

Tree of Blood

Ben Crowder

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Scene: The dark attic of an old family homestead. Knick-knacks and boxes are strewn about the room, some on a table, with a small chest off to the side. FRANK and MARTHA—brother and sister, each in their twenties—come through the door holding flashlights.

MARTHA

We've got to make sure we're back before the bus leaves...

FRANK

(Looking around with the flashlight, poking through boxes.)

Martha. We'll be back *way* before the bus leaves. I've got a watch. Don't worry.

MARTHA

Mom and Dad are going to *kill* us if they ever find out we came here.

FRANK

They just say that. Seriously, it's fine. And *I'm* not going to tell them.

MARTHA

Let's just hurry. Look for anything that looks family history-ish.

FRANK

Besides, why is this place off-limits?

MARTHA

Frank. No. We're not here for that.

(Starts looking around as well.)

Look, we've got ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Let's just find the important records and get out, okay?

FRANK

Sure. But aren't you even just a *little* bit curious?

MARTHA

We don't have time, Frank. You can solve the "mystery" later, once we're on the bus—you'll have *two hours*. Can't you wait till then?

FRANK

I just... feel like they're hiding something. I don't know. Ten minutes? We'd better get started.

(They continue walking around the attic, stopping to look inside the boxes. As soon as MARTHA is turned away, FRANK covers the light from his flashlight and tiptoes up behind her.)

MARTHA

(Pulls a book out of the box and opens it.)

We want journals, vital records, deeds, that sort of thing. Okay?

(Silence.)

Frank?

FRANK

(Whispers)

Martha.

MARTHA

(Shrieks)

Frank!

(FRANK uncovers his flashlight and pats her on the back.)

You ... Aagggh! Don't do that. Please.

(MARTHA starts reading through the book.)

Look for journals. Like this one.

FRANK

Whose is it?

(He looks into the box while she looks through the journal. After rummaging around for a bit, he pulls out a stack of papers.)

MARTHA

There's no name on it. It's a guy, though. I can tell by his handwriting.

FRANK

(Looks at a deed.)

Hmm, this is—

MARTHA

The journal starts in 1869 ...

FRANK

Hey, this deed belongs to Franklin. Franklin Harrell. Wasn't he that one great-great-whatever grandfather of ours, the one Grandpa called a demon? The black sheep?

MARTHA

Demon, yes. Great-great-“whatever” grandfather, no. *That* was his brother, James. Our line is through his son Adam.

FRANK

What if that's why the house is off-limits? Franklin wasn't human. Ew, we're descended from a ...

MARTHA

Frank. That's crazy. Stop. Anyway, this journal guy—who is definitely human, thank you very much—is talking about courting some girl. He calls her “M.” Isn't that cute?

FRANK

Uh huh.

(Puts the deed back in the box and notices some lines etched into the table.)

Hey, check this out.

MARTHA

(Somewhat sarcastically)

Wow, someone marked the days on the table. That's pretty amazing. Records, Frank. Records.

FRANK

No no no, there's eleven of them. Scraped out.

(Fingers the lines.)

MARTHA

So?

FRANK

Eleven headstones outside, under the tree. Remember?

MARTHA

Frank.

FRANK

Or it could be the eleven apostles, after Judas ... you know.

MARTHA

Frank, we don't have time for this.

FRANK

And you call yourself a historian?

MARTHA

We're here to get the records. That's it.

FRANK

Two more lines. In red.

MARTHA

Start going through a box, okay?

FRANK

Our history isn't just on pieces of paper in those boxes, Martha. It's everywhere. The paintings on the walls, the silverware downstairs, it's even in the ground, in the air.

(MARTHA shakes her head and, ignoring him, goes back to reading through the journal. FRANK pulls out a newspaper clipping.)

MARTHA

Hey, he married her! And her name's Martha.

FRANK

Runs in the family.

MARTHA

(Continues flipping through the pages of the journal.)

Yeah. She's pregnant with their first—

FRANK

Whoa, get a load of this. "HORRIBLE MURDER—Mr. James Harrell, of Mount Gilead, Montgomery County, North Carolina, is supposed to have been murdered at his house last Friday, about two o'clock in the morning." Oh my gosh. "The authorities suspect his brother Franklin to be the perpetrator of this hellish deed. The two brothers were heard quarrelling shortly before the five-year-old son of the deceased found his father's body in the parlor with Franklin's knife nearby."

MARTHA

Ugh.

FRANK

That's what they've been covering up. Murder.

MARTHA

(Takes the clipping from FRANK and continues reading.)

"The late Mr. Harrell was a young man and a good citizen, married to Martha Hamilton of Norwood. He was the proud father of two sons." Married to Martha?

