

BEYOND THE TREES

by

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INT. KITCHEN -- DAY

A family prepares dinner on a marble island in the middle of the room. The father (40s) slices meat. The mother (40s) makes salad. Both are wearing business-casual attire. They stand stiff and tense, and they avoid one another: no speaking, no touching, no eye contact.

The son (12) slips into the house through the side entrance. He doesn't look at either parent as he enters the kitchen. The oven clock reads 6:37; school gets out at 3:00. Neither notices him until he drapes his backpack over a high-backed chair.

MOTHER

Hi, honey. Wash your hands. We're about to eat.

FATHER

Can you get drinks? I'll have a water.

MOTHER

I'll have water. With lemon.

The son makes no move to acknowledge them, but he grabs three cubs from the overhead cupboard, fills them with water, and brings them to the table. He doesn't bother with the lemon. He returns to the kitchen to grab utensils and napkins. With food in hand, the father follows him back to the dining room. The mother pauses, waiting for the father to sit before joining them.

INT. DINING ROOM -- DAY

The family is seated at a small wooden table. The mother and father face one another. Taut shoulders, curled toes, held breath. Nobody looks at anybody. The son stares out the bay window at their backyard. Thick, tall trees hide the yard from prying eyes. He knows what's coming.

FATHER

(to the mother)
Hand me the mustard.

MOTHER

Can't you see I'm using it?

FATHER

I meant after you're done with it.

The mother squeezes the bottle of mustard too hard, drowning her dinner in yellow.

MOTHER

It's always what you MEAN. How am I supposed to know what you're trying to say?

The father's tone turns harsh.

FATHER

I can't SAY anything around you.

The boy hasn't touched his food. He's still looking out the window. Anywhere but here.

MOTHER

Well. I sure as hell can't give you the benefit of the doubt anymore, can I.

FATHER

Don't you dare go there. I didn't even—

The mother rises swiftly, knocking her chair back, and points her finger at the father. As the chair slides, it hits a groove in the hardwood and falls over. No one cares.

MOTHER

Don't fucking lie to me!

The father balls up his fists. His fingers are purple.

FATHER

Listen to me! I didn't—

MOTHER

Listen to you—hah! So I can hear about how good her blowjob was?

BAM! The father bangs his fists onto the table. The boy doesn't flinch.

FATHER

Damn it, woman! You don't know what you're talking about.

MOTHER

I bet she's just as sick as you.

FATHER

Shut the fuck up. NOW.

MOTHER

Would she fuck you harder if she knew you were married?

On and on and on. The boy ignores them. Their voices blur together.

Eventually the boy grabs his utensils and clanks them against his plate. Nothing. He gets up and heads to his room, taking his food with him.

He looks back when he reaches the stairs. They still haven't noticed his absence. The mother throws the bottle of mustard at the father, staining his button-down. He trudges up the stairs.

INT. KITCHEN -- DAY

The boy walks into the kitchen. He's getting ready for school. An empty lunchbox sags on the island, and his backpack rests where he left it. Aside from the beeping of stainless-steel machines, the house is quiet.

He notices a sticky note by his lunchbox. He picks it up to read it. It's hastily scribbled, almost illegible. "Hi, bud. Had to run before your mother got up. Everything in fridge." He crumples up the note, opens the drawer to the trash, and lets it fall in. It isn't worth a throw.

He moves to the fridge, pulling open its double doors. He grabs bread, turkey, cheese. He layers the meat on a slice of bread, then tops it with cheese and a second bread slice. He puts it in a sandwich bag and then in his lunchbox, not bothering to cut it. Lunchbox in hand, he shoulders his backpack and walks out the door.

INT. SCHOOL BUS -- DAY

The bus reeks of kids. Everyone is LOUD. Some are yelling, some are laughing, some are crying. Chaos. A paper airplane flies through the air and strikes someone in the head. More yelling, laughing, crying. The leather seats are worn and sticky, smeared with gum and candy and who knows what.

