Halfway up one of the maples, maybe thirty feet up, a long, thick limb had split off from the trunk. It dangled by a flimsy length of splintered wood, and the other end of the limb had fallen into the branches of the neighboring maple. It was, indeed, a big limb, maybe twenty feet long and about eight inches in diameter at its thickest. But it remained stuck up there, high off the ground. “Well, that’s fortunate,” Phil said. “As long as it’s up there, it can stay up there.”

“But what happens when it falls?” she asked. “It probably weighs a

ton.”

“Nothing will happen. It’s not hanging over the house or the patio. A tree surgeon would cost an arm and a leg.”

“So would medical and legal bills if that big branch fell on a person.” She had her hands on her hips. Silence persisted between them. She took a deep breath and said, “You need to call somebody.”

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The next evening, Phil arrived home and found, to his annoyance, Nathan in the back yard kicking a soccer ball against the foundation of the house.

“How many times have I told you not to do that?” Phil asked.

“But it’s so easy,” Nathan said. “The ball bounces right back to me.”

“You might put out a window or dent the siding.”

“No, I won’t. I shoot at the stone part. It helps me keep my shots low.”

Phil pointed out several smudges and dents in the old aluminum siding. “Looks to me like you shot a little high a few times.”

“But most of the time I shoot low.”

“How about not shooting there at all?”

“Aw, shit.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Aw.”

“How about I play goalie for you — in the middle of the yard.”

“Hell, no.”

“Hey, I’m warning you,” Phil said as his son stalked off. Phil considered punishing him for swearing, but that would only lead to a

scene in which Nathan would commit further infractions. Where would it end?

Anne tapped Phil on the shoulder. “Did you call somebody about the tree?” she asked. She apparently had seen the confrontation but didn’t care about it as much as she cared about the tree.

“Not yet.”

She raised her hand as if to make an argument, then let it fall weakly to her side. “I’ve got to tell you, you’re behind the curve here. When you were teaching, you never had time for anything; or, if you had the time, we had no money. Now we’ve got a little of both. I’m telling you: We can afford to call somebody. So, call, OK?”

“When it falls, I’ll rent a chain saw and cut it into firewood.”

“A chain saw? You’d decapitate yourself!” She strode to the twinned maples and positioned herself beneath the precarious limb. She looked up, spread her arms, then looked over to Phil. “How would you feel if this branch crashed to earth and killed your dear, loving wife?” She fell to the ground and lay flat on her back, arms and legs akimbo, pretending to be dead.

“Oh, come on,” he said. She always did this to him, planted seeds of doubt.

“You know something?” she asked, pointing upward and tracing something in the air. “This branch really isn’t all that far from the patio, which really isn’t all that far from the house, as you can plainly see. Not to mention the cable TV line and the phone line. If the branch fell, it wouldn’t necessarily fall straight down. It would definitely bounce off the limbs in its path — this way and that, like a ball bouncing in one of those old pinball machines.” She pointed to the various branches off which the

would-be severed limb might bounce. “I hate to tell you, but it might even hit the house. Or, it could fall straight down and hit someone standing directly below.”

“Get away from there.”

“Why? What could happen?”

Nathan ran over to his mother and flopped down next to her. He said, “Look, Dad. I’m dead, too! Are you happy now?”

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That night, the wind came up again. No storm developed, but gusts occasionally rustled the trees loudly enough to waken Phil. He envisioned people he didn’t particularly like — the faculty bastards he liked to blame for his academic demise, his new boss of corpse capitalism, the bratty neighbor kid — each of them running, one by one, under the maple tree as the terrible limb repeatedly fell and squashed its victim. Phil entertained himself with this parade until he decided his thoughts were a little warped, even for him. If the branch fell, would it fall on the house as Anne warned? No, that seemed rather unlikely. Yet it might take out the utility lines. He listened to the wind and estimated its force. He judged the chance of the limb falling that night as unlikely. But eventually, it would surely fall.

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The next morning, Phil rose late, hurried through his routine, and rushed out the door. Later, in the middle of a long, boring meeting about the customer service implications of standardization of bereavement packages, it occurred to him that he had not called the tree surgeon. He made a mental note to do so as soon as the meeting ended. But, immediately upon adjournment, he rushed to the bathroom and did not

think again about the tree surgeon until he returned home that evening, too late to call with expectation of reaching anything but a recording. With his feet up on the patio table and his eyes drifting to the split-off, tangled-up limb, he considered calling with hope of leaving a message, but then Anne called to say she'd be late. Phil responded by swinging into action to prepare dinner for her arrival, and he did not think about the tree surgeon again until his head hit the pillow.

