

Oliver DESBRUSLAIS

“I REMEMBER THE CLOWN”

Dedicated to Jonah Atkins

Endless amounts of children filled the streets of the town, all of them going door to door asking for sweets. Some were dressed up as clowns or as vampires or skeletons or zombies or witches. Few used their lights in the darkness of the night — but the braver didn't. Amongst the small crowd, two zombies, one wizard and two vampires wondered in the middle of the road. They walked past all of the homes and past all of the people. The decorations on the houses just weren't scary enough for them, then needed something more... realistic. The five craved something *scary* instead of receiving just sweets, although the sweets were a good reward.

“Where are we going?” asked a zombie called Jack. “Shouldn't we tell our parents?”

“Nah, it'll be fine,” replied the wizard known as Ben. “They know we're in the village.”

“But what if we get lost?” asked Tom the vampire.

“We won't,” replied Ben.

“It'll be fun, come on,” said the other zombie. He was called Robin. “It'll be scary.”

“I'm not usually great at scary things...” said the final vampire, Todd.

“But you love Halloween,” mumbled Robin the zombie.

“Yeah, because we get sweets. Going into the forest won't give us sweets.”

Robin was scared too, but he didn't admit it. Not to them. If he showed he was scared they might not want to talk to him any more. Even though they had been friends for almost all their lives, he didn't want anything to happen so that he would lose them.

They wanted to go into the forest simply because it was scary. Robin had to agree with Todd, it did seem a little stupid to go there and not get anything out of it. But if he told Ben that they should go back and trick or treat, he'd just say “Are you a wimp?” and then Robin would go with him anyway. He had always followed Ben. Ben was the cool guy, the one that everyone liked, but he always chose to come with Robin, Todd, Jack and Tom. Robin always assumed he did because they lived in the same village.

There had been times in his life where he had wondered if Ben really did like him, but it would never last long. He liked Ben, and Ben liked him. He hoped.

Tonight they were all following Ben into the forest. Ben had heard creepy stories about how people had been murdered down there, and that people that went into the forest never came back. Just stories, of course.

Halloween was made of stories. As soon as Ben had suggested the idea, Tom had bounced up and said they should definitely go. Because he had said yes, the others had to as well. As the day drew closer, the butterflies would build in Robin's stomach. And even Tom had lost some of his confidence.

Down the road, they broke away from all of the kids and headed towards the forest. In the distance, the dark houses were foggy and the moon was big. Robin could hardly see around and wondered how they were going to see in the forest. Then Jack revealed he had a torch and the road brightened in front of them.

"Maybe we should turn off the light," Ben whispered spookily to them.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Todd quickly replied.

"Is someone scared?" asked Tom as they turned off the road and followed the dry mud path to the forest. From where they stood, only the tops of the trees' broke out from the fog, leaving them blind to the rest of the forest.

"I'm not scared. I just think we should *see* where we're going, idiot." Todd always covered his fear with insults.

"Alright then, sure," Tom replied like he was trying to egg Todd on.

They continued down the path until the forest reached them. Any other day, the forest would seem like a great place to go. They could make a camp and make some arrows for a bow, but on Halloween...

Dark tree trunks loomed above them like adults trying to stop them from doing something stupid. Inside the forest, everything went unusually quiet. No sound could be heard apart from their foot steps breaking the solid mud or cracking on a stick. Todd took the torch from Jack and pointed it at a path going through some bushes. "Nice spot, Todd," Ben congratulated. Why did Todd point that out? He obviously didn't want to be here. Robin assumed that he wanted to make up for when he didn't want the light turned out.

On the journey along the path, a stick cracked and Jack gasped and said, "Who was that?" No one replied and then Jack let out a little laugh. "Your faces," he breathed through small fits of laughter. From then, the trip was full of them trying to out show one another, seeing how scared they all were. Even Robin joined in. But Ben never seemed scared.

Round a corner, the path finished at a worn down house. Surrounded by fog, the house was made of dark wood that looked like it had never seen sunlight before. Even though it looked sturdy, it was wonky in places. The house was like an old man, lingering on a moment where you didn't know if he was going to fall over.

Ben lead the way to the front door, and then went to knock on it.

"Wait," Jack interrupted, "d'you think that's a good idea?"

"Yeah sure," Ben smiled. "Tom, what d'you think?"

"Why not?" he shrugged.

Robin never said anything.

Ben reached over to knock on the door. Robin thought he saw Ben's arm stop for a moment before he hit the door.

There wasn't a sound in the forest, Robin realised. Quiet as it was, he could hear his heart lightly pushing the blood through his ears.

The door creaked open. A clown poked his head through and Ben jumped back. None of them said anything.

"Aren't you going to say it?" asked the clown, after looking at them for a long time. His voice seemed unusually high pitched.

"Say... Say what?" stuttered Jack.

"Trick or treat," smiled the clown.

"T-trick or treat?" Tom asked, questioning his question.

"Trick!" shouted the clown and they all jumped back. The clown laughed and then held out five packets of sweets to Ben. "Come on then, take them," he grinned with yellow teeth. Hesitantly, Robin and the other three moved forwards to collect their sweets. As Jack took his, the clown looked at him and said "I like you."

"Thanks?" Jack finally replied.

"You better all go home now," the clown grinned, showing those yellow teeth again. He looked at Jack once more then as he shut the door the clown held his finger to his mouth hissing "*Shh*."

They all walked back home, tucking into their sweets.

The next day Ben knocked at Robin's door. Luckily he had just finished his cereal and so he went to open it. School wasn't on today so they all didn't have anything to do. So why Ben was it his door, Robin had no idea. He opened the door.

"Hi Robin," Ben said, smiling as usual.

"Hey Ben... You alright?" Robin ask him because he didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah. You?" That was it. Then he realised. Ben doesn't usually just have a normal conversation like that. Something else was happening here.

