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Red Oak

Juliana Schicho
SUNY Geneseo

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Red Oak

There was something living beneath the timbre of his mother's voice. Simon wondered if she knew. She always seemed mystic to him, like the mind readers you see in movies.

"Eat your breakfast," his mother Jess said, sighing. Her strong jaw was slightly clenched, a usual feature of her face. Simon was not good at reading faces, and he fidgeted in his chair under the gaze of her amber eyes. She sat down across from him. "Did you skip your extra class yesterday?"

He said nothing, and instead moved the food around on his plate in short, timid motions.

"You know you have to go, Simon," Jess said, quiet but stern. "You can't fail math this year, it's a very important class. The teachers are there to help you."

"I wanted more leaves." He spoke quietly.

Jess didn't get mad. She almost never did. Instead, she stood up and patted the top of his head, slightly pushing down his dense ringlets of hair.

Yesterday Simon had enjoyed his afternoon in the woods, as he always did. He liked the clear air and crunching leaves. He liked the soft dirt under his feet. Sometimes, if he was daring, he'd dip a hand in the frigid river, letting the clear water slip through his palms. The cold would chill his hand until it was numb, and he'd remove it, sitting back down on the shallow bank. The river was fairly wide, but not large or filled with rapids. The banks were shallow, but the river was fast and made gurgling noises like an upset stomach or an engine trying its hardest to start. He spent hours collecting leaves to press in old heavy books—outdated encyclopedias and unused dictionaries on dusty bookshelves in his home were filled with remnants from the autumns before. It helped him forget about school, even though the dense woods were right down the street from the building.

His father entered the kitchen with a smile on his face. He was a short man with a crown of wiry salt-and-pepper hair.

“Come on, get to the bus stop! Omar, you too,” he called down the hallway of their small ranch home.

His older brother emerged from his room, yawning. Simon saw his father put an arm around Omar, whispering something to him about Simon and to look out for him, okay? Together, the two brothers left on the faded school bus.

The school hallways were narrow and old with musty scents, tiny lockers, and several students wearing hand-me-downs of camouflage and otherwise. Dirt caked into the worn tile floors as students tracked it in with their sneakers—another mark of a rural public school. The students brushed by Simon, shouldering their way through the crowd and each other. In his classes, the sounds of the teachers speaking and the hum of the fluorescent lights buzzed in his ears, causing the lessons to pass over him as he fidgeted in his seat with distraction and unease. As the day ended, he drew near his locker. A scruffy, pale boy approached him.

“Hey, kid.” the boy said. He was taller than Simon, like most people in the school.

Simon didn’t make eye contact, and instead focused on opening his locker.

“I said hey. Are you stupid or something?” The boy laughed, and a group of boys behind him chuckled along. “Is that why you go to the special class after school?”

Simon opened his locker with trembling hands. He wanted the boy to go away. He wondered where Omar was, as they usually met up before going to the bus.

“Good job, dumbass, you opened your locker.” The boy reached for the rusted seafoam locker door. “See if you can get it open again.” He slammed the door shut, metal slamming down on Simon’s hand.

He yelped in pain. The bully looked at his victim and opened his mouth as if to speak, but before he could say anything further, the bell signaling the end of the day rang. Simon scrambled for his things and ran for the door. He sprinted past the waiting buses, their white exhaust bitter in the cold air.

He thought he heard someone call “Simon” from behind him as he ran, but he didn’t stop. As he got to the woods, a park with a dirt path through it, he ran away from the trail and through the skeleton-bare trees. His feet pounded over both stone and soft ground as they carried him further toward his destination, a small clearing he often visited in the forest. As Simon grew nearer, he slowed down, his heart hammering in his chest. The ground in the forest here was more soft soil than rocks. Simon sat down to catch his breath.

His eyes stung with tears. The cold air wrapped itself around his ankles, grabbing his legs through his thin socks. He heard footsteps approaching him rapidly from behind, but was too upset to pay them any attention.

“Simon,” a voice huffed. Simon looked up and saw his older brother standing above him, his dark skin shining with sweat despite the cold weather. Omar’s feet were planted firmly on the ground and his brow was furrowed. Simon didn’t reply, but instead buried his head in his knees, pulled up tight against him.

Omar sat down next to him and put a lanky arm around his younger brother’s shoulder. After a pause, he suggested, “Come on, let’s go find those leaves. What color are we looking for today?”

“Red. Dark red,” Simon answered, sniffing and rubbing his hand, which was still sore.

The two slowly stood up. Together, Simon and Omar searched for leaves fitting the description. Simon was very picky about which leaves he allowed in his books, but Omar was patient. He never hurried Simon, and instead of shouting at him to hurry up, he sat down with him and looked for leaves to meet his brother’s standards. Simon sat down on the cold forest floor, sifting through individual leaves with the scrutiny of a diamond inspector. Breath rose from his mouth in a pale gray that reminded him of ghosts.

