

Woods

For most of my adult life, I've avoided my family at nearly all costs. I tell people that it's because I had a rough childhood, and that's not entirely inaccurate. My mother was a Valium popping, cheap-champagne chasing, dead-eyed burnout who gave up her never-would-have-happened dreams of being a model when she got pregnant with me at 19, and my father was a glory-denied Gulf War vet who worked his 9-5 data entry job, came home and watched the History Channel while he drank cheap beer or toked on a joint.

If I was a generation older, Dad would have at least had the dignity of working in a factory or laying drywall or something manly like that, but around the turn of the millennium community college graduates like him had to put on their short sleeved button-ups, clip on a tie and sit in an office park, alternatively freezing or sweating his balls off in the climate controlled hell, being bossed around by the same little fucks he used to pick on in high school. The smarter-than-him but not-really-all-that-smart kids who'd managed to go to Christopher Newport or Longwood (and yes, that's the real name of a college in Virginia. And yes, even as a 27-year-old man, it makes me laugh) for a four-year stint of shitty weed and frat party keg stands, then came back to the same Northern Virginia town they grew up in to live out their days.

For most of my childhood, my little brother Jim — born just two years after me, not quite Irish twins but close enough — was the only person in my family I liked. We were compatriots, sharing friends at school and the latest nu-metal albums all the same.

For years, though, I've avoided Jim more than anyone. More than my Mom, who starts drinking at noon and had an affair two years ago with a kid I went to highschool with. More than dad, who found out about the affair but just laughed and went back to the TV, where Fox News has replaced the History Channel, causing him to e-mail me at least once a week with the latest story of how "Obummer is *definitively* a Muslim." More than the kids I hung out with in high school, who mostly still do exactly what they did back then — sit in the parking lot of the shopping center, drinking 40s and working on new skateboarding tricks.

I say it's because I hate what Jim has become, another Confederate flag wearing NoVa hick. But really it's because, ever since I was 15, I haven't known if the Jim I was seeing was really Jim. I haven't known if it was my brother, or something much, much worse. Something horrible. Something I can't shake.

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I liked to sing a lot as a kid. I may have listened to Slipknot and Korn and Mudvayne, but that was mostly to fit in with the other misfit goth kids who populated the stairs outside of the auditorium in the high school every morning. If they'd known that I spent a lot of my time at home listening to the soundtracks from "Rent" and "The King and I" that I illegally downloaded, the girls wouldn't have been interested in me (not that they really were anyway) and the guys would have called me a pussy, and my already precarious place in the group would surely have been in doubt. (Just as a side note, for all the shit that high school jocks get, never let anyone fool you; every group of adolescents will find a way to ostracize and other someone, and to make their life a living hell.)

So, whenever I could, I'd sneak off to an abandoned field a few miles from the yellow slanted roofed house where my family dwelled — one of the few open space left in Northern Virginia that hadn't been turned into a development of McMansions — and I'd just sing. Whatever I felt like. Songs from musicals, the hymns I still remembered from when my Jesus-freak of a grandmother made me go to Church with her as a kid, songs I liked from the radio.

I tried a few times to sing in my room or in the backyard, but my mother would always start screaming, or my dad would start laughing, or the rednecks who lived next door would start throwing things at me from over the waist high fence as they drank cans of warm beer and tinkered with the reeking dirt bikes they rode around.

(When I was a bit younger, Pauly Reynolds, one of the leaders of the gang of white trash assholes that populated the neighborhood, would pedal his bicycle up behind me while I walked to the bus stop, hit me in the back of the head with a whiffle ball bat, spit on me, call me a faggot and ride away. The last time I saw Jim, about 2 years ago, it was with Pauly at one of the shitty bars that populate the wastelands of NoVa. Pauly actually isn't too bad anymore; still a hick, but unlike most of them he has an actual job at the gas station, instead of just sitting outside of it smoking cigarettes. I still used him as an excuse to leave when looking at Jim started triggering panic attacks so bad I couldn't hold my beer without shaking.)

