

Death Comes to Clove Lakes Park

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When I was small, I was playing in a park in Staten Island, and Death came for me...



Climbing the tree had been easy. My feet had slipped a few times on the way up, but its trunk was so twisted and angular that finding footholds was a cinch. Even so, I felt a rush of accomplishment when I reached the top – a feeling I couldn't wait to share with my parents. I stopped and, holding firmly on to a thick branch with one tiny hand, turned my head downwards to find my mother and father. I hadn't expected them to look so far away.

"Well, look at you!" my mother beamed, clasping her hands together in front of her chest. "Very good!"

My father nodded in approval, a smile of encouragement on his cheerful face. I was used to looking far up to see dad's face, and now he looked kind of small and funny. The whole world looked funny. I was up so high and the world was so low, and I knew I didn't belong up so high. Things that were up high were supposed to fall to the ground. I would fall to the ground too if my feet weren't well planted and I wasn't holding onto the branch.

But what if my feet weren't well planted?

Just as I had this thought, I could feel my tiny red shoes start to slip, and I reached wildly to grab the branch with my other hand.

"Oh, Marc!" My mother gasped.

I braced myself, knowing I only had to hold on another moment before my father pulled me down out of the tree. I fixed my eyes on the bark in front of me, worried that if I looked down, the ground would catch me by the eyes and pull me down.

"Ted, he's going to fall," I heard my mother say.

"He's not going to fall," dad said, sounding only a little uncertain.

I was afraid even to open my mouth, worried that the sound of my voice would shake the tree, but I risked it. "Dad... help..."

"It's okay, Marc," dad said. "Just come on back down."

I almost moved my foot, but then stopped. "How?"

"Just do what you did on the way up, but go backwards."



"But Ted, he's afraid."

"He has to try to do it himself, Cathy."

I took my eyes off the trunk and tried to find my father's face. If only dad could see how afraid I was, then he would help me. But dad still did not move to help, so I realized that dad would never pull me off the tree and lower me to the ground.

"I'm going to take him down," Cathy declared, walking purposefully up to the tree.

"Let him be," dad said again, but made no move to stop mom.

Mom now stood at the base of the tree, looking up at me. She reached up with both arms, but her fingers could only get to as high as my feet. "Dammit." She looked up apologetically at me. "I can't reach you, honey."

"Come on, Marc," dad said. "Just climb down a little bit. Your mom will meet you halfway. You go down a little bit and she'll help you with the rest."

"I'm scared," I said. My face was red and tears were now starting to appear in my eyes. I felt my palms growing sweaty and dirty against the bark.

"You have to at least make an effort," said his father. "You have to be tough like Spider-Man. You like Spider-Man, don't you?"

I nodded, as the first tear fell.

"Well, Spider-Man wouldn't have trouble with a little tree like this."

"But I'm not Spider-Man," I whimpered.

"He doesn't want to climb down the tree," Cathy said. "Could you just please help him down?"

"Don't you want to grow up to be tough and brave like Spider-Man? Or do you want to be wimpy and too afraid to even climb a little tree?"

"Ted," Cathy hissed.

"Not now, Cathy."

I was too weak to hold on any longer. I didn't want to play this game any more. I didn't like the rules and I didn't like dad for making the rules. I felt my fingers slipping and my head growing



lighter. It would be so easy just to let myself fall. That way, the game would be over. "I can't do it," I whispered. And then I let one hand drop away from the branch.

"Ted! He's going to fall."

"Alright! Alright!" Dad strode up to the tree as his wife moved aside. Then he and grabbed me by the waist. With a quick heave, he pulled me out of the tree, spun around, and placed me firmly on the ground. No sooner was this done than I turned away from dad, and ran to mom, throwing my arms around her waist and burying my face in her stomach.

"It's okay," Cathy soothed, stroking my short brown hair. "It's over now."

Ted's jaw set hard. "Well, that's just fine. He hates me."

Cathy offered her husband a kindly but reproachful look. "Of course he doesn't. Do you?"

I looked slowly at my father and saw that it was now his eyes that were pleading.

"Well?" asked Cathy.

Before my parents could react, I turned suddenly and dashed away, down the main dirt road of Clove Lakes Park. I didn't know why I was doing this, only that I had to get away and that I wanted to know if they still cared enough about me to chase after me. I heard dad yell my name, and the cry only made me pick up speed – my short legs working as fast as they could. Almost immediately, I could hear the sounds of heavy footfalls behind me. Dad was quick, so I knew I'd be caught in moments if I didn't duck out of sight. I continued charging along, following the dusty path around a bend in the woods. The moment I sensed that I was out of my father's line-of-sight, I left the trail, dove headlong into the brush, and raced uphill. My shoes sank into the muddy slope as I ran, slowing me down. I grunted with frustration, trying to keep up my speed as I darted around trees and shrubs. My feet slipped again on some wet leaves and I almost lost my balance. I caught myself on the trunk of a thin tree and pulled myself back into my running stride.

