

Dummy

Amos fought the urge to look up as he passed under the branches of the suicide tree. He'd never liked walking under that tree, not for as long as he could remember. And now the kid would be up there, like every afternoon this week, nestling in the twisting branches as if that were the safest place in the world.

Amos wasn't sure if the kid couldn't speak, or if he wouldn't, or if he was just too stupid to have anything to say. He lived on the same block as Amos, in the run-down house on the corner, the one the kid and his thin, unsmiling father had moved to the previous summer. There were rumors about what had happened to the kid's mother: one of the girls at school had heard she was in the nuthouse; Amos' friend Stitch theorized that she was being kept prisoner up in the attic and that's why the kid wouldn't talk. The kid's dad, Mr. Tadeo, discouraged overtures from the neighbors with a flinty stare, and spoke no more than was necessary. The kid didn't say anything at all.

Amos ignored him all summer. But now that school had started, the kid was in three of Amos' classes. Because the kid's first name was Matt, Stitch and Jake and CJ gave Amos crap about being stuck in classes with "Mute Tardo", although they mostly called the kid Dummy. Worse, the kid rode the same bus as Amos, got off at the same stop and loped eagerly along the same block with his ungainly shuffle as though he had somewhere important to be. And now he had taken to climbing the suicide tree.

That's what the neighborhood kids called the huge oak that overshadowed the small wood frame house where Amos and his mom lived, the front walk rumbled by its ancient roots. The story went that the tree had a voice that drove mad those who heard it on windy nights, commanding them to climb the tree, sending them higher and higher into its treacherous branches until they slipped and fell to their deaths.

Amos' mother had told him to stay out of the big oak, one command he was relieved to obey. It was true that during a big storm, its limbs whipped violently, the outer branches scraping against Amos's bedroom window, and the whole tree creaked as if foretelling impending ruin. The suicide tree was another reason for not inviting his new ninth grade friends over to his house, besides the fact that his mom didn't approve of them. CJ, especially, liked to make crazy dares.

That wasn't a problem at the moment. His mom worked from home and he'd needed a reason to explain away the afternoons he spent hanging out at Stitch's house where no adults were home until late, if they showed up at all. So he'd lied about being chosen to be the freshman football team manager, a story his mom bought until the first parent conference of the year. The frosh coach taught the math class Amos was already close to flunking. "This is a trust issue," his mother pronounced, and grounded Amos.

On the first afternoon of his sentence, Amos had watched in disbelief as the kid shinnied up the suicide tree. It was like the kid's usual clumsiness had been left on the ground with his books. "What do you do, Dummy, *live* in that tree?" Amos muttered as he watched the kid's hands and feet flow, lofting himself into the tree as though it had grown there just for him.

“Hey, Tardo! Go home, get lost,” he called softly, unwilling to catch anyone else’s attention. The kid looked down at Amos and smiled. Amos spotted a loose stone in the dirt near his feet and chucked it in the kid’s direction. The kid ducked, grinning as though at a huge joke, and extended an arm toward Amos, beckoning him.

Amos drew back sharply. Something cold tickled along his spine. He turned his back on the kid, stalked up the walkway and into his house, slamming the front door.

“I’m *home*, Mom,” he pointed out as he passed his mother in her downstairs office. She nodded and smiled absently, intent on her laptop.

After dinner, Amos went upstairs to bed. The streetlight shone through the branches of the oak, casting shadows across his window blind. The kid couldn’t still be up there, could he? Amos discovered he didn’t feel like going near the window, so he left the blind closed. It took him forever to fall asleep.

His mom shook him awake. “Hustle up or you’ll be late,” she told him. Amos roused groggily, rubbing his eyes to clear the images of grasping branches that remained from his dreams, as his mother stepped around the clothes on his floor and raised the blind to let in the morning light.

Amos felt his stomach lurch as his eyes darted to the window. He saw nothing in the oak tree except a couple of birds. “Stupid,” he muttered to himself, and headed for the shower.