(Looks at the journal.)

This is James's journal.

FRANK

And Franklin killed him. In cold blood. Wow.

MARTHA

Sometimes family history is so depressing.

(FRANKLIN walks onstage, carrying a candle.)

MARTHA

We shouldn't be up here. In this house. At all.

FRANKLIN

I didn't do it.

FRANK

(Takes the clipping back from her.)

It's *fine*, Martha. Do you really think I'd let anything happen to you? Besides,

(Sings the next line.)

Family history, I am doing it, my family history ...

MARTHA

I just feel like ... something's wrong. Like a breeze or something.

FRANK

It was hundreds of years ago. The house is empty. We're safe.

MARTHA

No. No, there's something else. Dark. Like, I don't know, blood in the wood or something.

FRANKLIN

(Painfully remembering)

The tree ...

(Shakes himself out of it.)

Sun's almost down. You can't stay.

FRANK

Your imagination is *way* too active.

MARTHA

What? *My* imagination, Mr. Descended-from-Demons? Frank. Please. I'm going.

FRANKLIN

Good. Good. Go.

FRANK

Whoa whoa whoa, Martha. We come all the way out here—it was *your* idea, remember?—and you're already on your way out the door. You just going to leave all the records?

MARTHA

Grab a box. C'mon, let's go. This attic gives me the creeps.

FRANKLIN

You have to get out before sunset. Before the—

FRANK

Martha. They're all dead. Gone. Do you see anybody floating around here? No.

MARTHA

It's not that...

(Pause.)

I don't know what it is, but something's not right.

FRANK

You're not a kid anymore.

MARTHA

That has nothing to do with it. Grab a box.

(Picks up a box.)

FRANKLIN

Get out, while you still can.

FRANK

Let's at least look through the boxes some more. Make sure we're getting the most important records. I mean, what if we miss the key to the puzzle? Makes it a useless trip, doesn't it.

MARTHA

Frank.

FRANKLIN

Just take them and go.

MARTHA

Frank.

FRANKLIN

Listen to your sister.

FRANK

(Waves the clipping at her.)

We've still got a few minutes before the bus leaves. Besides, don't you care enough to find out whether they caught him?

I told you, I didn't kill—

FRANKLIN

No. I don't.

MARTHA

You don't?

FRANKLIN

Some family historian *you* are.

FRANK

Please, Frank. Just ... let's go.

MARTHA

The curse will—

FRANKLIN

Fine. Go.

FRANK

I can't leave you here.

MARTHA
(Pause.)

I'm not scared. Just a few more minutes. Besides, you know the bus'll be late.

FRANK

Frank.

MARTHA
(Long silence.)

Hurry. Please, just hurry.

(Resignedly)

There's no time.

FRANKLIN

Hurry.

(Pause.)

I wonder what else they stashed up here.

FRANK
(Goes through the box, pulling out stacks of papers.)

I can't believe he killed his brother.

MARTHA

FRANKLIN

I told you, I didn't do it. It was ... an accident.

MARTHA

(Puts the box down and starts to look through it.)

I wonder why he killed him.

(Finds a sheaf of papers.)

Hey, here's something. Death records, I think.

FRANK

Money? A girl? There's lots of reasons why people kill.

MARTHA

But *family*?

(Looks through them.)

Yeah, death records. Well, the top ones, at least. Oh no. He didn't stop with James.

(Pause.)

I feel sick.

FRANK

What? What are you talking about?

MARTHA

He killed James's son, too. Russell. Obituary's attached.

FRANKLIN

How could I kill a—

MARTHA

Five years old.

FRANK

I guess we found our demon.

MARTHA

How could someone do something so awful?

FRANKLIN

The curse.

FRANK

Must've been sick in the head.

FRANKLIN

I didn't kill him. I promise. But you can't stay here. Once the darkness sets in ...

MARTHA

(Pokes around some more in the box.)

Hey, here's a letter from Martha. "Dear Anne, my life is a nightmare. Last night I was walking Adam to sleep—he's still scared of the dark—and I heard James and Franklin cursing at each other downstairs. Then silence. A few minutes later, Russell came up the stairs carrying Franklin's knife. Oh, Anne, come quickly. James is dead. I miss him so bad. Russell's too small, I don't think it was him, and ... and Franklin's locked up in his room. I'm scared."

FRANK

And?

MARTHA

That's the end.

FRANK

What kind of guy knifes his own brother?

FRANKLIN

You've got it all wrong.

MARTHA

Somebody cold. Cruel. Heartless.

FRANKLIN

I *loved* him. He was my brother.

FRANK

I wonder if his son watched him die.