As he grumbled toward sleep, he had to admit that, in some part of his mind, he had been aware of the alarming limb well before Anne pointed it out. Now he felt sure he'd seen the damage on that morning after the storm. Perhaps he had become so accustomed to ignoring problems and putting things off that his mind had dismissed the tree damage before he allowed himself to fully evaluate the matter. Furthermore, he supposed that, if he had indeed fully evaluated the matter, he would have steered himself to the same conclusion: doing nothing represented an acceptable risk. The limb could be dealt with much more easily, efficiently and cheaply once it fell to the ground — if it ever did.

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The next day barely dawned through black billows of storm clouds. Phil had grown accustomed to long sieges of springtime gloom, but this episode accentuated his dread over the menacing branch. Sipping coffee, he stepped out to the patio to view the sinking floats of leaden cloudscape. He squinted through spitting rain and found the limb undulating in unison with attached branches in the breeze, which swelled steadily, reaching what Phil had to admit were rather strong gusts. At the point of greatest wind intensity, the dangling branch oscillated faster than its fixed

neighbors, creaking like a rickety old rocking chair. He wondered if the limb would fall, right then and there. But the wind died back, and, to Phil's misery, the limb remained aloft. He wondered why the scene aggravated him so much.

Phil turned and found Anne in the opening of the back door, staring at him. "Hey, today's the day, is it not?" she asked, running her thumb back and forth across her fingers.

"You should know," Phil said. "You've only had it circled on the calendar for eighty-nine days."

"I've got some surprises for later." She kissed him, and they flexed into their newfound pose, and she kissed him extra hard, with special emphasis of tongue, surely to suggest the nature of the surprises she planned. Then he turned her around so he could keep looking at the tree.

Anne pulled away. "It won't fall unless you stop watching it," she said. "Why are you making it into such an ordeal?" Before he could think of anything to say, she went inside.

"What about Nathan?" he asked. "I mean tonight, with the surprises and all."

Anne sighed. "That can be something for you to worry about all day." She gathered her purse, sack lunch, keys, and umbrella, and herded Nathan toward the garage.

After his wife and son departed, Phil considered the trunk of the wounded tree. He still felt the sting of Anne's *worry all day* comment. He took pride in his critical thinking skills; he didn't *worry*. He eyeballed the distance from the ground to the first fork of the tree trunk. Phil owned an extension ladder he used twice a year to clean the gutters. The ladder, by his estimation, would reach nearly to that fork. One foothold higher, the

tree forked again. Above that point, many small branches suggested footholds and handholds, leading to the affected limb a few shinnies away. As he had already established days ago, the limb in question had split most of the way off, so the remaining wood to be sawed represented a fairly manageable job. He could deal with that damn branch himself. He could, and he would.

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Later that day, Phil's boss met him in the hall and asked Phil whether he'd checked his pay stub. Phil nodded, and his boss gave him a thumbs-up and went on his way. So, this emergence from *probation* amounted to no more than a stale gesture, Phil assessed. In a small way, he felt let down; and yet, what did he expect, some silly certificate? champagne? No, he felt grateful that this rite of passage did not include, say, a drearily intense session of prioritizing and goal-setting. In another way, he felt vindicated. He was right and Anne was wrong: It was not a big deal.

All day long, Phil's mind drifted toward home, toward the backyard. By mid-afternoon, something reached critical mass in his throbbing temples, and he left work early. Back home, he emptied his pockets on the kitchen table. He fetched the extension ladder and the small, dull saw that hung on a nail in the garage, and headed out back. He could have borrowed better tools from the cemetery. Last year, the whole crew would have come over to help, in exchange for a twelve-pack. But all that ended the first day Phil showed up wearing a tie to work the phones in the air conditioning. No, he was on his own now. He took off his tie and passed it through the handle of the saw. Then he strapped the tie over one shoulder and under the other armpit and tied a knot, creating a holster for

the saw and freeing his hands. He suddenly realized he had forgotten to change his clothes — too bad! There was no turning back now. He carried his equipment to the base of the maple. He extended the ladder as far as it would go and started to climb. When he reached the first fork, the ladder wobbled, but he kept climbing. Tiptoeing on the second-from-top rung, he swung a leg over into the fork, and popping into his mind came the memory of having suffered from a fear of heights years ago. Would it overcome him now? He hoped his sense of purpose would thwart his fear. Resolving not to look down, he moved up to the next fork, out along the thick branch to a point where he could reach the wounded limb above him. Straddling the fat branch and resting his neck against the stump of the broken limb, he untied his tie and drew his saw. When he swiped once back and once forth, generating a modest sprinkling of sawdust, he grasped that the job would require a fair amount of time.