The first period bell rang as Amos slid into homeroom. The kid was already sitting in the back row, staring straight ahead. Amos slouched into his assigned seat in the front.

At lunch break. Amos joined his buddies on the cement steps of the amphitheater. CJ, Stitch, and Jake jabbered on and on about stuff he was no longer part of, now he was grounded. “Dude, you shoulda seen Mute Tardo yesterday,” he laughed. “He was like, clear at the top of that tree outside my house, just hanging out, seriously all afternoon. Looked like an albino monkey.”

“What, is Dummy, like, *stalking* you now?” asked CJ. “Too weird. I’d take care of that if I were you.” Amos shrugged, finding he wanted to change the subject.

At home that afternoon, Amos kept his blind shut.

After dinner, Amos’s mom reminded him twice to take out the garbage. Amos nodded, but found things to do instead. When he finally headed upstairs to bed, he found the sticky note his mom had left for him on the landing: *Garbage!* Sighing, he headed into the kitchen, retrieved the overstuffed, sour bags, shoved them into the bin outside, and trundled it through the side yard to the curb. The suicide tree spread above him, threading its shadows through the pool of light from the streetlamp, weaving in the breeze, groaning slightly.

The wind picked up: Amos shivered. His head tilted upwards as though drawn by a string. Amos could see Dummy, perched high above him. The breeze ruffled the kid’s hair, which shone almost white in the spilling light. Dummy reached out an arm, his hand pointing at Amos and then making a slow summoning motion.

“What are you *doing* here?” hissed Amos. There was a concentration of rustling and Amos held his breath as the kid’s form dropped downward from branch to branch. In a fluid motion, the kid leapt the last six feet from the bottom branch and landed lightly on

his feet. He was still smiling, looking at Amos as though the two of them shared some great secret.

The kid laughed silently and pointed at the tree. Amos shivered again. “Stay away from me, dipwad,” Amos said, hearing his words blow away into the unsteady air.

The kid took another look at Amos and nodded toward the tree, his gaze expectant. Amos backed away. The kid’s face dropped back into its habitual vacancy: retrieving his books from the ground, he resumed his awkward shamble and headed into the darkness.

In his room, Amos avoided looking at his window as he climbed into bed.

The oak tree loomed outside, pulling Amos into lurching, dizzying visions. Leaves brushed his face; his hands gripped bark; his feet scrambled against moss, higher and higher, the ground spinning below him deliriously until he gasped, each branch and limb and twig vaulting him upwards. He woke up flailing, grasping for dream branches. He thought about the kid, who would be waiting at the corner for the morning bus.

Amos was downstairs, dressed and ready, a full half hour early. “Mom, I’m walking today,” he called to her, grabbing a granola bar from the pantry.

“Are you sure?” he heard his mother answer, “looks like it’s going to rain,” but the front door closed on her words. The oak tree hovered above him, a charcoal-colored cloud lowering over its branches. Amos hustled off toward school, taking a route that avoided the corner where the bus stopped.

At lunch break, he sought out CJ, Stitch and Jake. “I want your backup with this Dummy situation,” he told them.

“About time, buddy,” replied CJ. The four of them gathered in a whispered conversation that lasted until Amos stalked off to class, his stomach clenching.

Amos knew where the kid’s locker was, where he’d be after the final period. With CJ and the others, it was easy to surround him, easy to herd him away from the bus line without anybody noticing. Dummy walked among them unresistingly. They went out behind the track, behind the bleachers, dropping into the small, weedy ravine that ran along the fenced back yards of the closest houses.

This part was harder. Amos had never beaten anybody up before. The first blow — Amos wasn’t even sure where it came from, probably CJ — landed square in the kid’s gut, knocking him to his knees, scattering his books and papers in the weeds. Amos shrieked, “Stay *away*, you freak, hear me?” as he felt his fist connect with Dummy’s soft cheek, whipping the kid’s head around, sending him headfirst into the dirt. The kid just laid there, his silence flowing out and settling upon the others. Stitch gave him a light, exploratory kick. There was no response.