"What are you trying to get me to do?" sighed Robin.

"The clown's house, I want to go to it again," he grinned like the clown had. This house excited him too much. It was probably all he had thought about when he finally went to bed.

Robin hesitated. "Why not ask one of the others?" He didn't really feel like going to the creepy clowns house. There was something about it that he couldn't quite... well, he wasn't sure.

"Because you were the least scared last night. Of what I saw."

Robin was the *least* scared? He doubted that. But Ben thought it... Maybe he could try to be a cool as Ben, then maybe everyone would want to start talking to him. But, it *was* scary.

"I uh... I'll have to check with my parents."

Robin could have just said that his parents said no and then he wouldn't have needed to go. But Ben had come to *him* by *himself*. He couldn't leave Ben thinking he was a wimp, could he? No. And on that moment Robin just walked out the door and shut it behind him.

"Don't you have to check with your parents?" even Ben was shocked. Good.

"Nah." Robin bet he was cool.

They followed the same trail down to the forest. Covering the roads they walked were bits of sweet wrapper and some whole sweets. Robin had eaten most of his already, the same as everyone, he assumed. Except from Jack. He always kept loads of his sweets and ate them over time. Robin suspected that Jack still had some from last year at his house.

They got to the forest. Quickly, Ben found the other path that went through the bushes and lead the way along it, talking to Robin as he did so. Ben never had much to talk about, usually girls. That was the only thing he ever seemed to talk about, and he was only twelve. They were all only twelve.

The path ended, but there wasn't a big house, only more forest. There wasn't even a mark left on the ground to suggest there was even a house there before.

It was gone.

The next day, it was found that Jack had gone missing.

Robin didn't cry; he always thought that Jack would just turn up somewhere. Perhaps he needed to run away for a bit. He didn't think of the clown, or tell anyone else about it; it was just some creepy memory of Halloween that was shadowed by the fact that his friend had disappeared. People went out searching, the police was called and they looked everywhere with Jack's parents for so long. The police stopped looking first. Then everyone else said they couldn't give as much time into this as they wanted. But Jack's parents never stopped looking. You could slowly see them lose hope month after month, their faces holding a permanent sadness.

Snow came and coated everything in a few inches of ice. They said it was one of the coldest winters in recorded history, but they said that every year. The snow melted and then the flowers started to sprout. Grass had never been brighter. Summer felt like it lasted a long time, as long as those green fields. But then the days grew shorter, until it was dark and darker at night. Before Robin knew it, it was Halloween again, and Ben, Tom, Todd and Robin were out, walking the streets and going door to door dressed in the same costumes as the previous year.

When they had gathered up, Robin smiled at the memory of Jack. It had always been the five of them together, but not for a year now. There had been nights where Robin had sat on his bed, just thinking about his memories of Jack. Over the last year, the four hadn't really spent much time together, they all felt sad if they all got together without Jack. But did Ben? Even though he was upset Jack was missing, it didn't stop him going out with his other friends. Maybe it was just how he mourned for Jack.

Their bags were almost full of sweets when Ben mentioned the house in the forest. Such a distant memory. "Remember the house in the forest?"

Robin felt an awkward tension build around them all. He didn't know why though. He had forgotten about the house. Ben spoke again, "You know, the one with the clown in it?" That clown again. Robin had forgotten about the clown. Why did Ben always talk about the clown? There was something about that clown he didn't like, but that's probably what every clown was like at Halloween.

"Oh yeah," Todd remembered. "That was... That was a bit creepy if I'm honest." The memories had slowly been creeping back to Robin. He could almost see the house again. And there was something else...

"It was gone the next day," Ben said. "Me and Robin went to look." Now Robin remembered. The clown and the house, both gone. How a house could simply disappear like that was a mystery to Robin. He always assumed that it was a prank or something... Well, no, he hadn't. He had forgotten about it because Jack vanished as well-

"- Did the clown take him?" Robin blurted.

"What? No," replied Tom. "Don't be stupid."

"But the house *and* Jack went missing!" Robin didn't realise how loud he was. His voice went quiet near the end in the hopes no one heard him.

"Was it really gone? The whole thing?" Todd asked, looking a little unnerved.

"Yeah," Ben said, almost excitedly, "there wasn't a mark left or anything. I think we should go back." Everyone but Ben stopped walking for a moment. The other's looked scared but Robin was angry. Jack had gone missing the next day last year and that event made him forget completely about the house and the clown. But Ben, he hadn't forgotten about the house. Was it all that mattered to him? Even during school Ben didn't seem bothered about Jack's disappearance.

"Have you not been sad for Jack *at all*?" cried Robin, so suddenly that the other's looked startled.

"What are you talking about?" Ben replied, protective of himself.

"This house was the last we saw of Jack and you don't seem bothered by that."

“Why should I be...?”

“Our friend went *missing!* You care more about the house than *Jack*. He was one of our best friends and you don’t even mention him.”

“Well *I’m* going to the house. Or are you too *scared* to?” Ben narrowed his eyes and stood right in front of him.

“*See?* You just did it there! You didn’t even think about Jack.”

Tom was quiet for a moment. “I think Jack would want to go if he was here.”

“He didn’t want to last year,” Robin couldn’t believe him.

“How would you remember? You forgot the house,” Ben argued.

“And did you forget our friend?”

Ben moved back, his eyes fixed on Robin’s. “I’m going to the house, wimp. Come on guys.” And he continued down the street.

Robin was dismayed when he saw the others moving with Ben, but Todd turned around and said, “Come on. If you go he won’t be angry with you.”

“I’m not sure if I care...” Robin almost sighed. But now he was sad, sad for his friend Jack. If Robin had gone missing, would Ben have spared him a thought?