FRANKLIN

I hope not.

MARTHA

Let's not ...

FRANKLIN

You really need to go. Before the—

FRANK

There's got to be more. About Russell.

(Pause.)

Oh my gosh. I bet Russell *did* see it. The murder. Franklin killed him, to keep him quiet.

FRANKLIN

That is *not* true.

MARTHA

I feel weird.

FRANKLIN

It scrapes away at your mind, gnaws on it.

FRANK

(Looks through some more boxes.)

Here's another journal.

FRANKLIN

It wasn't our fault.

FRANK

Adam Harrell.

MARTHA

James's son.

FRANK

I know.

FRANKLIN

He was the only one with enough sense to leave.

FRANK

(Reading the journal.)

Were *all* our ancestors farmers?

FRANKLIN

It's the house. We made it from the giant black tree out back. Beautiful, beautiful wood.

MARTHA

That's what people did.

FRANKLIN

Every time we chopped it down, it grew back.

FRANK

Looks like he moved to New York.

FRANKLIN

Just like we'd never cut it down. We thought it was a miracle. Sent from God.

MARTHA

Franklin didn't... Adam too, did he?

FRANK

I don't think so.

FRANKLIN

I don't know who made that tree, but it wasn't God. And I didn't kill anyone. Well, almost.

MARTHA

We need to get going. The bus'll be here in a few minutes.

FRANK

Hold on, I'm not ready yet.

(Continues reading Adam's journal.)

FRANKLIN

I don't want it to happen to you, too. Please.

MARTHA

Just hurry.

(Picks up James's journal again.)

FRANK

Get this. So, the last entry. Adam says he's about to ride back to the family home, against his wife's wishes. That's all he says, but then somebody—I think it's his son—scribbled this in: "Father's been gone for three weeks now. Mother says he's dead." There's a few blank lines, and then some more: "Father returned last night. He looked different, something with his eyes. Something wrong. He could hardly stand up straight. I went to help him but he pulled a knife out of his jacket and swung at me. He missed, but before we could stop him he jumped up onto the table and stabbed himself. The doctor arrived too late."

MARTHA

Morbid.

FRANKLIN

You're not safe here. Nobody is. Not since James ...

FRANK

This is our heritage?

FRANKLIN

A legacy of madness and blood.

MARTHA

We never should have come here. Better not to know.

(As she closes the journal, James's will, folded up, falls out from it. MARTHA bends over and picks it up while FRANK pokes around in more boxes.)

FRANKLIN

Towards the end, James wasn't himself. A buzzing in his head, pacing the house by night, glued to the back window. That last night I found him lying facedown on the roof, dangling Russell over the edge by the ankle, chanting in some language I'd never heard before.

MARTHA

(Unfolds it.)

A will.

FRANKLIN

Leave now before the sun—

MARTHA

Listen to this. "I, James Harrell, being of sound mind and body—"

FRANKLIN

No. No, the curse had already eaten away most of his mind.

MARTHA

"Hereby bequeath to my son Russell his inheritance—"

FRANKLIN

Night's almost here.

(Paces around the room.)

MARTHA

"The house and its furnishings."

FRANKLIN

You can read that later.

(Tries walking in front of Martha, waving his hands, but with no effect whatsoever.)

MARTHA

"To my son Adam I likewise bequeath his inheritance—the land and the barn."

FRANKLIN

Adam tried to burn it all down.

FRANK

I wonder what made Adam go crazy.

FRANKLIN

The tree got to him first. Before he even lit the match.

MARTHA

“To my beloved brother Franklin—”

FRANKLIN

What?

MARTHA

“The care of my two sons, Russell and Adam.”

FRANKLIN

If I hadn’t—

MARTHA

“May he be a better father to them than I have been.” And then Franklin killed him.

FRANKLIN

I would’ve done anything to bring him back.

(Pause.)

Anything.

FRANK

Wait. What about Martha?

FRANKLIN

James and I were best friends.

MARTHA

Franklin could help with the chores. You know, be the head of the household.

(Pause.)

Replace James. Ugh, that’s just wrong!

FRANKLIN

I tried to *save* James. And Russell. And you.

FRANK

So, what was James’s last entry?

FRANKLIN

He got to my knife somehow, after our quarrel. When I came back in, it was already too late.

MARTHA

(Opens the journal up to the last page.)

“Keep the Gorgon out of the swallowed freedom. Capsize my liquid—dark blade!—and take care of him inside the world.”

FRANK

Huh?

MARTHA

It’s ... complete nonsense. Almost like *Jabberwocky*.

FRANKLIN

That’s how he was talking before he ...

FRANK

Man.