So, one fine Saturday in May of 2003, I woke up early, pulled on my baggy jeans and a ripped black t-shirt, and got on my bike to ride off the sing by myself for a little. The ride over was pretty uneventful, and I was actually feeling pretty happy when I got there — a rare feeling or most 15 year-olds, I know, but especially for me. Later in the day Jim and I were going to go sneak into the new Matrix movie with some friends, and if I played things right I wouldn't be back in my house until both of my parents had gone to bed or, more likely, passed out in the living room.

I hopped off my bike and just started, well, singing. I didn't know anything about how to sing, so I basically just fucking belted it, and it probably sounded terrible, but I didn't care. You spend so much of your adolescence caring about how you look, how you sound, how other people are perceiving you. Those times I spent singing alone in that field — and this was the last time I ever went there — were some of the only times I was completely walls-down, not-giving-a-fuck.

Then I saw Jim.

He came out of the woods on the edge of the field wearing a bright blue t-shirt. Unlike most of us in the quasi-punk group of kids I hung out with, Jim liked bright clothes more than the standard issue black fatigues. He was a smart kid, and he liked to stand out, I think.

"Jim, the fuck you doing here?" I said. I could have sworn I'd heard him snoring in his room when I left that morning, but I didn't think too hard about it. He must have left early to tool around on the moped he'd bought with the money he made mowing lawns, I thought to myself.

"Yo, I've got something cool to show you. Follow me," he said, turning and walking into the woods.

Now, as you may have guessed already, my home wasn't exactly one with a lot of rules. Generally, as long as the cops or the school weren't calling, my parents didn't give two shits what Jim and I got up to. The woods, though, were different. Ever since I could remember, my mom told us not to go into the woods. They were dangerous, she said. When we were younger we always wanted to go in and explore, but she would never let us. By the time we got old enough to go around by ourselves, the woods had mostly lost their appeal, as we preferred wandering around the mall or sitting and smoking cigarettes in the parking lot of the 7-11. When I saw Jim outside of the woods on that day, I honestly hadn't thought about the fact that we weren't supposed to go into them in years.

"I dunno, man. Mom always said —"

"Fuck mom. Follow me, pussy."

Jim didn't normally get like this, at least not with me. He'd swear and mess around with the rest of us, but when he didn't feel like he had to perform for the other kids at school he was, truly, a kind kid.

"Fuck you man," I said, giving it right back to him. "What the fuck is so important you need to bring me into the woods to show me?"

"Just fucking come with me, it'll be worth it."

I halted for a second, chewing on my lower lip like I always did, which the kids at school always said made me look girly.

"Quit chewing your lip, faggot."

*Holy shit.* I thought to myself. *What the hell has gotten into him?* Jim knew that I hated the way kids teased me for that. A bit shocked and more than a bit hurt, I stood there, mouth agape for one more beat before I silently started walking towards the edge of the woods, where Jim smiled, put his arm around me and walked with me over the line of burned out trees that lined the outside of the forest.

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For most of the walk into the woods, Jim didn't say anything, just looked back at me occasionally to see that I was still there. After about 10 minute of trekking. I was watching Jim closely, still smarting from his comment about my lip-chewing and seriously concerned about whatever it was we were going to see.

"How much longer we have to go?" I asked when we'd been walking for about 10 minutes. I'd never realized just how dense these woods got, and I wasn't entirely sure we'd be able to get back to the field where I'd left my bike.

"Just a bit further. What were you doing out here anyway?"

"Nothing. Just, I dunno, riding around on my bike."

"You weren't on your bike when I saw you. Seriously, what were you doing out here?"

“Fine. I came out here to sing. I like to practice, my singing, cause I’m thinking about, I dunno, maybe taking chorus at school next year, and mom and dad always get pissed when I try to practice anywhere near the house, so I just bike out here to sing sometimes. But don’t tell anyone, please, man.”

Jim stopped and turned around. He looked at me, eyeing me from head to toe with a gleam in his eyes that made it seem like whatever vile mood he was in was going to continue, like he was looking for the next nasty (and probably homophobic — I wasn’t and am not gay, by the way, but in middle school the slightest deviance from perceived masculinity means open season on whichever queer dared to do so) he could say to me. But he didn’t. He just nodded and turned around, continuing our hike into the woods we’d been under express orders not to go into for as long as I could remember.

True to his word, around five minutes later Jim stopped and took a sharp turn leftward, indicating that whatever it was we were going to see was just a few yards away. In front of us was a thicket of dense pine needles, which Jim pushed through. After breathing in sharply and closing my eyes, I followed him through.

