

Inside a dimly lit office in a mental hospital, the warden and doctor were talking.

“His care is getting too expensive,” said the warden, pushing his glasses up.

“I know,” agreed the doctor. “And the insurance doesn’t pay nearly enough.”

“And then there’s the fights he’s been starting... we have three times as many fights now than as before he came here.”

The doctor lit a cigar. “It’s annoying. I have to treat so many minor injuries because of him.”

The warden sighed. “I wish we could just get rid of him.”

The doctor thought for a moment and puffed out a long breath of smoke. “Maybe we can. I’ll fake his death and you can let him go into the woods. He’s so unstable; he’ll probably just die on his own.”

The warden grunted, considering the proposal. “Put that thing out. It stinks,” he said.

Four kids sat at a park bench, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as an after school snack. The oldest, a 12-year-old named Todd, was reading a book, and 10 year old Anne was doing homework. Melissa and Johnny, ages 7 and 8 respectively, were kicking each other under the table.

“Stop it, Melissa!” said Johnny. “Anne, can we go to the woods?”

“No,” answered Melissa. “It’s scary there. The trees want to eat me.”

“Melissa, trees can’t eat people. And I really don’t want to do this math, so sure, let’s go to the woods,” said Anne.

Once in the woods, Johnny started running around. Todd was walking and reading, occasionally bumping into trees. Melissa looked around cautiously, holding her arms close to her body.

“Can we go now?” she asked. “I think the trees are going to eat me.”

Johnny snorted. “Trees can’t eat! They’re not even alive.”

“That’s wrong,” said Todd. “Trees are alive, and eat nutrients from the ground. They also photosynthesize to produce their own food.”

“Then why are there dead people on the ground?” asked Melissa.

Todd dropped his book. “What do you mean dead people?”

“Oh my god, oh my god,” said Anne. Shakily, she pointed to her left.

“I told you. Trees eat people.” Melissa was surprisingly nonchalant.

The kids walked over to the body. It was a male child, about 6 or 7 years old. Todd crouched down and put two fingers on the boy’s neck, checking for a pulse.

Todd shook his head. “I think he’s dead.”

Johnny started crying.

“Make it go away!” shouted Melissa, beginning to cry as well.

Anne was in a daze. “Oh my god, this can’t be happening,” she muttered.

“Who- who could have done this?” asked Todd.

Anne raised her hand weakly. “I think I know. I-I saw it on the news. A guy named Claude died in a mental hospital near here. They didn’t have a body to show, so some people think his death was faked and he was released.”

Todd stood up and wrinkled his brow. “Why do you think it’s him?”

“Oh,” said Anne. “He was in the hospital because he killed kids.”

Todd looked like he was going to throw up. “We need to leave,” he said urgently. “We need to tell Mom.” Todd picked up Melissa to give her a piggyback ride, and they all ran off toward the house.

Inside the house, their mom was doing dishes with her back to the door. The kids burst into the house, and Johnny ran to hug his mother’s legs. Todd set Melissa down, and she joined Johnny in hugging.

“The trees ate the boy!” she cried.

“Anne? Todd? What happened?” asked their mother, confused.

Anne collapsed into a chair. “There was a boy...”

“We found a dead kid in the woods,” explained Todd.

“That’s not funny.”

“We’re not kidding,” Anne said. “Mom, please come see!”

Their mom sighed. “Okay. But if this is a joke, you’re grounded for two weeks. Mel, Johnny, you stay here, okay?”

Todd and Anne led their mother out of the house. They pulled and tugged on her arms, begging her to hurry as they walked through the woods. It seemed to take forever, but they finally arrived at the spot where they had found the boy. There was nothing there but grass.

Anne nearly fell to her knees. “Mom, I swear, he was right here and he was dead!”

“This isn’t funny,” said their mom crossly. “You two are old enough to know that jokes like this are entirely inappropriate.”

“We’re not joking,” cried Todd.

Their mom crossed her arms. “I’m sorry kids, but I have to ground you. These things have to be taken seriously. I have to go back to John and Mel. Come back soon, but when you do, you’re grounded for two weeks. That means no friends, no TV, no internet, no reading for fun, and NO GOING INTO THE WOODS.”

Their mom turned around and walked away. Anne sat down and miserably put her head in her hands. Todd looked around desperately.

“Hey,” he said. He bent down and picked up a damp piece of paper.

