



The man who ate sunlight

By Stephen Gauer

One day in late April, in his fiftieth year, Macklin was laid off by the software company he worked for, and rather than look for another job he decided to take the summer off. He wasn't unhappy with the idea of work; he loved the way it gave shape and meaning to a day, to a week, to a year, but the prospect of re-inventing himself yet again, after seven careers in 28 years, was depressing. The undeniable sideways drift of middle-age was beginning to resemble a collision course. But what was he about to hit? He didn't know.

He had no financial worries, thanks to Helen, his wife, who handled all of the money in the household and like a magician made it grow and multiply. If he wanted to, he could spend the entire summer at home and go back to work in the fall. He would paint the house, tend the

garden, prune the fruit trees, build a new patio, and he was sure the fresh air and exercise would be good for him. "Therapeutic" was how he described it to Helen.

"You're right," she said. "And much cheaper than seeing a shrink."

He caught himself staring at her. Lately he'd been finding it harder and harder to hear her, to remember things she said or asked him to do. Middle age seemed to be a constant reminder of the sheer familiarity of everything in his life and how that familiarity could render things invisible. If you looked at something a thousand times, could you still see it clearly?

May was unusually warm, so Macklin decided his first project would be repainting the house. He started early in the morning, almost at first light, the sky a fresh and unspoiled blue above him. At mid-day he took long breaks and ate a sandwich and an apple in the shade of the pear tree in the backyard. He took his time and worked slowly and carefully, finishing the eavestroughs and then moving on to the windows, trim and doors. The weather stayed warm and dry. He quickly grew accustomed to spending the entire day outdoors.

One morning at breakfast, Helen told him that her father was going into the hospital for an operation. Her parents lived half a day away, in a small town in northern Ontario. "Mom is in a complete state, of course," Helen said. "I think I should be there."

They agreed she would take the car and leave at the end of the week. She'd already arranged with her office to have three weeks off. "You do remember me telling you about this last month, don't you?" she said.

"Of course," he lied.

Helen looked at him. "Should I be worried about you?" she asked.

He was pruning the apple tree a week later when the accident happened. He was standing on the small ladder, reaching up and over to trim a couple of top shoots when the ladder shifted suddenly and he lost his balance. He dropped the pruning loppers at once and reached out by instinct to grab onto the tree but his hand missed the branch and instead impaled itself on a newly pruned and very sharp stub. Macklin swore just once, quickly and loudly, then jerked his hand and broke the stub, leaving a portion of it still embedded in his hand. He went into the kitchen, ran his hand under the running water and then pulled the piece of tree stub out of his palm. He held his hand under the cold water until it began to feel numb, then pulled it away and quickly pressed the dish cloth against it. He found a package of bandages in the hall closet and covered the wound with a big oval of tan-coloured plastic that looked just like skin.

The next morning, when he was shaving, he noticed a large blotch the colour of dark chocolate near his elbow, connecting to a series of radiating lines the same colour, like a web taking shape on his skin. By the end of the day his entire arm was a dark, dark brown. He called the doctor's office at once and made an appointment to see him. The doctor was intrigued. He said he'd never seen anything quite like it before.

"I'll have to refer you to a specialist," he said rather cheerfully. He began to write on a pad of blue paper. "You're not dying."

"That's encouraging," Macklin said.

"My friend is the best dermatologist in the city," the doctor said. "He's worth waiting for." The doctor carefully pulled the top sheet off the

blue pad, as though performing a delicate operation, and handed it to Macklin.

That night he inspected the rash in the mirror, and saw that it was not spreading. In two days he would see the dermatologist, and then everything would be fine. He wasn't dying. He would phone Helen and have news for her, something to break the crushing weight of sameness.

The next day, the sun was so hot he put on his bathing suit after lunch and ran through the sprinkler, just like a kid. He did this a couple of times and each time he ran through the icy water he yelled out "Yow" and "Yippee" because it felt so good.

But there was work to do so he put his shoes back on and picked up the shovel and stepped into the big flowerbed that took up most of the southeast corner of the yard. He wanted to move the butterfly bush further away from the fence because it had grown too quickly and was crowding out some of the other plants. He took the shovel and dug a hole closer to the edge of the bed. Then, for some reason, he dug a second hole right beside it. Then he kicked off his shoes and planted a foot in each hole. He leaned over and carefully placed the shovel on the grass, then covered his feet with soil.

You must believe that when he did this it seemed the most sensible and most natural thing in the world to do. When his feet disappeared from view, he straightened up and in that moment of straightening up his body was re-aligned and re-configured in a new and frightening way and he knew that he would never bend over again. His knees locked. His waist solidified. His arms slowly rose towards the sky, dropping any sense of weight or strain, and remained fixed in position even though he tried with all his remaining strength to pull them back down to his sides. His head seemed to sink down into his neck. The

forms and shapes of the world that minutes before had still been so familiar had now disappeared. When he tried to open his mouth to scream, he discovered he had no lips. As he tried to swallow, he felt a tiny jet of water move up through his legs into his body, his arms and head. At first, the water was refreshing, then it began to tickle him. He wanted to laugh but couldn't.

Within an hour he'd grown leaves and branches, his skin had turned to bark, and his legs had melded into a single, strong tree trunk. He could hear, with acute intensity, everything going on around him: the yelling, complaining and boasting of birds, the muted explosions of distant traffic on main streets, the mongrel chatter of talk show hosts on the television and radio sets in his neighbours' houses, the choir-like hum of power lines, the incessant rustling of leaves of every size and thickness and shape, the harsh cries of children, the angry shouts of his neighbours.