Suddenly, and this seemed impossible given the relative density of the woods we’d been in up to this point, we were in a big clearing surrounded by a wall of pine. In the middle was a big rock. There was a faint yelping in the distance, and the entire place smelled faintly of sulfur and stale vomit.

“Jim. WHAT. THE. FU-”

“Shut up. Just shut your fucking mouth for a minute and come with me.”

He reached out and grabbed my arm, gripping tightly, so tightly that I swear I felt my flesh burning beneath his fingertips. I looked down at his hand and saw that his nails were longer than I’d ever seen him let them grow before, and each one was filthy, with a deep maroon clay packed into the nail bed.

Jim took off, moving his feet so quickly I swear he got some air. He dragged me behind. At this point my mind was completely swimming, confused about where we were, what we were doing here, and what in the fuck had gotten into my kindhearted little brother. Seemingly in no time at all, we’d reached the rock at the center of the clearing.

That’s when I realized that there were four or five other kids there — I really don’t remember exactly how many — all with dark eyes and gap-toothed grins, wearing tattered old rags for clothes and carrying sharpened sticks in their hands. And that’s also when I discovered the source of the yelping.

It was a dog. A puppy, by the looks of it, tied to the rock. Probably a mutt, but mostly yellow lab. Its legs were splayed out, but it looked like he’d mostly stopped struggling. Her big, brown eyes looked right at me with a terror that may have even surpassed my own in that moment.

One of the dark eyed teenagers reached to the ground, grabbed a large stick and, in one incredibly smooth motion, brought it over his head and down onto the dog’s back, causing the pathetic creature to yowl and wriggle fruitlessly against her bonds.

I tried to yell, but nothing came out. I wasn't an animal lover, per se, but come on, who doesn't like dogs. I hadn't even realized that Jim had let go of me, moving towards the dark-eyed boys and picking up two sharpened sticks.

Suddenly, he was next to me again.

"Stab the bitch," he said, handing me one of the makeshift spears, already coated in dried blood from some other victim.

"Jim WHAT THE FUCK," I said, finding my voice.

"Just do it," he said coolly, displaying none of the anger that had flashed up throughout the brief and terrifying experience of the day so far. "Look, man, I'm fucking tired of you being a pussy loser, and I know you are too. Take some fucking power in in your life, even if its just power over some fucking mutt. Do it."

While he was talking, I studied Jim carefully through my terror, realizing that it wasn't just his fingernails that were dirty. His face was too. His lips were caked with a pukey crust, and his eyes looked like they'd been darkened with coal. I realized then that I wasn't even sure Jim had been home last night, because I'd gotten home first from school and gone right to my room to avoid my parents and hadn't ever heard him come in.

"Dude, fuck no, I don't know what the fuck you're doing but I'm fucking out of here. Jesus fucking chr-- WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING"

Jim and one of the dark-eyed boys had both lunged towards the dog and started stabbing, bringing their crude pokers up and down with the vigor of a rock drummer breaking into a his big solo. Tears in my eyes, I turned and took off running.

"YOU'LL BE BACK," Jim screamed as the other dark-eyed boys joined him in the kill. I turned back just before I went through the thicket of pine needles we'd come in. I saw sprays of blood coming up from the dogs soon-to-be lifeless body, drenching all of them. "Or I will be."

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I ran, salty tears blinding me, in no particular direction as fast as I could. At one point I looked down and realized that a spray of dogs blood had gotten on my jeans, so I stopped and puked, unable to stop retching until my own blood came up from my blistering esophagus. After that I wandered, cloudy minded, for what I think was hours, though I'm really not sure. Eventually, I saw light coming from the other side of the trees, and I walked out of the woods, realizing I had come out on the complete other side of the forest from where I'd entered, from where my bike was (and may still be, for all I know.)

After a hot second, I was able to get my bearings and figured out how to walk home, which took just over two hours. When I finally walked up the path to my home, past the lawn furniture and other detritus strewn across the browning sod, I broke the fuck down, totally unable to keep in any of the anger and fear and fucking confusion that had been building up. I stridently burst through the door screaming.