FRANKLIN

Same thing with Russell a few days later. He was such a bright child. But then ... incoherent ...

MARTHA

English was James’s native language, wasn’t it?

FRANKLIN

The next night Martha found Russell’s body out under the tree. With my knife.

FRANK

Yeah, I think so. A code, maybe?

FRANKLIN

By the end, James wasn’t there anymore. Just an empty shell with all that darkness inside.

MARTHA

Maybe.

FRANKLIN

You’ve got to get out of here or it’ll soak into you.

FRANK

“Gorgon.” Medusa?

MARTHA

Yeah.

FRANKLIN

Like branches growing inside your head, trying to break through your skull.

FRANK

Snakes. Snakes strangle. But Franklin used a knife, so that can't be it.

FRANKLIN

No! After we found Russell, Martha chased me out, screaming. But I didn't do it.

FRANK

"Swallowed freedom." What swallows freedom?

FRANKLIN

The buzzing got louder. Crept down my spine, till it was everywhere. Cold. Then I started seeing them.

FRANK

Jail swallows freedom. Maybe he was doing something illegal?

MARTHA

(Suddenly realizes the time.)

The bus! We've got to go.

FRANKLIN

Phantoms. Walking nightmares.

FRANK

Hold on.

(Looks at his watch.)

We've still got two minutes. More than enough time.

MARTHA

Do you see how many boxes there are?

FRANKLIN

Leave the boxes. It's not worth it.

FRANK

We'll be fine. I can carry four or five at a time.

FRANKLIN

Oh no. The sun's already down. But maybe this time will be different, maybe if you run you can still—

(A bloodstained knife appears on the table.)

FRANK

Hey, look at this.

(He picks up the knife.)

MARTHA

Oh my gosh oh my gosh oh my gosh.

FRANKLIN

(Hangs his head in defeat.)

Or maybe not.

FRANK

Where'd it come from? I swear it wasn't there before.

MARTHA

We gotta go. Now. Just... drop it, Frank.

(Grabs a box.)

Something's really, seriously messed up here.

FRANK

I think you're right.

(Examines the knife.)

FRANKLIN

Don't. Don't...

(A slow, deep breathing sound gradually grows louder.)

MARTHA

Frank. Let's get these boxes and go.

(Pause.)

Stop breathing so loud, it's making me nervous.

FRANK

I'm not breathing loud at all. But there's a weird buzzing in my head.

(He puts the knife back on the table.)

FRANKLIN

We cut the tree down thirteen times. Before we realized what it was. I remember now.

MARTHA

Frank.

FRANKLIN

It wants thirteen lives in return.

FRANK

I think the smottled leech is halfway up the ladder.

MARTHA

What?

FRANKLIN

Out there in the forest that night I babbled, too, before I...

(Motions stabbing himself.)

FRANK

Don't twinge, it'll all execute in another footstone.

MARTHA

Frank, you're scaring me. Stop it.

FRANKLIN

The debt is almost settled. It won't be long now.

FRANK

(Grabs his head and starts to moan.)

My sky. Aah. It's curdled, the rock is curdled. Aahhh.

FRANKLIN

Close your eyes, Martha. It's never a pretty sight.

FRANK

(The pain gets more intense.)

Out! Crawling! Aahh. Scrape the windshield off the stand, it's...

(Still standing, but writhing about in agony.)

MARTHA

Frank! We've got to go *now!*

(Drops the boxes and runs to the door to open it. It's grown shut.)

FRANK

You!

(He fixates on MARTHA with a wide-eyed look of terror on his face.)

Snakeskin! Don't glare the eyes!

MARTHA

It won't open! Frank!

(MARTHA keeps trying to open it. Shaking his head and still in a great deal of pain, FRANK points an accusing finger at her.)

FRANK

Can't let the ... can't ... Gorgon.

MARTHA

Oh no oh no oh no. Frank, it's grown shut, little branches, all over it. Oh my gosh.

FRANK

Gorgon!

(He slowly staggers towards MARTHA in fear, picking up the knife from the table on the way.)

MARTHA

Frank! The door. Cut the *door*.

FRANKLIN

It's not you that he sees anymore. He thinks you're one of the demons.

FRANK

(He stops for a moment, raises the knife, looks back and forth between it and MARTHA.)

Severed snakeskin, chop the Gorgon round and round.

(He starts walking towards her again, trembling.)

MARTHA

Frank! Stop! Frank!

(All lights go out except for FRANKLIN's candle. MARTHA shrieks "Frank!" at the top of her lungs.)

FRANKLIN

(Fatalistically, to no one in particular)

I tried.

(Blows out candle.)

The end.