“You have to. Everyone’ll be talking about it,” Todd explained as Tom and Ben were walking ahead down the road.

“Why would- no one knows about the house, Todd.”

“They do now. Ben told them.”

Robin looked over to Ben and Tom. They were waiting. Ben called for Todd to hurry up. Ben was always in charge. He was always the coolest. He was always the one to do different, cooler things. “Of course he did,” sighed Robin. Then they walked on to meet them. Ben didn’t look at Robin. He even avoid eye contact for a while. It was like Robin wasn’t even there, like he was a ghost.

The two vampires, one zombie and one wizard walked along the dry mud path that lead to the forest. In the distance the forest was foggy, with the tallest trees poking out of the fallen cloud. It got dark by the time they reached the forest and they could hardly see. They had all forgotten to bring a light with them. Jack would have brought one.

They struggled to find the path between the bushes. Robin had considered turning back a few times, but then he’d be alone in the forest. The forest was always the scariest place to be alone in at night, especially so on Halloween.

As they walked close together, they didn’t speak much. Tom tried to start a conversation once, but it failed and died just like all the conversations they tried to start. Robin never said a word. They were deep into the forest now and there were only four of them, and they were all only thirteen.

Between the bushes, there was a path. A path that Robin knew would lead to somewhere he didn’t want it to. He felt himself move with the pack, as the others moved onto the path, Robin was forced to follow in fear of being left behind. Despite how dark it was, he could see the path. He remembered that at any moment the path should bend, leading them straight to it.

Sure enough, the path began to bend, the trees guiding them the right way.

And there it was.

The clown's house.

It looked the same as it did the year before. It was old and new at the same time, it was broken and yet fixed. Parts of it bent in unusual ways. Yet still, it looked like an old cottage that belonged on a long road in the middle of a field. He couldn't see Ben, but Robin bet he was grinning.

They walked in a line towards the house, Robin dreading each step. Now matter how hard he wanted it to go, it was always there every time he opened his eyes. His feet never faltered, they took him to the house. The clown's house.

Todd, Robin and Ben stopped before the house, and Ben walked on. He walked up the little steps that lead to the slightly raised porch. The wood creaked slightly as Ben walked on it, but that didn't stop him. It happened too fast, Ben was by the door before Robin had even seen him walk to it. This time Ben raised his hand without hesitation.

He knocked.

A moment passed of horrible silence, and then the door opened. A dark green glow came from inside the house and then a clown popped his head through. "Hello?" he asked, his voice sounded like it broke to a high pitch whenever he spoke. His face was covered in thick white make up, slightly more sloppy than last year. His red smile painted on his face seemed different, like it wasn't as friendly. His head was blading, and where there was hair, it was grown out long and green.

"Hi there," Ben replied, holding out his hand for the sweets he expected.

"That's rude," replied the clown. "You just assume I have to give you something?"

"Uh... It's Halloween," replied Ben, his hand faltered. "You have to give us sweets."

"No I don't," the clown said bluntly.

"Why not?" Ben looked a mix between angry and confused.

"Because I don't want to," replied the clown, like he got this all the time.

"But it's Halloween!"

"You're not very good at arguments, aren't you?"

"Don't you remember us?" asked Tom. Immediately after saying that he regretted it. Ben was the only person that seemed OK with talking to the clown.

"Why would I?"

"You're in the middle of a forest and no one comes down here but us...?" asked Ben. He wasn't scared at all now, he seemed to look a bit disappointed.

"Have I disappointed you, boy?" the clown said, sadly.

"Yeah, a little," Ben said bluntly.

"Rude again," grinned the clown, his teeth worse than before. "I like you too."

He reached behind him, into the green glow inside of the house, and held out four packets of sweets. Robin thought he saw the clown say "thanks" to someone behind him. "Here you go, just for you four." He looked right at Ben for a bit, then his head twisted round to look at Robin, dead in the eye.

You'll be last because you're my favourite.

Ben didn't come knocking the next day. He wasn't in school the next term. When Robin's mum came to him to tell him what had happened, somehow, Robin already knew.

Ben's missing.

He didn't know what to think. At most times he had found Ben annoying, and he hadn't really liked him as much as he thought. But he missed him. Guilt flooded through Robin everytime he thought of Ben. Had Ben's last thoughts of him been that Robin didn't like him? They had argued and their last moments together

were somehow tense. On the walk from the clown's house they hadn't even spoken to each other, Ben ignored him. What would have happened if he was still here? Would he have continued to ignore him until Robin was some random person that he used to know? Or would they have become friends again? They could have even become closer friends. All of these possibilities, taken away from him.

The police thought that Ben had simply run away, as it turned out life at home wasn't great for him. He argued with his parents and he stayed out too late and mixed with the wrong people. Robin hoped he didn't cause any of Ben's pain. He didn't want to be a reason for someone running home.

Jack's missing.

Ben's parents talked to Jack's a lot. They desperately searched for reasons why this happened. It was spooky, someone had said, that they both went missing the day after Halloween. That was a link, along with the same school, same friends, only they both had different lives. Jack was a much more gentle boy. He hated films where people died, whereas Ben loved them; the more gore the better. Their parents never got anywhere with their hopes, they just talked to each other about how much they loved their children.

Days passed and then weeks. No sign of Ben was found, and there was little hope for Jack. After a year people seem to... forget. Most of the fuss was about Ben because he was the last, but now and then people would mention Jack. It didn't spread to the news. Globally, hardly anyone heard about it.

Then a year passed. Lots of people in school had began talking to Robin more and he made many new friends. Then it was Halloween. Over the past year he had grown bored of the event. He didn't go trick or treating that night. Nothing to remind him of the house. Nothing to remind him of the clown.

Another year passed. Jack and Ben's disappearances became a distant memory, and Robin instead focused on the days he had spent with them as friends. The days when Jack was happy and when Ben wasn't mean.