“Simon, how about these?” Omar asked him from behind.

Simon turned and was greeted with a head full of leaves that his brother threw at him. The older boy laughed and began to run, his younger brother chasing him. Simon was not well-coordinated and he watched Omar run circles around him, faint autumn sunlight creating light patches on his walnut skin. Finally, he slowed down and allowed Simon to catch him. The two laughed and fell over onto the dirt, some of it clinging to their jackets.

“You caught me, you caught me,” Omar laughed. “You win.”

It was then Simon saw it. By the bank of the river was a tall red oak tree, some of its leaves still attached. They were deep crimson, and Simon was transfixed. Omar caught on, following his gaze and slowing his laugh.

“That’s it,” Simon said quietly, walking over to it. The leaves were too high for him to reach, however, and they emptied into the clear river below, ruining the chance of finding one on the ground. “I can’t get one.”

Simon’s face contorted into furrowed brows and a frown, and Omar strode over to the tree. “It’s not that tall. I can climb it.”

Simon looked at him hopefully, but said nothing. His brown eyes were wide as he nodded.

Omar’s lanky frame was stronger than it looked, and he clambered onto the tree with ease. He reached toward the red leaves, setting his face and sticking out his tongue slightly in concentration. Simon stood at the base of the tree, wringing his hands in anticipation. It was something he always did

when excited or nervous. He huddled a bit further inside his coat, eager to see the leaves up close and imagining what they would look like once pressed and dried. The river carried in cold air and swept by Simon in a slight whisper.

Then, over the bubbling and spitting of the fast-moving water came a cracking sound. Omar's hand retreated and Simon couldn't see his face, but he knew by the way Omar clung to the branch that he was scared. Simon's feet shifted nervously in place and he felt a roiling in his stomach as his face grew hot with fear. His brother seemed so far and high up that he didn't know what to do.

"Omar," he said quietly, wringing his hands with anxiety now instead of excitement. He heard his brother produce something like an answer but before he could finish, there was another snap. The branch gave way into the water below, carrying his brother with it.

Simon's heart skipped several beats and a wave of panic crashed over him. He jumped to the edge of the water, and stood on the slanted shallow bank, watching to see if Omar had emerged from below, but he saw only but his distorted reflection. The river moved wildly on as if nothing had happened.

"Omar!" He cried, his voice cracking. His shoes were wet and cold as he stood on the cusp of the river. Water bounced from the fast river in droplets on his porous sneakers, and moisture from the ground below him steeped through the rubber soles. Downstream, he thought he heard a "Simon"; he thought he heard crying.

He exited the water and sprinted downstream, but the water was too fast and he was too slow. The boy tripped over a rock and fell, cutting through his jeans and creating a gash in his knee. He tried to get up to run again, but his leg gave way and he fell to the forest floor. Bits of dried leaves and dirt stuck themselves to his knee, and he gripped it tighter, feeling the heat of the injury, soon matched by the heat of his tears. The water was too loud, and he shifted his hands to his ears, standing up. Simon began to sprint back the way he and his brother had come, back toward the school and the street and home. It felt as if someone had shoved a stone into his lungs, and he gasped with panic and effort.

He remembered screaming the whole way back. He remembered his father dropping a porcelain plate and running outside. Later, his mother on the phone, voice wavering but strong. He remembered lights and lights and lights.

It had been two weeks and twelve neighbor-given casseroles since her oldest son drowned in the Paulinskill River. She never thought it could happen, especially somewhere she let her kids play almost every day after school. A dog found Omar an hour after *it* happened, and the animal's owner tried CPR

three times, to no avail. Local newspapers called it a tragedy that an intelligent boy of thirteen years would die. They spoke as if it never happened to anyone. She thought this would make her feel guilty, but she felt nothing—like someone had vacuumed out everything inside of her and she was just a ribcage with skin. The funeral had been a dream—none of it felt tangible, none of it real. Jess absentmindedly cracked her knuckles at her desk. Years as a database manager had left her with carpal tunnel syndrome, which got worse since her son passed. Some days she could barely open her hands flat, leaving them slightly clawed instead. Numbers flew in front of her, but she barely registered them as she typed line after line of data.

“Aren’t you done for the day, Jess?” her boss, an older woman, asked tentatively. “We’re all done. You should get some rest.”

“No,” Jess answered, distantly. “I’d rather finish up here first. I’ll see you Friday.”

She ended her work an hour after the others and went home. Her husband’s minivan was in the driveway, and she felt some of her loneliness lift. Inside, she was greeted by the clinging scent of pasta primavera, her husband’s signature dish. Jess smiled and silently gave him a peck on the cheek. His eyes were tired, but he grinned back.

“He’s in his room,” Ken said with a sigh. “Still not eating much.”

Jess sighed heavily. “Jesus, he’s only ten. Can you imagine? Ten years old. And having to see...” She trailed off, looking down at the tile of their kitchen.

