

Only the trees

It was only the trees, tapping at the window panes. That's what they told me, but I knew better. Nine years old and I was already wise to their world, the lies the grown-ups told, the things they did when they thought you weren't watching. The things they'd make you do when they thought no one else was watching.

School then was an old mansion somewhere deep in the countryside, banished from home by parents who knew no better. Boys only, of course. We slept in dormitories, iron-framed bunk beds lined up along dark wood-panelled walls in what had once been reception rooms, ballrooms, who knew what? They were all equally terrifying to a child scared of the dark, but the one at the back was the worst. This was where the trees came closest, reached their stick-fingers to the glass and tapped messages as we hid under our blankets at night.

Not all of us though. Some brave souls, or foolhardy, would get up in the night, go to the window that opened onto the fire escape when the trees were most insistent. When the scratching sounded like whispered promises. 'Come out here.' 'We won't hurt you.' 'Our special secret.'

I had a friend then, Billy Jenks. He was bolder than me, I thought wiser too. But he listened to the trees and the other boys egging him on. I wish he hadn't gone, wish I hadn't followed him in the shadows, unseen but seeing all. I wish I hadn't seen that it wasn't the trees making those whispered promises, wasn't the trees that lied. I was too young to understand what the science teacher made Billy do, there on the moon-dark fire escape at the back of the old mansion, but I knew it wasn't right. It wasn't until much later that I found out how wrong it was.

Billy changed after that. Fell into a clique with some older boys. Became moody and withdrawn, angry at the merest slight. We drifted apart, as children do. I made other friends and lost them too. Sometimes to the whispered promises of the trees, sometimes because that's just how life goes. When I was old enough, I left that school and its horrible memories behind. Billy left too, but we went separate ways then, never spoke again.

I was eighteen years old when I learned he had gone into the woods one night, thrown a rope over a branch of the nearest tree and hanged himself. Did they whisper to him then, I wondered. And what promises did they make? What lies did they tell?

There have been more Billys down the years. Some I have known, others I have only read about. Too young to understand what they are being asked to do, too scared to tell anyone that it has happened. Eaten up by the guilt and the pain, their lives are forever shattered by the likes of that science teacher, all those years ago.

But not him. No, not him. I remember the night it happened, clear as if it were yesterday though in truth many years have passed since. I was angry at the news of what Billy had done, thought I would confront the source of his misery. Perhaps I would force a

confession out of him, I don't know. I tracked him down, unsurprised to find him still teaching, but at a different school now. Still preying on the young and impressionable. A different mansion, a different fire escape, but the trees were the same in their insistent tapping. I hid in the shadows like I always do, waiting for the right moment. Oh, I wasn't going to let him hurt anyone. Not again. But he never had the chance.

Maybe it was the wind, though it didn't feel that strong to me. That's what the inquest said after they found his body the next morning. Knocked off the fire escape by a branch caught in a gust. Unlucky, they said. He might have survived the fall if there hadn't been that stick lying on the ground. And what were the chances? That its broken, spear-like point should be poking up like that? Right through one eye and out the back of his head. Poor bastard, they said. All the kids loved him.

I keep to the shadows, always have done. I'm good at hiding, at not being noticed. The trees see me, of course. The trees see everything. But they know I'm on their side, know that I do their work. And there is so much work to do, so many wrongs to put right.

And so you sit there in your feigned innocence, the world fallen dark outside. Maybe you contemplate the life you have lived, the things you have done, the times you have put your own selfish needs before the safety of others. The harm you have caused, the lives you have poisoned and destroyed for a few fleeting moments of guilty pleasure. Or maybe you are blind to your many faults, so absorbed in your self there is no room for thoughts of anyone else. I see you there, the trees see you there. And as the wind picks up, so they reach their judgmental finger-twigs towards you.

You stir, but it's only the trees, tapping at the window panes. There's nothing to be scared of. Nothing at all.

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