“What on earth?” cried a voice from below — Anne, accompanied by a man in work clothes, carrying a tool with a very long handle.

“I’ll be down in a little while,” Phil said.

“Get down now. I’ve got a professional here.”

“Give me a break.” He began sawing but stopped after a few passes, his shoulder already aching. “What did you call him for?”

“It was one of my surprises.” She stamped her foot and balled her hands into fists. “You got your raise, I see,” she said, waving his crumpled stub, “and now you’re trying to kill yourself.”

“I’m not afraid. I thought I would be afraid, but I’m not, all that much,” he said. “Stand clear!”

“Hold on up there,” the professional said. He extended his hand upward. He wasn’t pointing; he wasn’t exactly beckoning. He was

reaching out to Phil in a gentle, cautious manner. "What you're doing ain't advisable," he said.

"I'm fine," Phil said. He resumed sawing.

"If you was to come down outta that tree, I sure would be happy to get up there with my tools and fix you right up."

Phil maintained the continuous motion of his work. "Don't worry." He hoped that if he demonstrated dedication and control, those below would back off.

Anne glanced up and down, churning where she stood, muttering, "Please, please, please."

"For one thing, sir," the professional said, "it don't look like you puzzled out what that limb's fixing to do once you saw it off. You need to study that through before you cut. I got ropes and things to bring it down easy. The way you're going about it ain't exactly advisable."

Phil said nothing. His arm hurt, so he switched hands and resumed sawing. He quickly found he couldn't saw very well lefthanded, so he switched back and sawed through the pain. He made more progress than he expected over what seemed like a short period of time. Anne and the professional moved away, and she stopped muttering "please" and started muttering "damn fool" and "stupid bastard."

"It's coming," Phil called down. His arm and shoulder burned with liquid pain, but somehow he ignored it even as he felt it. Suddenly the limb cracked and peeled and swung free. The long-awaited moment took Phil by surprise, such that he could not move out of the way as the limb fell toward him in his perch directly below it. As the limb fell, the jagged end grazed Phil's cheek. It landed with a loud thud, another event that took him by surprise. At first he dismissed his injury as minor, like a cat

scratch. Then it started to sting, and blood dripped down his chin and floated toward the lawn in droplets that broke into spray. Still, he'd get over it, he thought; the wound couldn't be that big of a deal.

Anne ran over and looked up at him. "You're hurt. Don't tell me you're not."

"I did it!" Phil shouted.

She stepped back to avoid the blood drip. "You idiot!"

"That sure is a big ol' limb," the professional said, peering up at Phil. "You might want to have that cut looked at."

"It's nothing," Phil said. He touched the scrapes, and they hurt.

Phil started thinking about the possibilities inherent in the moment. The thought of coming down began to rattle him. Backing down the ladder would require him to step where he couldn't see. He probably would get scared, and he wanted the professional out of the way when that happened. "You haul brush, right?" Phil asked.

"Yeah. So?"

"Great. As long as you're here, we've got quite a pile of debris over there behind those shrubs." Phil had been wanting to get rid of that pile for months. However, the professional did not go to work on the pile. He kept watching Phil.

Anne approached the downed limb and tried to kick it with the heel of her flat shoe. It didn't move. She craned her neck and stared at Phil. She was huffing. "Please get your ass down here," she said.

The professional came over and said, "I'll hold the ladder so you don't break your neck." Phil took heart at this offer. His chest constricted as he lurched backwards and down to find the first foothold on the ladder. The professional climbed up and steadied Phil's buttocks during the

descent. Phil did not appreciate the gesture, but, from another perspective, he felt thankful.

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Phil sat in a patio chair and palmed his bleeding face while the professional used a power saw to divide the big branch into sections. Anne brought out a first-aid kit and a dish of ice. “See if this stuff will help,” she said, letting the kit crash to the table. “You probably need stitches, though. At least we can meet the co-pay without any problem.” She flipped his pay stub onto the table like a card in a poker game. The professional finished sawing and began carrying off the sections two at a time. Anne shook her head in disgust. “But you blew your other surprise. I arranged for Nathan to spend the evening at Paula’s,” she said, referring to their neighbor across the street, whose son, Caleb, was Nathan’s age. “We’ll have the whole house to ourselves for the first time in ages,” she said ruefully, slapping her hands against her thighs. “But now this! I’ll round him up and get him over there before he sees you in your condition.”