Anne joined Todd on the ground. “Lemme see,” she said snatching it away from Todd. “Oh my god, it’s written in blood!” She threw the paper down.

Todd picked it back up. “It’s just red crayon.” He turned the paper so the letters faced the right way and read aloud. “You found me out... you’re next.”

Anne looked around nervously. “We’re next?” She started to panic. “We have to leave. We should show this to Mom... oh my god, it’s really Claude!”

“He kills... children?” asked Todd.

“Mm-hmm,” confirmed Anne.

Todd stood abruptly, yanking Anne up with him. Terrified, they raced toward the house.

“You guys can’t be here,” said Johnny. “You’re grounded.”

The four kids were at the park again, gathered around the swings.

“Yeah, but Mom’s working late tonight,” said Todd, checking his watch. “We’ve got five hours until ten and she gets back. Five and a half if she goes shopping.”

“Why are you grounded?” Melissa asked.

Anne crossed her arms. “Mom didn’t believe us. Even after the note.”

“About the boy who was eaten by trees?”

“That’s the one,” replied Todd. “John, Mel, listen up. The man that killed that boy knows we know. And now he’s after us. Got it?”

“I thought the trees killed him,” said Melissa.

“For crying out loud, Mel, trees don't kill people!”

Johnny began crying, frightened. He ran off to the woods, and the others followed. Todd had to carry Melissa and Anne was wearing a skirt and flip-flops, so it was a slow process.

“Johnny, come back!” yelled Anne.

“He's gonna get me,” Johnny cried. He tripped over a root, fell down, and continued crying.

Todd groaned. “You do realize that by coming into the woods you've made it *more* likely that he'll get you? Claude has been hiding in the woods.”

“What?” shrieked Johnny.

“Where are we, Johnny?” Anne asked.

Johnny looked up in surprise. “I thought you knew!”

“We were following you!” she exclaimed.

“Oh... this isn't good.”

“So we're lost?” Melissa asked.

“Looks like it,” Todd replied.

“Lost in the woods with a mental guy who wants to kill us, and our mom won't be home for five hours,” Anne summed up.

Todd snorted. “Sounds like fun, huh?”

Half an hour later, the kids sat in a clearing. Johnny was digging for worms, Melissa was rubbing two sticks together, and Todd and Anne were talking quietly.

“I think we should choose a direction and start walking,” said Todd.

“No,” said Anne. “This woods goes on for miles. We'd just get more lost.”

“How do you expect us to get out of here? You have to remember, Claude is in here with us. And I bet he knows his way around.” Todd made a face. “My foot itches.”

Todd took off his shoe and scratched his foot. He started to put the shoe back on, but took it off again. He looked inside the shoe, then slowly reached in and pulled out a piece of paper. He unfolded the paper and read it. He looked to his left, at some mushrooms, then back at the paper. Throughout the process, Anne watched curiously.

“Wha- what the heck?” shouted Todd, scrambling to his feet. “How did he... how does he... that's impossible! My shoe!”

“What does it say?” asked Anne.

“How did he put it in my shoe? I've had it on all day!”

“Gimme the note, Todd!” Anne demanded.

Todd gave her the paper.

“I can see you. To your left are mushrooms. I'm waiting.' Well... that's... terrifyingly simple.” She stared at the red letters. “Okay. Let's move,” she decided.

They walked over to the younger kids to explain the situation. Together, they walked farther into the woods, looking over their shoulders as they left the clearing.

The sun had just gone down, and the kids were walking along in the last rays of light, passing around a juice box. Anne handed it to Todd.

Todd stared cautiously at the juice box. “So, John, where did you get this again?”

“My pants.”

Todd closed his eyes and sighed. “Whatever. Okay.”

He sipped the juice. Continuing to walk and drink, they shoved their way through some bushes.

Anne was the last one through, and she saw something on the ground. “Wait, guys,” she ordered, bending down to get it. She pulled a shoe out from under the bush. It was white and had no laces. The others stared.

“It's a shoe,” said Melissa.

“It has no laces,” noticed Todd. “Oh, crap, they don't give you laces in prison.”

“Oh my god,” Anne said, dropping the shoe. “It's a prison shoe.”

Todd looked around. “It's probably Claude's.”

“Oh my god, he was probably just here.”

Todd touched the shoe, worried. “We need to change direction.”

They turned to the right and walked away.

