

## The Tree House

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Billy gripped tightly as he reached for the next wood plank. Each step was nailed into the large oak tree about one foot above the last. But, near the top, they thinned out with gaps left where some of the old, rotting pieces had fallen off.

Billy struggled to the top and pulled himself into the tree house, bringing down a wall of spider webs with his face as he entered. Swatting and spitting the webs away, he glanced around. He had psyched himself up for something big and felt simultaneously relieved and disappointed to find a boring, empty room. No pile of gold, no skeletons, no lavish bed.

He sat down and let his legs swing outside the open doorway, sending tingles of fear up his body like the top of a rollercoaster hill. He spotted Gramps' house through the trees. Every time Billy visited his grandfather, he would go exploring the first chance he had. Gramps lived only a few hours' drive from New York City, but his mossy surroundings felt a world away from Billy's apartment.

It was getting dark earlier, and Billy was surprised to see the sun already starting to set. His stomach grumbled for dinner, confirming that he'd lost track of time. A faded oriental rug sat at the center of the room. The floorboards creaked as Billy stepped to the rug, touching its intricate pattern. It was oddly warm for a rug up in a chilly tree house.

He started to walk across the rug, but suddenly his knees went weak, his stomach flew to the sky, and his scream got lost in his throat. By the time he understood he was falling, that the surrounding blackness wasn't the nighttime air, but the inside of a hollow tree, he had landed.

How Billy didn't break his arms, legs, and neck was a mystery to him, but it felt more like he'd landed on a cloud covered in tufts of grass than on a hard forest floor. His eyes adjusted to the dark, and he slowly rose. As he reached out to touch the bark in front of him, it disappeared.

He was back in the forest, but now it was bathed in a golden light, and the autumn foliage was once again green. Something scurried past, brushing up against Billy's foot. Billy gasped, and the critter stopped. *A chipmunk!* he thought. *Just a normal, adorable chipmunk.* Maybe he'd fallen asleep outside, and the whole tree house thing had just been a strange dream.

The chipmunk turned around and winked. If this was a dream, it was not over. The chipmunk nodded its head toward the right, looking directly at Billy, before scampering off in the same direction. Without thinking, Billy followed the chipmunk between pine trees, under and over fallen trunks, through an archway of leaves, and into a majestic meadow underground.

Billy's new friend joined a group of chipmunks up on a branch. Something poked his hip.

"An elf!" Billy exclaimed, looking wide-eyed at the bearded figure below.

"Excuse me?" the little man asked, pulling down his pointed hat, which had nearly fallen off as he tipped his head up in horror.

"Sorry, that was rude. Hello, I'm Billy."

"And I'm a gnome, not an elf! Can't you see?"

Billy looked at the little man's pointed shoes. They seemed pretty elf-like to him. Then he recalled one of the bedtime stories Gramps used to tell him when he was younger about the people who lived underground. Gnomes lived underground. Elves stayed above ground.

"Right!" Billy said, "You're a gnome. Clearly."

Tiny cheers erupted all around him, and Billy realized he was surrounded by gnomes.

"The name's Gruff," said the gnome, shaking three of Billy's fingers with a strong grip. "Now, we don't have much time. Tie these together," he said, handing Billy a dandelion and bright green leaves with long stems.

Billy tied the flower and leaf stems together, while Gruff and a few other gnomes continued the chain, forming a small circle of flowers and leaves.

"It's ready. Kneel down," Gruff said.

Billy complied, and Gruff placed the crown on his head. Billy still felt clueless, but he was enjoying the mystery of it all.

"Thanks," Billy said. "Now what?"

"Now it's time for you to go. Just know that these flowers will never wilt and these leaves will never crumble. On the days when life feels boring and gray, let this crown be a reminder that the world is full of surprises."

Billy loved his present. As he leaned in to give Gruff a hug, the gnomes knocked him into a pile of leaves. His whole body was sucked into the pile like dust into a vacuum. There was a flash of black, a warm softness hugging his body, and then the feeling of cold, wet leaves beneath him.

He was back in the forest. It had rained, but he was dry. He looked up. This was the tree he had climbed, but there was no ladder, no tree house. Billy stumbled back to Gramps' house, where Gramps was putting dinner on the table.

"You're back!" he smiled, "And just in time for dinner."

Billy scratched his head, realizing the crown was still there. Gramps was staring right at it. His smile widened. "Make sure you don't climb trees in the rain, Billy. It can be very dangerous."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What does Billy do every time he visits his grandfather?
  - A) He visits the tree house.
  - B) He visits gnomes.
  - C) He goes exploring.
  - D) He cooks dinner for his grandfather.
  
2. Where does the beginning of the story take place?
  - A) Billy's apartment in New York City
  - B) a mystical meadow in the middle of the woods
  - C) the inside of a tree house near Gramps' house
  - D) underground, inside a magical tree
  
3. In the passage, the tree house's rotting pieces of wood, spider webs, and a fading rug are described. Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?
  - A) The tree house is old.
  - B) The tree house is magical.
  - C) The tree house is high up in the tree.
  - D) The tree house was built by Gramps.
  
4. Billy feels relieved when he enters the tree house and sees a boring, empty room. What conclusion can be made from this?
  - A) Billy had been in the tree house before.
  - B) Billy was a little scared about what he might find.
  - C) Billy hoped to find something more interesting.
  - D) Billy was convinced that the tree house would be magical.
  
5. What is this story mostly about?
  - A) Billy's disappointment over finding nothing in the tree house
  - B) Billy's eagerness to find treasure
  - C) Billy's adventure in an underground world
  - D) Billy's relationship with his grandfather

6. Read the following sentence: "He was back in the forest, but now it was bathed in a golden light, and the autumn **foliage** was once again green."

As used in the passage, what word could best replace **foliage**?

- A) plant leaves
- B) forest floor
- C) animals
- D) lakes and rivers

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Billy followed a chipmunk into a meadow \_\_\_\_\_ meeting a bearded gnome.

- A) initially
- B) instead
- C) after
- D) before

8. How does Billy return home from the majestic meadow?

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9. What evidence supports the conclusion that Gramps knows about the tree house and magical underground world of the gnomes?

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10. Gruff tells Billy that the crown should "be a reminder that the world if full of surprises." How does the story illustrate the message that the world is full of surprises? Use information from the story to support your answer.

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