More years past and Robin left his school and moved onto college with great results. After college he considered taking a gap year, then decided against it. He loved university, but then that ended. He got a job and he enjoyed that, too. All of his days at school and his memories of his old friends became a memory some place far away. Something to look at and remember from time to time. He met someone and eventually settled down with them. They had a son. And then another son. Robin and Lucy then got married. He loved his life and everything was goo-

"Who sent this letter?" Robin asked as he held a letter addressed to him. There was nothing on the envelope but *Robin*. How it found it's way here, Robin has no idea.

"I don't know, open it," replied Lucy. She sipped a cup of hot chocolate and sat at the table with her laptop. Her glasses were on so she was doing her work, giving distant replies as she focused. Or tried to.

Robin sat opposite her and opened the letter. He tore one side open and then pulled out the white letter from inside. "Hm."

"What is it?" asked Lucy, somewhat absently as she scrolled through a web page out of procrastination. Her blonde hair was tied up.

"I have absolutely no idea," he studied the letter. There was nothing on it but an address and a time. He then passed it over to Lucy who was already holding out her hand. Her blue eyes moved away from the computer screen to the letter.

"It's near where you used to live as a kid, isn't it?" she looked over to him, still holding the letter in her hands.

"Yeah," he replied.

"And it wants you to go on *Halloween*, spooky," she smirked. He couldn't help but smile at that smirk.

"What if I go and I just get robbed or something?" he questioned.

“God,” she laughed, “You can’t say *that!* It wasn’t that bad there.”

“It was a rough neighborhood, I could get stabbed,” he looked to the floor like he had a damaged past. And then remembered, “Two of my friends went missing the day after Halloween...”

The sudden change of mood caught Lucy and she didn’t know what to say. “You told me, I thought it was best not to mention it.”

“It was a long time ago anyway. Do you think I should go...?”

“Well, maybe another friend of yours is doing a sort of get together thing? You know, perhaps it’s to remember the two you lost,” she smiled sadly.

“Wow... To see Todd and Tom again, my God, they’d both be, what? *Thirty* now.” He tried to imagine what they looked like as grown men, but he couldn’t. He could hardly remember their faces back when they were at school. That must have been the last he saw of them, the last day of secondary school. About fourteen years ago.

“You’re thirty too,” she laughed, moving her eyes back to her computer.

“Yeah but, *they’ll* be thirty. That’s weird.” Robin wondered what they were up to now, what jobs they had and if they were married. He had always meant to see them again, but they were people of the past and time moved too quickly.

“So you’re gonna’ go?”

“Well, I guess so,” he got up and moved to Lucy’s computer. He slowly edged his way over until she gave up and passed it to him. They sat together as he searched for the address. They tried many websites, but nothing came up. According to the internet, the house didn’t seem to exist.

“We’ll have to meet in a pub or something, I guess,” Robin thought out loud.

“You should probably call them to check this whole thing is happening and you’re not going to be, as you said, robbed and stabbed.”

Robin searched for them online, seeing if any of them had some kind of presence on the internet. He couldn’t find Tom, but he found Todd. When he called him he almost gasped when he heard his voice. Asking if it was Todd who had set this all up, Todd replied with “Nah, I thought it was you, actually,” and he revealed that he had also received a letter. Robin then asked if Todd had Tom’s number. He said he didn’t and pointed out that they didn’t have one another’s numbers. Even though they couldn’t get hold of Tom, the two decided they’d meet there on Halloween. How they would find each other, they didn’t have a clue, but they would do it anyway. Robin told Todd not to tell him anything about his life because he wanted to save that for when they met one another. Todd said, “Alright, weirdo,” then they both hung up and Robin sat down and smiled.

Later, he said goodnight to the kids and watched some TV with his wife for a while. Then they both went to sleep.

The drive to his hometown took four hours. It was meant to take around two and a half, but he got caught in traffic and there were diversions and lots and lots of rain. Eventually, he got there. When he drove in, the first thing he noticed was that the town hadn’t changed. Houses had been built here and there, but apart from that, it was basically the same place. Driving down the main street, he remembered all the times he and his friends had biked down here and all of the times they had fallen off. Everything was a little bit damp after the rain and it made the town dull. Whatever colour it used to have, it was gone now. The whole place was ever so slightly... greyer. Like the town itself was crying, rather than it simply being the rain.

It took him a while to find somewhere he could park where he was sure he wouldn't get a ticket. No one was here to check, so he wasn't sure why he was so worried. Once the car was finally parked, he walked along the street looking for a pub. There was definitely one here, but he was just a boy so it didn't interest him. By the time he finally caught up with his friends and started drinking, he had moved out of the town.

He found the pub, *Red Heart*, on the main road. There were a few cars parked outside, and it was unusually busy. As soon as he walked inside, a wave of noise hit him. Laughter filled the room as people drunk perhaps a little too much. Groups sat around the tables, all talking about whatever it was that interested them. Some sat as couples and some were a group of men and some people over there were talking about the football. Robin didn't like football, or he really just didn't care about it.

Someone got up and waved at Robin to bring him over, it took him a moment to see that it was Todd and then a big smile appeared on his face. As he approached the table, there was someone else sitting with them. A boy, now a man, he knew as Tom. He was dressed up casually and smiled when he saw Robin. "Robin!" Tom spoke over the noise, he then stood up and went for a hug. Robin accepted it.

"It's good to see you," Robin greeted, "but I didn't know you were coming, how'd you know to come?" Their hug broke off and Robin gave Todd a hug.

"He got a new phone and he doesn't do the whole internet thing very well," laughed Todd. Their hug finished and they all sat around the table. Robin was pleasantly surprised when he found there was a drink for him already on the table. Todd had already drunk some of his, and Tom hadn't started yet. He often liked to wait for others before he started, Robin remembered. Unless that was someone else.