"Marc!" I heard my father call again.

I hoped my father could not follow the sounds of the rustling leaves and branches as I pushed them aside. Already I was feeling tired and breathing heavily. The further from my father that I got, the more mortified I felt. It was bad enough I had humiliated myself on the tree. Why did I make this second mistake? It was foolish to run. I knew that already, moments after the impulsive decision was made. But once started, something like this was no easily stopped. I was afraid to turn back and go down the hill. I didn't want to get yelled at. Maybe it was better that they didn't find me for a while.

The steep slope started to level out I soon ran into a clearing. In the middle of the clearing stood two wooden picnic tables and a rusted barbecue grill. There were no people to be seen. The



air was stale and dead. I felt suddenly cold. I stopped, looking back. All I could see in the direction I had come was a brush. I could not hear the sounds of my parents' voices. I had not gone very far, had I? As I stopped, I realized how heavily I was breathing. I could feel my heartbeat racing. I tried to steady myself, but my breathing came in gasps. Still agitated, I looked past the picnic tables, and considered going farther. But I couldn't do that. Any farther and I might get really lost. The chill I felt grew still icier. The sky darkened noticeably around me. In the space of a moment, dusk had fallen like a cloak over the park. It would be dark soon.

"Why, hello there," a woman's voice said.

I started. Who said that? I looked back at the picnic tables and saw a woman sitting at the nearest one with her hands folded delicately across her lap. Dressed simply in a pair of tight jeans and a silky red shirt, she had a round, soft face and keen blue eyes. Her black hair fell in buoyant curls about her shoulders, and her smile was a perfect white. Some people who I met reminded me of my stuffed animals. They were the people I felt an impulse to embrace the moment that I met them because they seemed so cute and cuddly. They had a softness in their faces and eyes, their manner was gentle, and they spoke in a simple, affectionate way. This woman was one of them. Her sudden appearance had been very strange, but I soon pushed the thought aside. Maybe she had been there all along and I just hadn't seen her. "Hello," I said nervously, still trying to decide if I should keep moving or stay a moment.

The woman beckoned cheerfully. "Why don't you come here and talk to me?"

I hesitated. I still couldn't hear my parents. They must be getting really worried by now - and really angry. I didn't want to be found near this woman. They might both get in trouble. The woman did not seem put off by my distracted state. Instead, she slid off the bench and walked slowly over to me. The only sounds that could be heard in the still air were the crunching of the dead leaves under her feet.

"Are you lost, or exploring?" She stopped a few inches in front of me. She had the reddest lips that I had ever seen. Her face looked pale in contrast. She was so beautiful, that I felt awe at the sight of her. I avoided her eyes, and again chose to look over my shoulder at the woody slope behind me.

"Are your parents down there?" she asked.

I nodded, still looking away. "I ran away."

The woman crouched beside me, sitting on her heels. "Why?"



"I don't know."

"You don't know?" she asked sweetly.

"No." I looked at the ground and started idly kicking some leaves. "I got mad."

"Oh. They must be worried about you, then."

"Maybe."

"I'm sure they are. I'm sure they love you very much."

I shrugged. "I guess."

"I'll take you back, if you like."

She slipped her hand into mine. It was cold to the touch. I looked down at her soft white hand, but not at her face. I squeezed my fingers around hers, not wanting her to let go.

"Okay."

"You're so shy," she said softly. "Won't you look at me?"

She placed her free hand under my chin, gently lifting my head until my eyes met hers. Her blue eyes shimmered hypnotically. I had never seen a blue as brilliant or glistening as the blue in her eyes. Her face was almost close enough to touch mine. Her breath felt warm against my skin. The coldness I had felt before was gone, replaced by a peace that I never knew before. I felt loved. I reached up to touch her face, brushing my hand lightly against her cheek. Her skin felt smooth, smoother than the softest cotton or silk I had ever touched. Unfamiliar emotions churned in me. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to kiss her, but in a way I'd never kissed a girl before.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Margaret."

"I'm Marc."

"I know," she whispered.

Slowly, she wrapped her arms about my waist and drew me closer, pressing me to her breasts. She closed her eyes and kissed me lightly on the lips. I stiffened. At first, I did not know what to do. Then my small arms returned the embrace, clutching tightly at her shirt; bunching up the silky fabric in my fists. Margaret kissed me on the cheek and on the forehead. The kisses were



motherly and affectionate, sultry and arousing. She unfastened the top button of my shirt, pulling it open until my neck and shoulder was exposed to the cool autumn air. She kept pressing soft, wet kisses to my face, running down my forehead to my neck. The feeling of the hot breath on my neck tickled me. Smiling, I relaxed my body and closed my eyes, surrendering myself to the woman. "I love you," I whispered.