The water circulating through his body soothed him. His fears and uncertainties all fell away, as useless now as cars and books and clothes and bottles of beer. His roots sank deeply into the ground, insuring that the tiny jet of water that sustained his life would never be interrupted. As his leaves grew and multiplied that first afternoon, he began to eat sunlight. He knew he would never feel hunger again. He was in perfect equilibrium with the world at last. How long would he live? He had no idea.

Time passed. He heard a car approach, then doors opening and closing. Helen was walking towards him. He could hear the sound of each moving limb, the scrape of fabric against skin, the pinning of blades of grass under the soles of her shoes, her heavy human breathing. She stopped. He felt a tug at the base of his trunk. He remembered his red

swim suit. Her fingers brushed the earth from the fabric. She stood up again and placed a hand on his trunk. Her touch was alive and vibrating with blood against his bark. Then she pulled her hand away and walked into the house. She called his name as she walked from room to room. By midnight, she was pacing the floor. Mackin could smell the fragrant tobacco of her cigarettes.

In the days that followed, Helen called his friends, talked to the neighbours, even phoned his agency to find out if they knew anything about him. No one knew where he was. When she finally called the police, a young woman asked her a dozen questions about her husband and said they would be in touch if they had any information. Macklin wanted to help but could do nothing now. He remembered some emotions. Regret. Remorse. Love. Pity. He tried to feel them but failed. He vaguely remembered the shape of a mouth. But what was the purpose of a mouth?

Helen spent many evenings sitting on the patio smoking. He enjoyed the smell of the tobacco and he enjoyed listening to the many small movements she made with her body. But when she shouted in anger at the neighbour's dog, or her mother on the phone, or the boy she hired to cut the lawn, he wondered why humans had to put up with such difficult and disturbing emotions. The worst sound was her crying, late at night, in the bedroom they had once shared. She sounded like a dying, wounded animal. Macklin strained and struggled to block out the sound but he could not.

When his first fruit appeared in August, he was filled with happiness. His branches were tall and strong, and produced dozens and dozens of apples. Helen came out one morning and picked an apple from a branch and began to eat it. She ate quickly, and the sound of her

chewing created powerful rhythms, like deep and intense music. He wished for lips again.

Suddenly she sucked her breath in. "My god, no," she said. "No! No! No!"

She spoke his name. The question mark hung in the air for a moment, then fell to the ground. She said his name again, this time framed by exclamation marks. She kicked him hard, very hard, in the trunk. He winced with pain. "You bastard," she said. "How could you do this? How could you abandon me?"

She kicked him again and again. The pain was intense because his bark was still young and tender. She grabbed one of his branches and shook it very hard. He was very confused. She'd eaten his fruit and now she understood who he was and why he was. She should be happy for him.

"I should cut you down," she said. "I should cut you down and burn you in the fireplace." Then she began to cry.

She avoided him for days. He waited patiently. He knew that in time she would understand and accept him. One evening she came up to him and placed her hand on one of his branches and said hello and then spoke his name. He was listening so carefully he could hear the soft scraping sound made by loose strands of hair as they moved against the skin of her ear. She spoke very softly, and said that she missed him and loved him but would no longer grieve for him. She said that he was gone and yet still here and that was a contradiction she could not resolve. When she kissed a branch he felt a stirring of something he remembered as desire, but could not remember what desire was.

When late fall arrived, with bullying winds and marathon rains, Macklin's hearing shrank to almost nothing and his consciousness drew

in upon itself. As his leaves began to die, the pulse of oxygen exchange that so intoxicated him began to dwindle, and when the leaves finally fell from his branches, the pulse disappeared completely. He was so groggy he could barely track his own thoughts. He finally fell into a deep slumber.

Months passed. It was soon time to grow again. As his strength returned, Macklin felt a stirring of happiness from somewhere deep inside. This feeling seemed to coat all his cells, lubricating and protecting them.

One day he felt something small and fleshy banging on his trunk.

“DAD,” a voice cried. “CAN I CLIMB THE TREE?”

A boy perhaps? But there was other voices too. He recognized one of them.

“There are three fruit trees,” Helen said.

“I see four,” a man said.

“DAD CAN I CLIMB THE TREE?”

The man went over and pulled his son away from Macklin.

“I like it,” the man said. “My wife will love the garden. And the fruit trees.”

And so the house was sold. Helen hired movers who came and packed everything into boxes. On the last day, she touched his trunk and said I love you. Macklin counted the words. There were three. He repeated them, even though they had no meaning.

The new family was very noisy, especially the small boy and the small girl but Macklin barely noticed because his entire consciousness was now dedicated to growing. The summer was a long, hot one and Macklin grew taller and stronger and produced even more fruit than the

summer before. His branches grew higher and wider, and he hoped the new man knew how to prune.

In the years to come, the small boy would become a larger boy and try to climb Macklin but get only to the first branch before his father would yell out to get down and thank God for that because the boy was ridiculously heavy and poorly coordinated and had no business being in a tree in the first place. The boy would eventually move away, of course, just as Helen had. Humans were impossibly restless. Whenever Macklin thought about this, he sank his roots even deeper, and pushed his branches up towards the sky, and rejoiced that he was a tree.

The Man Who Ate Sunlight won third prize in the 2009 Toronto Star Short Contest.