Towards the back of the bus, the boy plays with the holes in the seat in front of him. He's quiet. He doesn't seem to notice the yelling, and the other kids don't seem to notice him.

The bus stops at Sugar Street. His stop. He stares out the window at his house, expressionless. He doesn't move. The bus driver glares at him through his rearview mirror.

BUS DRIVER

Can't wait all day, kid. Keep it moving!

He stands slowly. He walks past several rows of seats before realizing he forgot his things. He turns back to grab them.

BUS DRIVER (CONT'D)

Let's go!

He wades through the rows, his steps heavy. The other kids are lost in their own worlds. He looks at the ground and watches his feet shuffle forward.

He makes it to the front and descends the steps. The bus driver lets out an annoyed huff and shakes his head.

BUS DRIVER (CONT'D)

About time.

The bus lurches forward as soon as the boy's feet hit the sidewalk. He trudges home.

INT. BEDROOM -- NIGHT

The boy lies on his bed, his head propped up by pillows. The mother kneels beside him. Lego sets and Funko Pops line floating shelves behind him. A mirror that has yet to be hung rests against his dresser. By the door is a bookcase filled to the brim with fiction novels. A sound machine lies on his bedside table. His closet doors are closed, but there are other monsters to worry about.

The mother pats his head. He cringes. She doesn't notice.

MOTHER

Good night, honey. Don't let the bedbugs bite.

The mother stands, pulls the covers up to his shoulders, and kisses his forehead. Another cringe. He watches her leave. She's two steps from the door when the father's shadow appears.

They stare at each other. Neither of them move.

After a minute, the father moves to push the mother out of the way. She doesn't budge.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Don't touch me.

FATHER

I'm just trying to say goodnight to my son.

The father puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes her again. Her weight shifts, but she still blocks the doorframe. The boy doesn't move, either.

MOTHER

Don't touch me!

The mother, aggressive now, pushes the father back. The bedroom door is still open, but the boy can't see either of them. Good. Easier to pretend. He turns on the sound machine, upping the volume. Ocean waves drown out the yells.

As the minutes pass, the boy grows angry. He palms his sheets and pulls; they're too tight to budge, but he tries and tries anyway. His breath is shallow. He doesn't cry. He's all out of tears.

He lets go of his sheets and slides out of bed, crossing the room to his closet. He can hear yelling over the crashing waves. He doesn't look at them. Instead, he opens the closet and pulls out his suitcase. It's only a carry-on, but he doesn't care.

He grabs a bit of everything from his dresser and stuffs it all into his suitcase. He manages to fit his favorite book and stuffed animal. It's so packed he has to kneel on top of the lid to zip up the suitcase. He doesn't worry about being quiet.

He pushes himself up and turns to face the mirror. The mirror is angled upward such that the mother and father tower above him. Surrounding him. Suffocating him. He waits. They yell. He gives up and returns to the closet.

He sits to put on his newest pair of tennis shoes, retying them to make the laces extra tight. He feels the carpet, stiff yet soft. He looks at his room for the last time.

He rolls onto his knees and pulls his suitcase up with him. He opens the shutters, unlocks the latch, and slides the window up. The backyard lies past a short section of roof. A tree limb sticks out near the roof, though it's still a few feet away. The trees... No one will see him leave.

He exhales. No going back.

EXT. BACKYARD -- NIGHT

He heaves his suitcase onto the roof and climbs through the opening. He slides on his butt down to the edge of the roof. He lowers his suitcase as far as he can, then drops it onto a bush. It slides off and falls onto the lawn with a thud. He stares at it for a moment before getting to his feet.

He angles himself toward the tree limb and, before doubts arrive, jumps.

He grabs onto the limb. The tree shakes and his fingers slip with sweat, but he works his hand around a branch to gain leverage. He waits for the tree to stop shaking before climbing down. He walks onto the lawn.

No more yelling. No more trudging.

He raises his hands above his head and lets himself smile.

Time for life beyond the trees.

END.