Their homes were rooted next-door to each other on the blue-collar side of the neighborhood. The girl and her family had grown in close proximity for the years leading up to the transplantation, but they’d only officially lived in their home for three years going on four. The boy’s mother, however, grew up on their very same street.

It had crept slowly at first. The girl recalled gathering inklings several years back, perhaps as early as fifth grade or junior high. They were alike in character then: fiercely competitive, obstinately independent, acutely intelligent, cultivated by mutual virtue, the careful product of wholesome and modest parents. In the societal cycle of progeny, they were the kind of positive outcome that all parents of high morals hoped to rear. And bookworms. Both raised by teachers, this certainly whetted their gluttony for words, but the majority of the responsibility lay within their own hands, for those were the ones ultimately turning the pages. The boy and the girl were very mental beings in more sense than one, both back then though even more so now.

The girl was able to pinpoint the origin of the spark to a particular carpool on a Saturday morning. After an science fair competition, of all events. She was unable to recall the weather. Her trophy was etched sixth place, his medal thirteenth. Or so she thought she remembered. The details of the following competitions throughout the next two years had been melded together so that no one quite remembered who had won what when. The girl had been so focused, so caught up in numbers and wins, but her detail orientation had abated steadily since that point. Those junior high days were lazy summer afternoons, and the separation of two years made the details run together like the hues of a watercolored painting left out in the rain. Like blood diluted by water from a cut in the shower.

That also was the day on which the existence of the tree was first evident. Situated between their homes, at this point it was not a sapling, as would have been expected, but mature. Though the tree would require more growth in order to be considered a respected and sage member of the natural neighborhood, the inception of its presence was established on the Saturday morning of disregarded weather. However, neither the boy nor the girl had ever noticed it before.

By the time high school washed ashore, it was clearly made of glass. The boy’s version, a presumption made by the girl, had already been eroded by the saltwater’s natural corrosiveness, but the leaves on the tree between their houses crowded and obstructed her view. Perhaps, during this time, she too resembled beach glass on the outside, but in actuality, her fragmented pieces drew blood. At times she felt like a beached whale, whether the gasping and incessant struggle for air remained figurative or literal depended upon the particular day. But this feeling was keenly foreign and fiercely wrong, as the girl had always been a comfortable fish within her safe small pond. But now she had cut her foot on this beached broken bottle, and when she went to examine the wound, her hands re-stained the sand with same color elicited by her injured foot. Though saltwater initially burns, it quickens the scar. This lesson she was skeptical to accept. The following summer allowed time for the girl to reestablish peace, but she regained her courage and curiosity to search for beach glass with a renewed sense of caution.

The boy, however, remained unaware of her near coastal casualty. But it was not his fault. The leaves and branches between their houses were to blame. The girl sensed that the boy’s relationship with the sea was in vast opposition to her own oceanic connotation. Why, then, had she been shown the cruelty within the wave’s wake and he the seaside sunset? No answer was to be found in the tree. She observed his experience with green and seasick envy, but she was far from bitter. His bottle had cracked as evenly as broken glass allows, and it drifted apart without the seven stages of grief attached to separation. Or so she thought.
Perhaps the cause of these differences lay within the boy’s careless distracted hours, his procrastination, or stress-free nights. Perhaps it was because he went to bed too late, mind devoid of worry, watched too much TV, and didn’t care as much as he should. Maybe it was because the teacher the girl despised was his absolute favorite, another feat which her mind refused to conform into comprehension. The girl fervently envied his laziness. This couldn’t possibly be the secret to the creation of beach glass— not when she was the one who meticulously followed the rules. Not when he was the one to take shortcuts. His instruction manual to high school was buried under his bed amid books on ocean ecology, though he continued to excel without its assistance. But the girl was naive enough to overlook nature’s proclivity to sidestep the law. Nature was no novice at finding loopholes. Nevertheless, the boy may have created beach glass first, but as the girl began to catch up, their mutual transparency transcended into a colorful, rounded, and solidly individualistic beauty.

The tired tide rolled in as sophomore year approached. It was the time of year when summer and autumn came together to create an divine liminality of weather. They’d been in school long enough that it was habitual, but each day continued to feel progressively surreal. As school grew into a habit, she too developed one.

She began studying him. It was intended in the most admirable of ways, but it soon became an infatuating routine. She memorized his heinous posture, his damaged cuticles, the way he crossed his legs and bounced his left foot during tests. She relished in the fact that they were both employed in the business of finger destruction. He bit his nails during class and picked incessantly at his cuticles, forever critiquing over the rim of his askew glasses. Meanwhile, the girl tugged at the skin adjacent to her fingernails until it peeled and bled. Though these little habits were both subconscious and trivial, the girl very much enjoyed such nuances.

It took all her might to avoid watching his lips. She’d been aware of their cherubic quality for quite some time now, but she worried if she glimpsed them too often she’d either be driven mad or throw herself at him. She secretly vowed to surrender her sanity to him given the chance.

He played the piano and aspired to be a marine biologist. He swore he’d never be a medical doctor, his argument being that saving lives would only augment the population, which would, of course, hasten the arrival of the apocalypse. This would leave him panicked and guilt-stricken for causing the end of life as we know it. However, the girl knew the real reason he wouldn’t be an MD: for he abhorred blood and innards to the point of sickness. She knew he was close with his mother, fought with his brothers, and admired his older sister more than anyone. She didn’t need to squint through the leaves and branches to see this, for it was plain as day.