"That would have made it a whole lot easier," sighed Robin as he picked up his drink and had a sip. "You should probably get that sorted out."

"I'm not just going to make a blog or something just for you guys," he laughed, settling into his seat.

"So come on, was it you who sent the invitations?" Robin asked, his eyebrows raising.

Tom grinned, "Yes, it was me," he put up his hands in surrender, "I just thought it'd be nice to see you guys again after all this time."

"But to remember Jack and Ben, yeah?" Robin gave a sad smile.

"Yeah," Tom smiled back.

"God, how long has it *been*?" Todd chortled. He took a small gulp of his drink.

"It must have been... Fourteen, fifteen years?" Robin mused. All those years he had been away from them and how much they had changed. Todd was also casually dressed, his coat was on his seat. He had a small beard now and short hair that still remained unstyled. Despite how much he had changed, his laugh was the same and his voice was the same.

Tom seemed to have changed a lot more. He had much shorter hair, but there was no beard. He sat up straight in his seat and his laugh was polite, but his voice was also the same.

They spoke about where their lives had got to. Robin told his life story first, but it kinda blended in with the other two's. Todd boasted about the fact that he was seeing someone, and then Robin pointed out that he was married. Both of them gasped, and then Todd said, "What's his name?" They all laughed and Robin told them about Lucy. Where they met and about their kids. Tom and Todd listened carefully to his story. When it came to Tom, he didn't have much to say. He had a job now, working in London, he got good pay. He had a house to himself and he wasn't dating anyone, which was odd for someone like Tom. He was considered the ladies man back at school, but times change after those days. Upon Todd's turn, he continued to boast about the woman he was seeing: Megan, her name was. Eventually he started to talk about where *his* life was at. He

was doing good, he said, working as a computer technician and programmer. Thinking about it now, that was the perfect job for him.

And then they started to talk about Jack and Ben, their two friends missing from the table. Although the time they spent with them was so far in the past, they still remembered everything about them.

... "And every time Jack laughed he did this thing with his lip," Robin almost shouted as his voice mixed with laughter. Todd couldn't control himself with laughter and Tom was laughing with them.

"Oh my God, yeah, it vibrated-" he laughed, almost spilling his drink- "and it would like-" he couldn't control himself and he started laughing again.

"Remember that time we all went down the woods on our bikes?" Tom chuckled, "Didn't Jack crash into Ben or something?"

"Yes! Yes he did!-" Robin said,

"oh my God!" cried Todd,

"-They tumbled down a small hill and Ben leaped up and said '*Don't worry, I'm all good!*' and then Jack said-"

"*I'm not!*" cried Todd. They all cracked - including Tom. To the other people surrounding them, they must have sounded mad, but that was Todd's fault; he was probably quite drunk, but then even Robin was starting to feel a bit tipsy. Tom, however, still hadn't had any of his beer. Robin kept forgetting to ask him why he hadn't had any.

They spoke until it got dark and then the trick or treaters began to walk to streets. "It's *Halloween*," Todd bellowed in remembrance. They seemed to have forgotten a lot of important stuff. Someone called over to Todd as he said that, calling him an idiot in a joking Toddler. Obviously that was a bad idea as Todd stood up shouting, "Who said that?"

Robin quickly took control of the situation and sat Todd back down. "You're quite drunk," explained Robin.

"Nah, quick adrenaline rush'll make me sober," Todd countered. He sat back down and suddenly settled into his chair.

"So what's the plan from here?" asked Robin. The question was aimed at Tom as he had organised this whole thing, and asking Todd was a bad idea.

"Well, I'd say we go to the house," shrugged Tom.

"The house?" Todd nearly burped.

"You know, the one in the forrest."

Somewhere, a glass shattered.

"Uh... Why?" Robin had never liked the house, but he couldn't remember why. It had been so long ago, and they were here to talk about their friends.

"It's something we did every year all together, thought it'd be good, or... not?" Tom answered with another question.

"I just- I dunno' man, I've never liked that house."

"It's just a Halloween spook, come on," Tom laughed.

"Sounds fun," Todd slurred.

"Hmm... Alright..." Robin sighed.

They all got up and left the building, Tom taking the lead. Robin pondered on why he had agreed to do this for the third time. He didn't really want to go into a forest at night on Halloween. But it was different this time, there was something he needed to prove. Going into the forest at night was like any old child's fear, but he wasn't a child anymore.

They walked along the road that would inevitably turn of to the left, taking them to the forest. Along the paths beside the roads, there were vampires and zombies and wizards and witches and some kids that didn't want to dress up. Parents wandered with their families, enjoying the experience. There were children at doors happily accepting their treats, their bags filling up ever so slightly too much. Robin realised how much he missed those days, back when he was a kid. All of these days that seemed so special back then. Christmas, Easter, April Fools, and Halloween. But as he grew up they all lost that *magic*, that thing that made them so special. Soon did the magic leave, and then did the paperwork come. Life was like that, Robin thought, but it made those happier days stand out.

To their left came the path.

Tom walked onto it, continuing to lead them further away from the world. The mud was wet from the rain and it made Tom's shoes messy, but he continued trudging through it anyway. Just ahead of them was the forest. Fog caked it, allowing only the tops of the trees to poke through. Against the dark of the night, the fog was pale and lifeless.

As they entered the forest, memories came flooding back to Robin. The last time they had come down here was without Jack. Ben had convinced them all to go again, and just before that, Robin and Ben had argued. Reluctantly, Robin decided to go with them. He remembered the path between the bushes and Todd pointing them out the first time, back when they were only twelve.

Between the two bushes was the path. The bushes were less friendly this time, like the life had been sucked out of them, only thin twigs remained.