"MOM. DAD, Jim is in the woods by the old school and I don't know who the FUCK he's with but he's fucking gone of the deep end and he's killing a fucking dog and --"

“WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP?” my dad screamed from the next room. I smelled pot in the air, which was actually better than if he’d been drinking Beast. The my mom came sauntering down the stairs, holding a bottle of her favorite cheap, peach flavored champagne. Her hair was dirty, like it usually was, and her blue eyes were aflame in a way I didn’t normally see them.

“What did you say?” “Jim’s doing what?”

It was clear she was fucked up even more than usual. It was just past midday, but it was a Saturday, so that meant she didn’t have to pretend. An empty pill bottle was sitting next the the sink, a dull orange tombstone to the idea of mom remembering any of this conversation.

“Mom,” I said, trying and actually mostly succeeding to stay relatively calm. “I was down by the big field behind the old high school and Jim just came out of the fucking woods and --”

“I thought I told you not to go into those damn woods when you were a damn baby.”

“Yeah, I know, but Jim just kept telling me he had something to show me and --”

“Stop lying.” She looked at me with a mix of hate and fear, the same look I imagine I gave Jim that day when I was running through the thicket.

“Lying? Mom what the fuck I’m not LYING Jim has gone fucking mental and --”

“Jim HAS BEEN HERE ALL GODDAMN DAY. STOP LYING. WHERE IS MY SON?!”

She lunged at me, falling the rest of the way down the stairs and landing at the bottom of the stairs, a puddle of muscle relaxants and fizz. I reached to help her and she grasped at the side of my head, staring directly into my eyes.

“It is you,” she said softly. “It is you.”

“Mom what the fuck is going on? Jim hasn’t been here all day, he was at the woods, he fucking killed a dog.”

“That wasn’t your brother. Just look outside.”

I turned my head towards the back door and saw him, Jim, wearing coveralls and kneeling next to his moped. He had wrap-around headphones on and was tinkering with something.

“Mom what the --” I whispered, but she grabbed my face, tears softly falling down her cheeks.

“That wasn’t Jim. It was them. One of the things. The things your grandmother told me about. It was her who told me not to go into the woods. It was because of them that I spent every damn spare minute of my childhood in that church. Don’t go back to the woods, ever. Don’t go anywhere near them.”

She starting puking, then fell asleep where she stood. We never talked about it again, and to this day I don't know if she remembers that afternoon.

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I tried to forget it too. But evil has a way of latching onto you, and that day it latched onto me, in the form of my brother Jim. I'd start seeing him places where he couldn't possibly be. Skateboarding through the parking lot when I knew for a fact he was off on his moped. Standing in the corner of my history class, or in the crowd at my prom a few years later.

Oh, and I never sang again.

I couldn't deal with being around Jim, because my mind, already anxious by nature, would start scrambling, looking for dirt under his fingernails or any trace of darkness to his eyes. He realized I was being distant, too and I know it hurt him. He stopped trying at all in school, and dropped out not long after I shipped off for college in New York a few years later.

Yeah, I escaped. I escaped Northern Virginia, at least. I never escaped Jim. I thought that going to NYU would do it, that being hundreds of miles from my family and from those woods would finally set me free. But still, I saw him. In an empty subway car on my way back from a bar. In the crowd at the Union Square Farmers Market. One time I swear I saw him sitting right next to me in Psych 101, and I smelled the puke on his breath and felt his burning fingertips reach out and graze me as I walked out of the lecture hall and ran back to my dorm room to figure out how to drop the class.

I've tried a few times to go back and see Jim, or my parents, but honestly in the nine years since I left for school, I've been to Northern Virginia less than a half dozen times. It's been almost a year since I've seen Jim, and I'd honestly been doing pretty well.

Until yesterday, when I got a call from my mother.

Jim died.

He and one of his buddies, another dropout, were driving drunk down the main drag of our suburb and wrapped themselves around a light post. Both of them died on impact.

The funeral is in three days, and I don't think I can go. I don't think I can go to bury my own brother — the kid who was once my best friend, who I abandoned because of something that wasn't his fault, who I left to become another hick dropout while I got the fancy writing job in New York. I can't go and bury him. I can't say goodbye, I can't stand by his casket and weep.

I'm afraid to look in that casket. Because I don't know who or what will be looking back at me.