

The Tree in the Meadow

Ness sat on a tree branch, high above the ground. She wore some blue jeans that were cut off at the knees, and the rough bark on the branch jabbed into her butt. It didn't seem to bother her, however, and she kicked her legs. Her loose flannel shirt whipped in the breeze and she chewed on a bit of straw, staring at the road below. Her long wavy red hair was tangled and messy, and on top of it she wore a hat made out of grass.

She was preoccupied with her chewing, and every now and then spat onto the road. She would then burst into a bout of humming—some unintelligible song that no one else would recognize, but which sounded perfectly sensible to her. At length she sighed and stopped kicking her legs. She bit off the chewed portion of her straw, spat it out, and began to chomp on the remaining shaft. She began to kick again.

It was then that Mitch reached the tree. She saw him coming but didn't move or speak. He stood at the foot of the tree and stared up at her. The sun was on its way down and Mitch shielded his eyes in order to see her.

"So, he's been waiting for over an hour," he said.

"Meh," she said.

Mitch stood with his hand shielding his eyes. The wind kicked up and he shuddered.

"You know..." he started, but then he grunted. He walked over to the trunk and started to climb. Ness followed him with her eyes as he fumbled up the trunk of the knobby tree. The side of her mouth curled up as he gingerly crept along the branch until he was next to her. Then he straddled the branch and met her eyes. She chanced a grin but quickly recovered and looked away.

"This time yesterday, you were head over heels for him," he said, but Ness made no sign that she even heard him.

He squinted. He scooted closer to her and she stopped kicking her legs. He leaned towards her neck. She didn't move a muscle. He moved his mouth next to her ear and then spoke softly, "Hmmm."

"Stop it," she said with a haltering laugh. Mitch backed up and she finally met eyes with him. Her green eyes were dilated, but they were fierce. Mitch frowned.

"Do you really think that you're the only girl on earth?" he said bitterly. She looked away and began to kick her feet again. "He's been waiting for an hour and you promised to meet him. Now get down there!"

She shrugged.

"Spoiled brat," he said, and he stood up. Her kicking made the branch vibrate ever so much, but Mitch stretched out his arms and balanced himself. He turned around and walked along the branch towards the trunk.

"I just don't like him," she said. Mitch stopped, rested one arm against the trunk and faced her.

"What changed between now and yesterday?"

"Nothing."

"But you swore eternal love to him yesterday."

"I lied."

"And... you don't see anything wrong with this?"

"Stop preaching," she said, and she spat out her straw. She lifted up her bare feet and stood up, easier than Mitch had.

"I can do what I want," she said.

"You're wrong," said Mitch. "Girls like you think that you can get whatever you want because you are pretty, but someday you won't be pretty. People may bend over backwards for you now, but they won't forever."

"Do you really think I'm pretty?" she asked with a smirk. Mitch didn't say anything. She turned towards him and walked along the branch, staring him in

the eyes. He didn't move. When she reached him she quickly embraced him and Mitch had to grab the trunk to keep from falling over.

She brushed his cheek with hers. Her fragrance filled his mind and he closed his eyes. He pictured his brother sitting at the picnic bench with the lunch he prepared, waiting. He quickly turned away from her.

"I'm not a toy," he said.

"Blesh," said Ness, and she pushed away from him. "You boys think that just because a girl is cute and single that she has no reason to deny you, and that she is automatically a prime target. I'm tired of feeling like I have to be with someone."

"That doesn't mean you should lie to people and break promises."

Ness snorted and turned away. She walked across the thick branch and stared east at the setting sun.

"You're brother is an idiot. He is only fun to torment, and otherwise has no redeeming quality. But you," she said, and at this she turned around and came close to him again. "You're cute and your fun to bicker with."

She leaned in to kiss him but he turned away. She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. Their eyes met and she raised a red eyebrow. Mitch closed his eyes, and she kissed him. A wave rose in his chest and his body tingled. He placed a hand on her cheek and leaned forward.

"*Stop it,*" he told himself. She giggled and ran her hand through his hair, kissing him repeatedly.

"*Stop this, now!*" he said to himself, and he tightened his lips. He turned away but she kept kissing him.

"No," he said but she wouldn't stop. She grabbed his shirt and tugged his hair.

"Knock it off," he said, but she just giggled and pulled his face towards hers. She began to unbutton his shirt.

"I said stop!" said Mitch and he raised his arm upwards quickly, knocking her back. With a startled shriek she toppled over and hit her head on the branch. Mitch lunged for her but was too late. She fell to the ground and hit with a sickening thud.

