

The Tree House - Lois Lowry

The Tree House

by Lois Lowry

illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman



It was a terrific tree house. *Better* than terrific: It was a marvelous, magnificent, one-of-a-kind tree house, with wooden walls painted bright blue. It had two windows, with red shutters on each, and a yellow door with two shiny brass hinges and a small brass bell that rang when you pulled a string. There was a little porch where you could sit with your legs dangling.

Inside were a table, a chair, a small rug with fringe on each end, and two fat pillows so that you could lie on the rug and read.

You reached it by climbing a ladder—a ladder to the best tree house ever. And it belonged to Chrissy.

“It’s all mine, isn’t it?” she had asked her grandfather after he built the house for her. “Just mine, and nobody else’s?”

Grandpa was washing his paintbrush. He nodded. “I built it just for you,” he said.

So Chrissy used her markers and made a sign. CHRISSEY’S HOUSE, the sign said. KEEP OUT! She tacked it to the door. Then she took her favorite books into the tree house, curled up on the pillows, and began to read.

“Chrissy?” The voice came from the next yard, from just across the fence.

Chrissy got up and looked through the tree house window. “Hi, Leah,” she said to the girl who lived next door. “How do you like my tree house, now that it’s all done?”

“It’s beautiful,” Leah said. “What do you have inside?”

“A table and two chairs and a rug and some pillows,” Chrissy told her. “And some secret stuff,” she added, though she didn’t have secret stuff, really. She *planned* to.

“Can I come up and see?” Leah asked.

“No,” Chrissy said. “It’s just for me. That’s why I made the sign.”

Leah stood silently for a moment. Then she said, "I hate you, Chrissy."

"I hate you, too," Chrissy replied. She went back to the pillows and opened her book again.

A short time later, she heard voices in the next yard. She peered through her window and saw that Leah's father was there with Leah. They had a wheelbarrow full of old boards, and a jar of nails. As Chrissy watched from her window, she saw Leah's father prop an old ladder against the trunk of the tree on the other side of the fence. Then, after he jiggled the ladder and made certain it was steady, he climbed up, carrying a board, and began to nail it into place where the branches came together.

He was making Leah a tree house. Chrissy laughed to herself. Leah's father was at home because he had lost his job. She knew they didn't have extra money now for things like paint and brass hinges. And Leah's tree house would never be as good as hers. Never in a million years. Chrissy went back to her book and turned the pages while the hammering continued.

That evening, after supper, Chrissy stood beside the fence and looked up at Leah's finished house. She laughed aloud.

It had taken a week for Grandpa to finish building her beautiful tree house. Grandpa had used new wooden boards from the lumberyard. But Leah's had been completed in a day, and Chrissy could see that it was made from the stack of old

weathered boards.
Only one board was
the tree house.

The house had
windows, like Leah's.
The boards were
pieces of old wood.

Even Leah's house
with its new paint
was the same.

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weathered boards that had been in the corner of Leah's yard. Only one board remained there now; the others had become the tree house.

The house had walls and a porch and a door and two windows, but it had no shutters and no paint and no door bell. The boards were crooked, and the roof had holes where the pieces of wood didn't quite meet.

Even the sign wasn't as good, because Leah had done hers with crayons instead of marking pens. But its message was the same. LEAH'S HOUSE, it said. KEEP OUT.

Leah's head appeared in the window of her tree house.

"Your house is not as nice as mine," Chrissy told her.

"Not on the outside," Leah said. "But inside, it's better."

Chrissy wondered what Leah had inside her tree house. But she didn't ask.

For several days the two girls didn't speak to each other. They sat alone in their tree houses. By the fourth day, Chrissy had finished all her books and had read some of them twice. She went to her window and called across the fence to Leah.

"Do you have any books I can borrow?" she asked, when Leah's head appeared.

"No. Our car's broken so we can't go to the library."

"You don't have any books at *all*?"

Leah shook her head.

Chrissy sat back down. She wondered what it would be

like to be in a tree house with no books at all. She wondered what Leah was doing in there.

Finally she called across the fence again. "Would you like to borrow some of mine?" she asked. And Leah said yes.

So Chrissy climbed down, stood at the fence, and handed two books over to Leah, who had climbed down her ladder, too.

"I have some bananas," Leah told her. "Do you want one?" Chrissy nodded, and Leah climbed up and returned with a banana to pass across the fence.

Back in her own tree house, Chrissy peeled and ate the banana. Then she called to Leah again.

"Do you have a wastebasket in your house? I don't want to mess up my carpeting with this banana peel."

Leah, looking through her window, nodded. So Chrissy climbed down, and Leah climbed down, and Chrissy handed the banana peel across the fence.

Both girls climbed back into their houses. Chrissy sat alone and admired her fringed rug for a moment, then leafed through her books again, wondering what Leah was doing. She called through her window.

"Leah?"

Leah looked out. "What?"

"I could come visit you if you want," Chrissy said.

Leah didn't answer.

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"Or you could come visit me," Chrissy added.

"Your sign says KEEP OUT," Leah pointed out. "So does mine."

"Well," Chrissy suggested, "we could change them."

Leah nodded. Each girl removed her sign and crossed out the words KEEP OUT. They wrote WELCOME instead. They rehung their signs.

"You know what, Chrissy?" Leah said. "We could use that wide board in the corner of my yard. It would go from your porch to my porch, over the top of the fence. Then we could visit each other by walking across the board."

Chrissy eyed the distance and the height. "What if we fell?"

"It's not very high," Leah pointed out. "And if we each came out halfway and held hands, we could help each other across."

They climbed down their ladders. The wide board was heavy, but when each girl took an end they were able to lift it into place. In a few minutes they had made a bridge between the houses, over the top of the fence.

Chrissy stepped from her tree house porch onto the wide board, reached for Leah's waiting hand, and walked across. She entered Leah's tree house and looked around.

There was no rug, and the only books were her own that Leah had borrowed. But there was a bowl of fruit, a wastebasket, and curtains at the windows. The walls were covered

with portraits of beautiful women—the most beautiful women Chrissy had ever seen.

“I like your art collection, Leah,” Chrissy said.

“They’re left over from where my mom works,” Leah explained. “She works at a beauty parlor, and they get pictures of all the new hairstyles. These are last year’s.”

“You can’t tell. They look brand new.”

“My house isn’t as nice as yours,” Leah added. “I said it was better inside, but it isn’t, really.”

“I don’t really have carpeting,” Chrissy admitted. “Only an old rug. And I don’t have curtains, or a single picture on my walls.”

“I could let you have one of my pictures. Two, even. You can have the blonde shag and the auburn blunt cut.”

“My grandpa had paint left over. He could paint the outside of your house so we’d match. But I’m afraid we don’t have another door bell.”

“Now that my sign says WELCOME, I don’t think I need a door bell,” Leah said.

“I don’t really hate you, Leah,” Chrissy said.

“I don’t really hate you, either,” Leah replied.

They sat together on Leah’s porch and looked around happily.

“What do you think is the best part of a tree house, Chrissy?” Leah asked.

Chrissy thought. She looked over at her own house, with its shutters and brass hinges. She looked around at Leah's, with its bowl of bright apples and its yellow curtains.

"The *very* best part," she said finally, "is the bridge."