Robin remembered the letter that was sent to him. There was nothing on it but a date and an address. The address lead nowhere. Robin originally told himself that it was probably because a building had been knocked down that used to be in the town, but now he thought that maybe it was the address of the house they were going to. How would have Tom got that address? It could have been a jokey thing he put down to hint at his friends that they were going to visit the old house, or at least that was what Robin assumed. Just as he was about to ask Tom, the path began to curve and he knew that they were already there. The walk was so much shorter this time.

And there it was, the old house.

The three friends stood in a row before the house that loomed over them. It's wood was dark and rotten. The framework of the house was wonky, bending corners in peculiar ways. There was no material but that wood. Two windows were on the front facing them, both crooked slightly, with a dull green coming from them, and the porch was bent up at either side, making the whole house look like an evil smile.

For a while, they all remained quiet as the house watched them. None of them moved, none of them spoke. Robin couldn't even hear their breathing. Then slowly, Tom moved forward. Before he got too close, Robin quickly asked, "Do you think that's a good idea?"

Tom hesitated, then turned back to face Robin, "Why not?"

"Because our friends went missing the day after, and this house is not good."

"Our friends couldn't have gone missing *because* of this house," Todd put in. "I mean, look, it can't be *that* bad."

Robin waited a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. "We got here guys, I think now we should turn back." Getting here was enough for him.

Todd looked at him and looked like he might agree, but when he needed Todd to say 'Let's go back,' he said nothing. Instead it was Tom who replied, "Nahh, come on, we always did this as kids."

"*Twice*, Tom. Only two times," explained Robin. "Let's leave this in the past. Let's go."

Tom looked at him for a long moment, then finally said, "I need closure, Robin," his eyes sad.

"Why?" cried Robin, his arms flinging in the air in anger and sadness.

"You said it yourself," he said through a sad face, "we lost our friends here. I mean to find out what ever this is and who that clown is!"

The clown. Of course. He remembered now. The clown that poked his head through and spoke to them. Robin always thought there was something wrong with this place, and now he knew what it was. *The clown.*

"That's what!" Robin had his face in his hands. "That's what it was. The bloody clown!" he kicked at the floor. Todd looked confused at him. "Can't you see, Todd? There's something wrong with this place and it was the clown. That person - whatever he is, I don't care - he kidnapped our friends!"

"Wha... What?" Todd slowly realised what Robin was telling him. He prayed that Todd understood. "I remember the clown," Todd said, like he was trying to convince himself something. "We can't... You can't knock on that door, Tom. Please God, don't."

"We lost *friends* back here," Tom almost shouted, his eyes tearing up. He took a deep breath in and held it for a second. "This is *all* I have been able to think about since Ben went missing, I've lived here all my life, I've had to grow up with the clown watching *me!*"

"Oh my God, what about *Jack?*" He could feel his blood burning around his body. "And why didn't you *just move away?*"

Tom's face twisted in rage and he turned and ran towards the house. Todd attempted to run after him but fell over - luckily into a dry patch - and Robin went to catch up with him instead. "Tom - *don't!*" Todd shouted. The distance between them and the house had somehow gotten further. "I have a chance to have a *family,*" cried Todd from behind him. But Robin tried to ignore him, and the house. All that mattered was catching Tom.

But it was too late. By the time he had even started running, Tom was already on the porch. By the time he reached the porch, the door had already been knocked. Tom waited outside the door, breathing heavily, as if just being angry had puffed him out. Robin waited just beside the porch, a look of disbelief on his face. Todd caught up with them both and ran into Tom. They tumbled over and Todd was on top, but he couldn't bring himself to hit his friend.

And for a while, nothing happened. Then slowly did the door open inwards to the house, dull green light flowing from it, followed by a head. Whoever it was, their face was dabbed with sweaty white makeup. Their balding head had a few green hairs. And their mouth was a blood red grin.

"You came," said the clown. "Please, come in."

Without hesitation, Tom got up and walked through the door. "Tom..." Robin sighed. Todd followed him in, his feet dragging him along. Before he could call out to Todd, Robin's own feet walked themselves into the house, bringing him with them.

Beyond the front door was a long dark corridor that throbbed with a green light. Just ahead in the darkness, Robin could see the clown leading them like this was something he did everyday. Along the floor, rotten wood was crooked and there were gaps revealing only more darkness beneath. No lights hung from the ceiling and there were no shelves or pictures, just the floor, walls, and ceiling. They continued to walk for what felt like a lifetime, constantly trudging along. Every time Robin tried to turn back, nothing happened. He could feel his feet walking, it just wasn't him walking them. When he went to speak, his mouth didn't move. His face was relaxed, but he couldn't do anything. It didn't even feel numb.

The corridor ended with three doors, one in front and two either side, and the clown took them through the right. The room was a like a dining room. Squeezed into the room was a giant table with six seats around

it. Together, they all sat down at the table. Robin, Tom and Todd sat on one side, while the clown sat on his own with two spare chairs. Robin was at one head of the table, and the clown was at the other. He still couldn't talk or move.

"Oh," said the clown, "that's ever so rude of me. I almost forgot our friends. Come on!" he called to behind him.

Two figures emerged from the same door Robin, Tom and Todd had come from. Even though the two figures looked on the verge of death, Robin couldn't forget Ben and Jack's faces.

He desperately tried to move. He forced a kick, a punch, a headbutt, but nothing would happen. On his left he could see the sadness in Todd's eyes as he looked at his old friends. As soon as their old friends sat down, Todd shouted out a noise that was pure anger and grief. Robin felt control over his face again but only shook.

"*What is this?*" Todd shouted at the clown.

"Dinner," he replied, as calm as the sea.