On the first day of school, sophomore year, the girl was eavesdropping. She heard him proclaim that his most cherished summer event was reading a particular book. Eleven days later she immersed herself in the same pages. She soaked each word, intrigued that his eyes had stumbled upon the very same arrangement of twenty-six letters. She found pieces of him tucked within the margins. Months later, she was still turning pages but at a topic pace. It was not a boring read in the least: in fact, she found it interesting independent of his recommendation. She could not, however, bring herself to reach its conclusion.

Her favorite class of the day was physics. Though science was not her favorite subject, she valued the seating arrangement. Assigned seats were unheard of, yet each student occupied the same seat each day tacitly. The girl sat on the edge of a row, and the boy sat nearby though not adjacent. They sat among a band of friends, a group whose humor and knowledge was highly unprecedented. The conversations they’d have would induce fits of laughter, but, specifically, they boy and the girl were forever teasing each other. The most prized part of these banters were the boy’s side glances, smirks, his words. He would make the girl smile so hard. Only a smile prompted by sucking on a piece of dangerously sweet candy could affect her in the same way. She would smile until her eyes squinted so,
until all teeth were exposed, until she would quake with joy. They would hold eye contact with restricted smiles until one of them looked away and the other surrendered their teeth.

One autumn afternoon beheld a particularly formidable set of physics problems. The girl wished to avoid asking the boy for help at all costs because she detested nothing more than her mind in subordination to his. The weather was so pristineley gorgeous and influential that fall afternoon, so the girl went upstairs into her bedroom and opened her window. As the tree’s branches and leaves allowed, she could see that his window was also cracked to allow the sweet autumn breeze. The girl peered out of her own window, as the leaves rustled in the wind; his curtain too blew, and a susurrous was likewise produced in his room. She inhaled.

“Albert!” she sang melodically, backed by false bravery. Her voice carried through the tree and across to his open window. After exactly seven lengthy seconds, the curtain receded, and his face materialized at the window. His glasses were slightly off balance. She asked her physics problem, and he quickly explained from the other side of the tree. She told him she understood, though, in fact, she did not. Later that night she requested further help from the others with whom she sat. That night, asleep, both the boy and the girl awoke to the sound of trains.

Five days later she reached to turn out her lamp, but a clack at her window fueled hesitation.

“Charlotte!” he called. “Charlotte!” She peeped her head out trying, with difficulty, not to smile. He desired her input on an essay. It was 11:23 PM, and the girl was exhausted, but she soon found a second wind through the common rustle of the leaves between their homes. They each stuck an arm out of each window, and not only were their hands unable to abridge the distance with their insufficient appendages, but the tree also stood in their way.

The girl insisted they both climb out. If he sat in the tree, then surely he could reach her. But his resistance to this proposition provoked a low but rising disappointment in the girl. For she knew he was not afraid of heights.

The following weekend was devoted to pruning and painting. The boy’s house was straddled with three ladders and primed in white paint. His father and mother and little brother contributed, but his only contribution was holding the bottom of the ladder steady; however, his nose remained in a book, his responsibility and respect for safety precautions diluted. In order to paint, the tree had to be trimmed, so now when she looked out her window, there were no longer as many leaves obstructing her view.

Soon after, they began talking nonstop. Their habit of colloquy was not rooted in tree-sitting but over words in type. It would have been blasphemous to deem it “texting,” for the strings of paragraphs they typed out for each other carried a heightened gravity absent from normal conversation. Small talk was unheard of and loathed by the both of them. The boy and girl perused an anoply of discussion points including music, emotion, religion, poetry, and existentialism. She begged for audible conversation: his words in print only occasionally retained the quality of his voice, but his introversion prevented him from stepping out of his window. No matter how many times she lapped repeatedly with the request, the boy receded, refusing to sit in the tree with her. Once the exchange of words through typing dissolved, they still talked in school, and though the girl still felt a sense of connection, it was muted by a new layer of frustration and dismay. Low tide, perhaps.

The girl, however, continued to plead with the tree. She hoped that its branches might sweep into the boy’s room and pull him out onto its trunk. The boy’s comfortability persisted at a constant degree, but he denied the tree its rightful recognition.

Two more years passed, and as letters from colleges collected in each of their mailboxes, the leaves from the tree compiled themselves upon the ground. Their conversations had been curtailed, trickling to a close, as both the boy and the girl went about their days with separate mindsets. They each began school at different universities, and during autumn break the girl came home to two foreign cars in the driveway next-door.
Three people made their way down the sidewalk of the boy’s house. A woman in a skirt brandishing a clipboard followed by a young couple holding hands. The girl caught vague musings of their conversations. Yes, the couple approved of the size of the master bedroom, but would the kitchen countertops suffice?

“The only thing I find strange,” the husband offered, “is the lack of shade, how bare the yard is. Neither this house nor the one next-door have a single tree planted.”

“Why look—” the wife agreed, “Isn’t that most peculiar… there’s not so much as a stump.”

As these words fell upon the ears of the girl, she was overcome with a wave of conclusion. The subsequent silence that ensued swept her in a great, gentle exhalation.