"Ness! Ness!" he shouted and he stared at her from the branch, panting heavily. He turned around, hugged the trunk and began to crawl down.

"No, no, oh God no, oh God please no," he said. When he reached the bottom he closed his eyes and began to tremble. After a moment he slowly turned around.

Her eyes were open. Her crumpled body was bent in an unnatural shape and her long red hair covered her mouth. He crept towards her, wringing his hands.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," he said.

Her straw hat lay at his feet and he picked it up. He stood over her body and bent forward. A slug began to crawl up her hand and across her pasty white arm, leaving a filmy trail as it went. Mitch cried out, covered his mouth and ran off.

Trevor sat at a picnic table with his head bowed. The last few rays of sunlight were sinking into the sea and a chill wind blew a small cyclone of leaves onto the table. The plate set before him was empty, but the plate at the opposite end was laden with fried chicken, rolls and strawberries. He sat completely motionless, just as he had for the past few hours, but at last he began to cry.

He heard heavy panting and footsteps and so he sat up strait and composed himself. His brother was running towards him, and Trevor sighed. Mitch slowed when he neared the table and Trevor looked away.

"You know," said Trevor, "I think I've become convinced that women don't really want a nice guy. They say they do and they say they want to be

treated well, but I think they are really attracted to the guys who treat them like trash."

Mitch was panting heavily. He sat down at the table across from Trevor and his face was pale. He didn't say anything.

"I think that women genuinely despise the man who treats them well, listens to them and gives them respect. They interpret kindness as weakness and it disgusts them." He slammed his fist down on the table. "But what the hell am I supposed to do?" he cried. "I just... I just can't. I can't anymore."

Mitch began to weep and his body convulsed violently.

"Oh, Mitch I'm sorry," said Trevor standing up. "What did I say?" Mitch looked up at his brother and their eyes met. Trevor could see tears running down his brother's pale face. Mitch couldn't speak. Instead he held up a grass hat, and it was smeared with blood.

Trevor blinked and then his eyes went wide.

"Where? Where damnit!"

The two raced across the meadow in the moonlight. The stars began to pop into existence one by one and the night creatures emerged to sing their songs. Trevor saw the tree loom closer as he ran, and soon he saw a pale shape sprawled out at the foot of it. When they reached the body, Mitch stopped and covered his mouth. Trevor ran up to Ness and landed on his knees next to her.

"Ness! Ness!" he cried, and he grabbed her, supporting her head. Her hair fell back and drool hung out of her open mouth. He felt a cold wetness in her hair and he recoiled. He saw a dark mark on his hand in the purple moonlight and he shrieked.

"Oh God, Jesus, dear God Jesus!" he cried. Mitch slowly paced back and forth, his hands still covering his mouth. Trevor held her close and began to weep, rocking back and forth.

Mitch stopped and looked towards the sky. All the stars had appeared now and he looked for Orion. He gazed at the constellation and then drifted to

the branch. He stood motionless and stared at the branch as his brother wept and wailed behind him.

At length Trevor released her body and staggered to his feet.

"What happened?" he asked between sobs.

"Dunno," said Mitch, facing the tree. Trevor followed his brother's gaze and stared at the branch.

"Did she fall?"

"Yeah, looks that way," said Mitch and he turned around. "What do we do?"

Trevor met his brother's black eyes for a moment and then looked at Ness. He touched her arm but then instantly flinched. She was growing cold.

"I don't know. Take her home, I guess."

"Maybe we should bury her," said Mitch.

"What? Why?"

Mitch shrugged.

"Well we're the ones who found her. We could get in trouble."

"No," said Trevor and he shook his head. "She needs to be with her family. We won't get in trouble; we had nothing to do with it."

"Right," said Mitch, and he nodded. "Right."

Trevor furrowed his brow. He sat motionless as the night crept all over his body, then he stood up. He picked her up gingerly with both arms and the two of them walked towards town.

The coroner said that she had suffered severe head trauma when she hit the ground. Everyone concluded that it was an accident. The branch on the tree was cut down to keep people from climbing, but no one from town had any interest in climbing it anyway, not now.

At her funeral, Trevor and Mitch stood nearby, watching Ness' family bawl and wail. Her mother had taken it particularly rough, and her makeup

dripped to the cold ground. Her father just stood motionless as they lowered her casket into the earth, and his face ever after remained frozen and expressionless. Her three sisters wept uncontrollably and held each other's hands. The stringent air of disbelief hung over the crowd. The men wore dead faces and the women cried incessantly.