Robin had the choice to talk, but he didn't. He looked back over to his friends. Ben and Jack looked less friendly this time, like the life had been sucked out of them. Only thin bones remained beneath their pale and lifeless skin. Their eyes were sightless, the pupils as small as the tip of a pencil. So this was where they had been all this time. Where they even alive anymore?

"Wh..." Robin tried to speak but his voice was gone.

"Hmm, do you want to say something?" the clown asked. When Robin failed to reply, the clown continued, "Time for some food!"

When Robin looked back down there was a plate full of red meat with a knife and fork neatly placed on either side. Something red was splashed all over the plate, and something told him it wasn't ketchup. The clown was already chewing on the meal. His mouth was open and Robin could see the meat being grinded with those yellow teeth. A drizzle of saliva trickled from the corner of the clown's mouth. The clown waited a moment and savoured the food.

"Mmm," he hummed to himself. "Delicious, isn't it?" he asked Robin. Robin didn't speak. He couldn't. He felt like throwing up more than he felt like eating this. "Oh, how rude of me. I started before everyone else! Go on, tuck in!" Ben and Jack's arms moved to the cutlery and began cutting the meat. "Your friends are such good company," said the clown as he ate, "they're great fun. Look at them." Ben and Jack's faces were mindless as they endlessly chewed on their food. "Come on, Tom," the clown's gaze moved over to him, "aren't you gonna' have some?" Tom didn't do anything for a moment, then gently his expression went mindless and his arm's drifted over to the knife and fork, and he began cutting the meat.

Robin didn't understand, "Tom...?" his voice was barely a whisper.

The clown grinned. "He came to me later than these two. Must have missed Ben so much that he came looking for him one day, and then he found us!" the clown exclaimed, joy spreading over his face.

Robin felt his breath slowly drift out of him as he realised Tom belonged to the clown.

He looked back at Todd. His face was pale and tears were building in his eyes. He shook his head. "No no no," Todd said to himself, his voice trembling as he tried to will the world away, "no no no no no no." His hands gripped the table so hard that his knuckles turned white. Anger built in his face as he struggled to form a word. "*Why?*" he demanded, his voice quiet but strong.

The clown regarded him for a moment. "They're my friends too."

"*No.*"

“That’s a bit rude,” replied the clown, a new edge to his voice. “I prepared this meal for you, I invited you into *my* house, I *allowed* you to sit at my table, and you do not *allow* me my friends?” his head was tilted to the side like an animal.

Todd’s hands slammed onto the table, rocking it and causing cups of water to fall over that Robin didn’t realise were there. Todd couldn’t find his words. Instead his eyes screamed at the clown, filled with rage and anger and horror.

“How *dare* you look at me like that.” The clown stood so he was above Todd. “You’re not eating your food. Eat it.”

“No.”

“*Eat it.*”

Todd spat on the table.

That did it.

The clown lost any patience he had and roared and then everything went dark. There was nothing to see, just the darkness. Robin reached out with his hands, expecting to find the table, but there was nothing. He realised he was standing. Slowly, he got onto all fours and felt his way around. He could feel his hands shaking. Hard floor was beneath him and his hands moved across its smooth surface. After a moment, he worked up the courage to whisper, “Todd.” As soon as he did, he heard a startled gasp. “Todd?” Robin called, moving towards where the gasp had come from.

There was someone sniffing, and then, “Robin?”

“Todd!” Robin tried to keep his voice down.

His hands found something and it shuddered for a second, then went, “Robin?” again.

“Todd, it’s me,” Robin sighed with relief.

“Oh my God,” Todd breathed out. His nose sniffed again. We was quiet for a moment. “That was *Ben*,” he suddenly cried. “And *Jack*,” his voice sounded like he was fighting back tears. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” was all Robin could say.

Todd hesitated. “Are they dead?” he asked, quiet. “I always thought we’d find them somewhere…” his voice trailed. “Around the village somewhere, you know?” he sniffed. “I always thought we’d find them *safe*.” Robin heard him lie down against the floor. “Nothing was ever the same after the day they all disappeared. When Jack went I couldn’t- I couldn’t *believe* it. I thought it was my fault he went missing… I thought he *hated* me.” Robin felt Todd look over to him. “I thought you *all* hated me,” he said and then he went quiet for another moment. “You always went off without me and I thought you *hated* me. I thought I was annoying, and- and horrible and just not nice to be around. And then when we all drifted I thought it was true. The worst part was seeing *you* go. You were always my best friend… And then after Ben disappeared, everything went *wrong*. You started to drift away once he disappeared. I missed you.” Robin heard Todd’s head hit the ground. “Why is this happening?”

A corridor appeared in the darkness in front of them. The entrance clearly outlined beside the dark. It gave off a dull green glow.

Robin stood up and looked at the uneven wood that made it. “We need to go,” he said.

“I can’t go there,” Todd said. “Not back there.” His face was a dark outline in the gloom.

“What do you suggest?” Robin said with a voice that betrayed him to sadness.

Todd stood up without saying a word. Robin put a hand on his shoulder and then walked to the corridor. As soon as his feet trod on the corridor, he heard it creek slightly. He looked back to see only more endless

corridor that continued so far that it went back into darkness. Todd looked scared and he looked old. So much older than thirty. And so so tired. *What's happening to us?*

Robin led the way forwards in the endless corridor. The floor continuing to creek and moan under their weight. All he could hear was the constant thumping of his heart and his breathing that felt a little too loud. Every few paces, he looked back to see if Todd was still there. With the dull green glow of the walls, he could just make out Todd's face.

On the left of the badly built corridor, there was a door made of the same wood. Robin glanced back at Todd before he opened it. Whether Todd shook his head or not, Robin didn't see. The door opened a little, but it got stuck on something. He pushed at it harder and it plowed its way through whatever was on the other side. Bright white light exploded into his vision. When his eyes adjusted, he could see a hill covered with snow. Along the snow were trails of where children had been sledging down constantly until they condensed the snow into ice. Atop the hill, they could see two people walking up to the peak. Their conversation was surprisingly easy to hear from this distance.

