

“The Trees”

I awoke violently once again. The whispering which had taunted me constantly was becoming louder and louder, almost too loud to bear. I sat up and grabbed my rifle, loading it through the top, pulling the bolt, and aiming it at the door. Every single night since building my Cabin deep in the Appalachian woods, something has haunted me, following me, driving me insane. I moved into these woods after my discharge from the Army to try to escape the constant horrors that had plagued me since the ambush, but it seems that my demons are chasing me and won't relent until they've gotten what they wanted, whatever that may be. I tense my finger on the trigger of my rifle. Whatever is chasing me doesn't just want me dead, it wants me suffering. Both I and It know that it is more than capable of ending my life, but I haven't the slightest clue why it's waiting so long to put me out of my misery.

It wasn't long after my injury in Vietnam that it first appeared. I initially thought I was just experiencing PTSD, or shock, as any person exploded by an RPG would. The doctors could explain away what I was seeing and experiencing and would say it was just a result of the attack on my psyche. When I told the doctors about the whispers, they explained to me that “my brain's just rattled,” and that it would subside before long. They told me the creature outside my window was an effect of losing my eye, and that my brain was attempting to “fill in the gaps.” I should never have believed them.

I blindly searched the floor next to my cot for my prosthetic leg. Dawn had broken and I was safe, at least safer than I was before the sun had appeared. The whispers of the trees had returned back to a tolerable murmur, however they never stopped. I attached the peg, which was carved out of Red Spruce, to the stump just beyond my knee and departed my cabin to carry out my daily dues. During the days I would hunt animals and gather berries and mushrooms for food, picking up firewood along the way. Most of these trips would go without much incident, aside from the odd rustle among the leaves or distant scream from the forest that

seems to be common around these parts. Today's hunt was different. The areas of the woods I had familiarized myself with had now felt wrong, as if they weren't the same woods. I was no more than fifty feet into the wood before my skin began to crawl and the trees began to whisper again, whispering like last night. I turned around on my heels and began to sprint back to my cabin; I knew that my time was coming soon, but I sought to prolong the inevitable.

As I tore through the unrelenting forest the whispering of the trees turned into yelling, then into deafening screams. No matter how hard I looked or how fast I ran, the woods continued. I knew how far I was, I knew which direction my cabin was, I had been into this section of the woods every single day. Something was wrong, I had moved miles away from where I began. I had no chance, it had caught up to me. The only thing I could do at this point was pray that my death would involve minimal suffering. I dropped to my knees and began sobbing as the trees fell silent. I heard the sound of massive amounts of earth and lumber moving, rushing towards me like a river of mud and stone. As the sound of snapping roots and flowing earth approached, it fell silent before me. As I held my head in my hands, sobbing, I heard a solitary whisper, frail and like sandpaper against my ears.

"Look to me..." It beckoned. I was trembling with fear. It was the creature that had been pursuing me since the ambush. I lifted my head from my hands and looked up to meet its gaze.. In front of me was a gargantuan spruce tree, hundreds upon hundreds of feet high. In its trunk were the withered bodies of hundreds of tortured men, whispering, screaming, begging. The bodies of these men, their skin fused into the bark of the trees, were all faces I vaguely recognized. Trapped within this tree was the soul of every person I had killed in the war. The tree's voice, rough like it's bark, called again.

"Look upon me, look upon the souls you've damned." I continued to weep as I watched the tortured souls of the Vietnamese Army grab and claw at me, begging for mercy. "You were responsible for the loss of these men, freedom fighters for their homeland," The tree's voice tore against my ears. "The gunshots, explosions and fires that led to their deaths all came from you.

You are responsible. You did this. You are the monster, not I.” The voice of the tree had become too much to bear, the pain of what it had told me became too much to deal with. I continue to sob as I look upon the tree of souls. I feel its roots wrap around my prosthesis and drag it into the earth, and then I am urged by the tree into a deep sleep.

I awake outside my cabin, my clothes torn and dirty. As I attempt to pull myself off of the ground I fall. My leg is gone, but so too is the whispering of the trees.