Trevor's head was bowed. He did not cry for he had spent all of his tears, but he could not look at the casket. Her death had made him forget about all the harm she had done to him. Now she was a shining beacon of goodness in his memory, which broke him even more. Mitch, however, took everything in. His wide eyes darted from Ness' mother to her father and then to her sisters, and he watched the casket sink until it scraped against the rocky soil. Some trumpet player that no one knew played Taps, and after the casket was lowered the undertaker thanked everyone for coming and wished them well.

Weeks went by and neither of them spoke much. At class they sat next to each other and Trevor always stared at his lap while Mitch stared off out the window. At first their teachers all understood, but as the weeks went by and their behavior didn't change, they began to receive scoldings, demerits and detention for incomplete homework and failed tests.

Mitch and Trevor spent more time with each other than they had before the accident. They didn't talk much but they didn't need to. A creek cut through a thicket near the family farm and the brothers spent much of their time after school wading through it, fishing and picking berries from the nearby bushes.

What neither of them knew was that they had each taken up a custom of visiting the tree at least one night a week. They did so randomly and out of compulsion, and it was on one such night that Trevor sat up in bed, drenched in a cold sweat. He looked out the window and the stars were obscured by thin and distant clouds, but the crescent moon was pale and clear. Trevor closed his eyes and hugged his knees, then quickly dressed and climbed down from the loft.

He walked towards the tree in the darkness. Night creatures rustled through the grass as Trevor walked by, but they didn't startle him. The crickets did not chirp that night, making the thundering of his own mind overwhelming. He saw the tree in the distance and he quickened his pace.

When Trevor got within a stone's throw of the tree he stopped suddenly. A shadow stood erect facing its trunk. Trevor could not make out the shadow and he slowly crept closer, careful not to make a sound. The shadow became more distinct and he realized that it was a human shape. His mind went wild.

"O, God, my Ness!" he thought and he quickened his pace.

He moved to the side so he could see the figure in profile, and when he got close enough to recognize his brother, he stopped cold. His throat clenched shut and his heart slowed. He crouched down in the grass.

Mitch stood at the tree shaking. He stared at its roots and muttered to himself. Every now and then he screamed.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried, and he covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

"You evil little girl," he said. *"Knock it off! Please stop."*

He fell to his knees and bent forward, weeping. Drool trickled out of his mouth as he heaved and he beat the ground. At length he sat back up and sighed.

"I'm so sorry Ness. I'm so sorry. Please, dear God, please help me."

In his stupor, Mitch heard a flurry of footsteps to his left and he turned just in time to be kicked in the stomach. He reeled backwards with a groan, and suddenly he was overcome by a flurry of punches that he could not feel.

"You killed her! You killed her you ass!" cried Trevor, and he beat his brother with all of his might.

"No!" said Mitch when he realized what was happening, and he raised his arms to shield his head. *"Trevor stop! I didn't—"*

"I loved her!" screamed Trevor and he beat Mitch ever harder.

"I didn't kill her! Stop it!"

Mitch lifted up his knees and kicked his brother as hard as he could. Trevor flew backwards and hit his head against the tree trunk, and then crumpled to the ground. Mitch scrambled upright and saw his brother lying motionless.

"Oh no, not again, dear God!" he cried and he raced towards his brother. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Trevor!"

Mitch took Trevor in his arms. He cleared the dirt and hair from his face and shook him. Trevor gasped and let out a long, loathsome wail, and then began to hiccup.

"Oh thank God," said Mitch and he hugged his brother tight. He rocked back and forth and the two of them wept.

"Wh-wh-why, why did you kill her?" asked Trevor.

"I didn't. I mean, i-i-it was an accident."

"Liar," said Trevor and he turned his face away.

"No, she fell, we were in the tree and...and..."

He couldn't finish. He looked up the tree trunk and stared at the stump where the branch used to be.

"You always loved her," said Trevor, and he turned back towards his brother. "You n-n-never said anything, but I could always tell." Mitch panted and shook his head.

"No, she loved you," he said. Trevor sat up and leaned against the tree. "She loved you and told me so. She made it clear that she had no feelings for me. That's all that went on before the accident."

They were quiet for a moment. Trevor's cold stare bored into his brother's eyes, and Mitch at last averted his gaze.

"You're hiding something, I can tell," said Trevor.

Mitch sighed.

"If I am hiding something," he said, "it might be because I'm trying to protect someone, someone I deeply love."

The crickets began to chirp then. A wind picked up and the chill of winter was on its breath. After a long, quiet moment, Trevor began to stand. Mitch helped him up, and holding each other the two quietly walked back home.