“No,” Ken said, scooping pasta onto a plate. Steam fogged up his glasses, and he took them off, clearing them of the water droplets. “I really can’t. You need to talk to him, Jess. He still won’t listen to me. It sounds silly, but I wish Omar could talk to him about this. He was always the one to get through to him.”

Jess didn’t respond; instead she nodded thinly and exited the kitchen, walking down the hall.

Her two sons—her *only* son—lived down the hall in a room across from where his brother’s once was. She hadn’t cleaned out Omar’s things yet, even though a well-intentioned neighbor told Jess it’s best to get it cleaned up early. His old door was always open a crack. She hadn’t gone in except for when she needed a picture for the funeral. He had the best copy of his school portrait in his room. Jess was afraid to open the door fully, in case it let out a ghost. She knew it was ridiculous, but the room always seemed colder than the others. It hurt.

She shook her head slightly to break her stare away from the old door. Jess’s neck was stiff, her eyes strained from the constant glare of her computer screen. Slowly, she knocked on her youngest son’s door. She heard a shuffling of feet before Simon answered. His eyes were puffy, and he looked at the floor. He was always looking at the floor, even before all this happened.

“Simon, honey, you have to eat,” Jess nearly whispered. She was greeted with the usual silence. “Are you feeling okay?” She knew that was a dumb question, but with Simon she rarely received an answer anyway.

His skin, normally a rich umber like the leaves he used to collect, seemed bloodless—his eyes glazed over as if hypnotized. Jess thought it was like having another ghost in the house. She held onto him but never received a hug back. She tried not to blame him for what happened, to convince herself that it was just a twist of fate, but every time she looked in her son’s eyes, she saw something that was missing, something stolen from her.

Dinner was still, as it had been for the last few weeks. They sat closer together now but it made the gap at the table feel larger. The spaghetti was warm and it sat in Jess’s stomach like a rock. Bedtime was so quiet she could hardly put herself to bed. Her ears buzzed in the silence like a swarm of hornets, and she tossed and turned until morning.

The next day, she went into the small kitchen with its cold tiles and found it empty. Jess walked down to the other end of the haunted hallway and knocked on her son’s door. There was no answer.

“Simon,” she yawned, rubbing the back of her neck with an aching hand. “It’s time to get up for school. I’ll make you breakfast.” She received the usual stillness in return. “I’m coming in.”

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room and found nothing. Simon wasn’t in his bed. Jess’s heart leapt into her throat so quickly, she thought she would choke. Her palms sweat as she rushed to each room in the house, looking for her son. She still found nothing. She hated this house now—it seemed to laugh at her as she searched. Ken was doing IT work for the local high school, and had been called in early to set up the new operating system, and wouldn’t be back for several hours. Jess set her jaw and threw on a thick beige coat over her bony shoulders and thin pajamas. Snatching a hat off her cluttered kitchen counter, she bounded out the front door, like a child late for school.

Her old Saturn station wagon groaned to life and she gripped the frigid wheel, backing out of her driveway. The radio played soft static but she didn’t bother to turn it off. Her stop wasn’t far.

The woods had always intimidated Jess this time of year because its grayness that seemed to swallow up every bit of color. Ever since they moved to this rural town seven years ago, her children had loved the woods, but she never understood why. She should have listened to her gut feeling about the forest. She shut off her car and jogged into the woods, being careful to scan the trees around her for the sight of her boy’s red winter coat. A few minutes in, she couldn’t see her car anymore, and she was beginning to worry that

she'd lost her way. But then, Jess heard the river. It made her heart beat faster than it already was from her jogging. A small figure in a red coat huddled in a clearing to her right. Immediately, she felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders. Jess approached her son quietly. He didn't look up.

"Have a bad dream?" she asked. She saw the mess of tiny curls on his head bob up and down in the manner of a young child. She took the hat from on top of her head and bent down to put it on her son's, sitting by him in the process.

The river ran like an unanswered phone, each splash of water slowing her heart a little more. Jess's hands froze in the cold, and she rubbed them together to try and make warmth. The sight of the river had made her numb. It moved with a clear intensity that she knew she could never match again.

"That's the tree?" she asked, pointing to the skeletal figure of the trunk. None of the leaves were left. Jess had never actually been to the site of where her son had died, afraid there wouldn't be anything to mark his passing.

Simon nodded, not looking up. He just seemed to know where she was pointing. Jess wanted him to make eye contact with her. She wanted an "I'm sorry," even though it wasn't his fault. She almost wanted to strike him. Instead, she put her left arm around him, bringing him closer to her in the frigid air. Jess thought the tears on her face would freeze, but they didn't. Then, Simon reached his cold hand up to her face and wiped a tear away. Jess didn't smile, but her chest swelled with a brew of both compassion and sadness, and the tears poured out faster. She clasped his hand and held it in her own. The two huddled together, bare trees around them closing in. Below them, leaves rotted into the ground.