“Jeez, Amos, what’d you do, kill him?” barked CJ with a nervous laugh.

“Shut *up*, I didn’t even hit him hard,” said Amos, his chest heaving. Fat drops of rain spattered the kid’s jacket and dripped into Amos’s eyes. He approached the boy’s crumpled form. “Hey, Dummy, you in there?” he asked. He leaned and peered at the boy’s face.

The kid’s bloodied mouth grinned crookedly; his blue eyes looked into Amos’s own.

Amos sprang back on his heels. The others stared at him. “What a wuss!” he jeered. He forced a laugh. “Hey, not like he’s gonna *say* anything, right? He’s fine, he’s fine,” Amos said as he backed away. “C’mon, we’re outta here.” Amos retrieved his backpack and scrambled back up the ravine. CJ, Stitch and Jake followed him, casting doubtful glances over their shoulders.

The storm had picked up. Amos left his friends at the end of the field and jogged off toward home.

Rain pooled in his eyes, superimposing a series of watery images on the path in front of him: the kid in the oak tree, smiling serenely; his effortless descent from its dark branches; the look on his face as Amos punched him. Amos blinked, but the images only shuttered by faster and faster. He found himself running, stumbling, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The sky darkened with astonishing speed, a distant rumble and a flash sweeping across the gap in the hills to the west.

Amos was running blindly now. Lightning crackled; thunder bounded in his sternum. He could see nothing but the vision of the kid still lying at the bottom of the ravine.

Amos slammed into something rough and unyielding, scraping his wet face. He had fetched up against the trunk of the suicide tree. The air exploded from his throat. A cramp gripped his side and he doubled over, fighting to catch his breath. The wind buffeted his ears with hollow sounds, or was that someone calling to him? His house was only steps away; as he turned his head he could see the light spreading from its windows into the gathering darkness.

His legs scissored crazily as he took a step toward his front walkway. His foot caught in one of the oak's roots and he fell hard on his elbow, sending a shock down his arm. The wind rose higher, whipping the branches back and forth through the light from the streetlamp, moaning, murmuring. A voice from somewhere nearby formed words that whirled into Amos's ears and were ripped away again before he could make sense of them. He struggled to stand up. His mom would be waiting for him, inside the house, wondering where he was . . .

A jolt of lightning whitened the world for an instant, followed by a crash of thunder and a shower of sparks from the streetlamp: everything went black. In a daze, Amos craned his neck and peered upwards into utter darkness, his thoughts suspended.

Another flash. In the sudden light, Amos could see the figure of the kid, of Dummy, perched among the whipping branches of the oak, straddling one of the great limbs as though riding a plunging beast. The blue eyes connected with Amos's, a hand extended toward him, summoning. And now the voice sounded clearly in Amos's ears, a voice he had never heard before but recognized. *Amos, it'll be okay. C'mon, come on up. It's great up here. You can do it.*

Amos felt a wave of energy surge through his spine. A thought filled him: he could make things right, erase the image of the broken kid in the ravine if only he could reach him now, join him in the tree's ecstatic dance. Amos scrambled for the lowest branch. His hands caught hold. He swung for an instant, his feet finding purchase, and suddenly he was climbing, almost flying through the swaying branches, pulled up through the vector of the storm, finding footholds and handholds as he needed them,

higher and higher, toward Dummy's waiting shadow. A shout of something, perhaps fear, perhaps joy, erupted from his throat. He was nearly there, inches from the branch where Dummy waited, calling, *that's it, Amos, keep going, just a little higher . . .*

A zipping, white-hot bolt lit the tree. A crack, a creaking, a calamity of separation rolled into Amos's eardrums as he felt the oak's trunk lurch, totter, give way beneath him. His grasp on the upper branches failed: he flew backward through empty air.

Amos splayed on his back, his glazed eyes staring up into the tree's empty branches as the streetlamp sputtered on again. *There's no one there*, Amos thought dimly. The voice grazed his ear, a low laugh carried on the dying wind.

Dummy, whispered the voice as Amos felt a final breath wheeze through his shattered chest.