“Fine.”

The professional now went to work on the debris pile, one armload at a time, trip after trip. Phil rarely sat around while another person toiled, but what other choice did he have? His stinging cheek wound turned into something of an ache. He pressed ice cubes against his cheek and waited for the ice to produce its effect, whatever that would be, but the treatment only yielded a stream of pinkish dampness that dripped onto the patio concrete.

Bearing another load of sticks, the professional passed by the patio. Phil looked up from his task of trying not to dribble on his clothes. “Tell

you what,” the professional said. “That ice ain’t doing you one bit a good, and I’ll tell you why. Your hand warms it up, and it turns to water on your cheek, and the water only helps the blood keep bleeding. It’s the same deal as how people commit suicide by slicing up their wrists in the bathtub.”

“The ice — that’s my wife’s idea.”

“Don’t matter. Still oughtta get that looked at.”

“Yes, of course,” Phil said. “I just want to assure you I’m not trying to commit suicide. Whatever it is, it’s not that.” But the professional already had moved on, leaving Phil alone to enjoy his own quip.

Anne reappeared. “Have you seen Nathan?”

“No,” he said. She stood over him, hands on hips, breathing loudly, making a fine display of her aggravation. “Come on, lighten up,” he said. “I got an idea in my head, and I made it happen. Nothing I’ve done lately can beat this.”

“It could have been a lot worse.” She stepped toward him, then stepped back. “I just don’t want to lose everything we’ve gained in the past year, all because of you and your screwy ideas.”

“A little scratch is a small price to pay.”

“I should let you bleed to death out here.”

“Hey, if you brought out a little more ice, I think that could be arranged.” As soon as Phil made this remark, he realized it was not the best choice of words for the moment, and, worse, it lacked context.

She looked closer at his face and grimaced. “That’s it. We’re going to the ER.”

He fully expected some severe ugliness to erupt between them, but then Nathan came around the side yard into the back with Caleb.

“Whassup?” Nathan asked. Phil didn’t try to hide anything. What was there to hide? He was sick of trying to stop his ever-trickling flow of blood. He simply faced the boys and bled.

“Wow, Mr. Schilling. That blood looks real,” Caleb said.

“It is real,” Phil said.

“What happened?” Nathan asked.

“I was doing a little tree trimm ng. A branch hit me.”

“Cool!” Caleb said.

“Shut up!” Nathan shouted. He tried to touch his father’s cheek, but Phil leaned away. “It must really hurt,” Nathan said.

“It hurts a little,” Phil said. “It sure does.” Anne slit her eyes. Phil hoped she wouldn’t say anything; he found it easier when she just stood by and fumed.

Phil showed off his face to the boys. They studied it closely.

“There’s a lot of skin that’s not there,” Caleb said.

“Are you gonna be OK, Dad?” Nathan asked.

“Probably,” Phil said. “Don’t let Caleb scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” Nathan said, staring at the patio cement.

Anne stepped forward and steered the boys away by the backs of their necks. “Come on. I’m sending both of you back to Caleb’s while your father and I go to the emergency room.”

“I want to go too!” Nathan said, twisting out of his mother’s grasp.

“No you don’t,” she said. “It will be just a lot of waiting.”

Nathan chewed furiously on his lower lip, something he’d started doing when worried or dismayed. Phil quickly dried his hands on his pants and clapped Nathan on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, son. It’s just a little blood. Stuff like this happens when you’re having too much fun.”

He kept his hand in place, willing Nathan's jaws to stop working. At last, the boy did relax. I've got the magic touch today, Phil thought.

"Can I go, too, Dad?" Nathan asked. "We'd all go if I had to go to the ER."

Phil looked to Anne, who shook her head vehemently. He shrugged and reached for the first-aid kit and looked for some cotton, but he didn't find any. He pressed his pay stub against his cheek. The sturdy, smooth document stock failed to sop up blood, but it would have to do for now. He withdrew his hand, and the pay stub stayed stuck to his cheek. It worked as a useful tool, eliciting a smile from Nathan and a fiery stare from Anne. "Come on," he said, hugging his son and reaching out to Anne. "Let's make it a family outing."