As usual, they were walking.

Melissa tugged Todd's shirt. “I'm tired.”

Todd checked his watch. “Can't you hold out a little longer? It's only 8:30.”

“My bedtime's at eight!” she whined.

“Can’t we rest for a little while, Todd?” asked Anne.

Todd thought about the note in his shoe, and the shoe in the bush. He remembered the bright red letters on the first note- ‘you’re next.’ “I really don’t want to,” he said.

Johnny yawned.

“Come on, we’ve been walking for hours,” Anne reasoned.

“Okay. Fifteen minutes,” Todd agreed hesitantly.

They all settled down with their backs against tree trunks. Melissa lay on Anne’s lap. Within minutes, they had all drifted to sleep.

In a tree above them, a one shoed Claude was cleaning a knife. He took his time with the cleaning, making sure he got every speck of dust off the blade. He smiled slightly as he folded up the cloth and put it in his pocket. Carefully, he climbed down from the tree and crouched next to Todd. He raised the knife, and started to stab it forward.

“TODD!” Johnny jumped on top of Claude, knocking him over.

Todd, Anne, and Melissa all woke up. Claude turned to look at Johnny and made some sort of strangled noise in the back of his throat. He slashed at Johnny with the knife, but Todd rushed in and pulled his brother away.

“Come on, Mel, this way,” Anne whispered. She pushed Melissa in front of her and they ran off into the woods.

Johnny watched them. He pulled Todd’s hand. “Come on, Todd, let’s go!”

Todd kicked Claude in the face, sending him sprawling on the ground. They ran after Anne and Melissa while Claude chased them, clutching his head.

The kids sprinted together through the woods with Claude about thirty feet behind. In the darkness, Johnny tripped over a root and Todd pulled him up, shoving him ahead. Claude grunted, lunged forward, and grabbed Todd.

“Gotcha!”

The others stopped and turned. Claude pinned Todd on his back and raised the knife. Todd struggled frantically, grabbing at Claude’s hands.

“Let go of him!” Melissa screamed.

Melissa and Johnny attacked Claude, pushing him and pulling his hair. Anne tried to hold his hands back. The knife fell out of Claude's hands and onto Todd's chest. Todd took the knife as the younger kids pulled Claude away.

Claude got to his knees and grabbed Anne. He tried to choke her as she clawed at his fingers. Melissa and Johnny tried to pull him away without success. Todd, holding the knife, crawled over to them. Without considering what he was about to do, he desperately plunged the knife into Claude's chest.

Johnny and Melissa let go of Claude. Anne removed his hands from her neck and scooted back. Claude stared, dumbfounded, at the knife in chest. He felt the handle, then collapsed.

"Todd..." Anne said quietly.

Todd looked at his hands. "It's over."

"Is he dead?" Melissa asked.

Todd felt for Claude's pulse. "Yeah."

"For real this time," Anne said softly.

"Okay guys," said Todd. "We can't tell anybody about this. As far as the police know, Claude was already dead. If they find out we killed him, I... I don't know what they'll do. Okay?"

No one was in the mood to argue, or even point out that it was just Todd who had killed him. They all nodded. Todd covered the body with some leaves.

"Hey... hey! Light!" Melissa shouted suddenly. She pointed in front of her, and all the kids looked ahead.

"What do you mean?" asked Todd.

Melissa ran a few paces in front of Todd. She smiled and turned back to face them. "It's a light."

Anne stepped forward. "A streetlight."

Understanding immediately, they all rushed forward and ended up in the street by the park, where Johnny had first entered the woods and gotten them lost. Side by side, they walked home in silence.

The next day, the kids sat at a park bench, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Johnny and Melissa were kicking each other under the table.

“Some kids were talking in school today,” Anne said. “The mental hospital managed to confirm Claude’s death.”

“I wonder how,” said Todd.

“No one said. Oh, and they found the body of that kid. It turns out he wasn’t dead, but he came pretty close. You’re not very good at checking pulses.”

Todd looked worried. “I checked Claude’s pulse.”

Johnny spoke up. “Don’t worry, you killed him.”

It was an odd thing to say to comfort someone, but Todd looked relieved. Johnny reached in his pants and pulled out a juice box. “Juice box?” he offered.

Melissa took it. The four kids continued talking and laughing, grateful that they no longer had to worry about being attacked by child killers.

The end.