"I love you, Marc."

She smiled again, exposing her wolfish fangs for the first time. Then she clamped her teeth down on my neck, tearing open my skin and rupturing my jugular vein. I half-screamed, half wailed, as tears of agony rose to my eyes. Blood rushed from the wound, spilling into Margaret's mouth. She held me tight as I flinched, not allowing a single drop of blood to spill down my neck. She swallowed, feeling a thrill of satisfaction as the blood slid down her throat.

My pulse raced. I could feel my heartbeat throbbing against my temples, hammering away, unrelenting. My knees started to buckle, but she held me erect, keeping her fangs locked deeply into my flesh. She hungrily lapped up spurt after spurt of blood, shivering with pleasure against me each time she swallowed the lifeblood. Just at the moment I thought I would die if she continued, I felt her stop.

The fangs slid free of the open wound. My head lolled back and I once again saw her face. Drops of my blood were rolling slowly down the side of her mouth. She caught them lazily with her tongue before they reached her chin. Her blue eyes looked warmly into mine and I felt my vision fading.

"Sleep now," she purred.

Then I blacked out.

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Ted held up the tape proudly and smiled. "I got a vampire movie to watch with Marc."
Cathy arched her eyebrow. Though she didn't have the same fanatical devotion to horror films as the rest of the family, she still retained a mild interest. "Really? Which one?"

"Oh... 'Lust for a Vampire,'" he replied as casually as he could. He was hoping her memory of films stayed as bad as usual, but he could tell by her expression that she recognized the name. They'd seen it when they were dating.

"Is that one of those Hammer movies with Ingrid Pitt and the lesbian vampires?"

Ted slipped off his coat and draped it over a hanger. "Yes, it is. Not Ingrid Pitt, but ... it is a lesbian vampire movie. Takes place at a girl's school."

"An hour and a half of full-frontal female nudity?" she asked, deadpan.

"It isn't that bad," he offered feebly. "It's just a harmless fantasy film." Ted often referred to horror films as fantasy to water down their image of self-torture as entertainment. Vampire movies weren't disturbing; they were fun. Apocalypse Now and Raging Bull, on the other hand...they were real horror films. Hammer movies were fantasy films, liked rated R versions of The Hobbit, with a healthy dose of female characters added and some sex thrown in. These films almost all took place in 18th and 19th century Germany, featured romantic castles, formidable aristocratic vampires, charming villages, taverns with kindly old inkeepers who would warn travelers not to go to the castle... And the taverns would have buxom serving wenches with frilly, low-cut Swiss Miss dresses on. Hardly a horror movie at all! These films were merely an escape from the monotony of the remarkably un-sexy Staten Island suburbs and their legions of semi-attached, near-identically designed houses, small patches of perfectly manicured grass pretending to be front lawns and back yards, and parking spaces on the street too small to accommodate your average Volkswagen Beetle..

"That's not fantasy - that's pornography." Cathy looked back down at her book. "You think you're showing that to an eight-year-old boy?"

It was just as well she assumed he wasn't planning on showing it to Brian as well. "I've already shown him a couple. We watched The Hunger the other night."

"And you don't think that had a bad effect on him?" mom asked.

"Well, he seemed to enjoy the nude love scene between Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve. But when I asked him who he'd rather be bitten by, he said Susan Sarandon. I was kind of disappointed to hear that. I would have preferred it if he'd said Catherine Deneuve. But he's young. He'll learn."

"But these movies equate sex and death."

"Sure they do. But they make it look like such a fun way to die. If you gotta go, there's probably no better way to go. If only we could all die that way. Instead of ... you know ... in some hospital attached to an IV and ... cancer. Vampire women are certainly preferable to cancer."

"I don't know..."

"But Marc loves these films."

"I think you love these films. Marc told me he prefers Godzilla."

"But he loves vampire movies, too. Especially Salems Lot and Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter."

"Oh, fine, fine." Cathy sighed. She was tired of being the bad guy all the time and she really didn't want to continue arguing. What she wanted to do was read in peace. "Just fast forward all the nudity."

Ted glanced at the orange box with a frown. "We can't watch the tits?"

"No tits," she insisted.

With an annoyed snort, Ted retrieved his coat from the closet and threw it back over his shoulders. Irritated, Cathy looked up again from her book. "Where are you going now?"

"I'm going back to Monte's Video Warehouse and exchanging the movie for The Bride of Frankenstein. That one's a harmless black-and-white. Not Rated R."

It was this sort of reaction that always exasperated her. "But I just said you could watch



it. Just fast forward all the scenes with the breasts.”

“If I do that, then there’s nothing left of the film worth watching,” Ted huffed, and stalked out of the house.

Cathy sat there thoughtfully in the silence. A moment later she shook her head and chuckled and returned to her Bronte novel.

At least Marc hasn't been having any nightmares yet, she thought.

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