"Where's Tom?" asked one of the two people. Robin recognised his own voice.

"He said he had some homework to do or something," replied a voice he knew as Todd's.

"But it's snowing. It's a snow day; there won't be any school tomorrow. To bring in homework for, I mean."

"I dunno', he can do the homework if he wants to."

Robin remembered this day well. Todd and him had gone out to go sledging together. This was about a year after Ben had... gone. What happened next he had never forgotten, for some reason it had always been in the back of his mind.

The young Todd and Robin got on the sledge together and plowed down the hill at a great speed. They went past the doorway, so Todd and Robin had to peek around to see them. The young Robin was controlling the sledge, and he hit straight into a tree and they both went toppling. In the end, Robin was alright, but Todd had hurt his right arm badly. There wasn't much, but blood dropped onto the snow, melting it slightly. Todd's sledge was broken as well, and he wasn't happy about that. They had argued, Todd fueled by the pain in his arm, and then they had stormed away from each other. Somehow, Robin knew this was when Todd started to feel like Robin hated him.

He took a few steps back into the gloomy corridor, pitch black as his eyes were adjusted for the snow. Todd was still looking out, longing for the past.

"It's not real, Todd," said Robin.

"I know..." Todd sighed.

"I never hated you," Robin said quietly.

Todd pulled the door shut and then they were both left in darkness. "I know," he repeated. He began down the corridor, leaving Robin to follow behind.

The corridor opened out to a five sided room with a painting on each wall. Above, the ceiling was so high he couldn't see it, only more darkness. The room was lighter however, allowing them to see each painting. Robin walked up to the first one he saw. It was a painting of Jack when he was twelve. Under his eyes were dark, and his short hair was messy. His skin looked grey and lifeless, and instead of a mouth he had a shut zip sown into the skin. Dried blood was all around his mouth. Beneath the painting there was a plaque, naming the painting *Jack the Unimportant*.

Beside Jack's painting was another of Ben. He was standing up, proud, with his fists to his sides like a superhero. His short blonde hair was styled with a pointy quiff like he had always had it. "It's to impress the ladies," Ben had said once, with a wink. Robin never understood what he had meant back then, but now he

was thirty he knew all too well. Ben's painting was a lot brighter and was painted with more care. His plaque read *Ben the Best*.

Beside Ben was Tom. He was older than the others; he looked to be in his twenties. He was looking over to Ben, his head looking up at him. He was wearing a suit but his tie was badly done up, along with the top button being undone. The painting was better than Jack's, but wasn't as colourful as Ben's. The plaque said *Tom the Follower*.

Next was Todd. The painting wasn't finished, Robin could vaguely see his body, and his head hadn't been painted at all. Whoever was painting this one hadn't bothered to finish. *Todd the Hated*, said the plaque. Robin could only see Todd's back, but he looked like he was staring at those three words.

The final painting was completely black. There was only the same golden frame that the last four had. There was a plaque, but it read *Robin the ...*. The last word was too faded for Robin to read.

When Robin turned to look at Todd, the room had changed. Todd took a step back from the shock. They were standing in another corridor, but this time it wasn't endless. There was a door at one end of it. Robin was in front of Todd, so he walked to it slowly, each step creaked less the closer he got to the door. When he reached it, he held out his hand and twisted the door knob. The door opened outwards from the house, revealing the forest.

"We're back?" Todd asked.

"I'm... I'm not sur-" Todd barged past Robin and through the door. "Todd!" cried Robin.

But nothing happened.

Todd ran around in the forest in circles and then fell onto his knees. "We're *back!*" he cried.

Robin slowly walked to the front door. "Wait, that's actually, *actually* home? It's not like the sledding hill?"

"Yes!" Todd cried again, a smile on his face. "That was the most *terrifying* thing I've ever been through."

"Are you sure? Look at me. Todd, look at me! Am I standing in the house?"

"Well yeah, it's just a door but..." then his smile dropped and he went quiet.

The door slammed shut.

Robin called out for Todd. He slammed on the door. He kicked at it, he ran at it, but nothing would happen. "Todd!" he cried, "Todd!" he shouted. And then everything went dark. Robin felt the tears building in his eyes. "Todd..." his voice barely a whisper.

Something appeared in the distance. Everything was pitch black but Robin and the object. He looked down and saw his hands clearly. Then back up at the object. "Todd?" Robin called, but he got no reply. A moment passed, and then he forced himself up. Walking along the darkness, the thing in the distance moved closer. Slowly it got bigger and bigger. "Tom?" he called instead, clinging on the slim chance that his friend was still there. As he walked closer he called for someone else. "Lucy? Please God be Lucy," he sniffed, missing her. He wiped the tears out of his vision. "Boys?" he called for his children, not knowing why they would be there. There was something on the floor and something else looking over it. Someone was lying on the floor, Robin could vaguely see their body, and someone wearing brightly coloured clothes kneeling beside them, holding something...

And it was a knife.

And it was the clown holding the knife.

And it was Todd lying on the floor.

And there was blood on the blackness.

And the clown was grinning.

“No,” shouted Robin. But it wasn’t a shout. It was a feeble noise. He felt like he had just been shot. Robin bent over and fell to his knees. The tears fell from his eyes. When he looked back, the clown was still looking at Todd. Then he looked at Robin. And then it all went black.

The next thing Robin knew, the clown was gripping him by the back of his shirt and pulling him along. He was still holding the red knife. They reached another dark room, and inside four people were standing, all lined up. Jack, Ben, Tom, Todd. Jack was the smallest and Todd was the tallest. The clown pulled Robin up and got him standing.

“I have a family,” Robin tried, “please. Please, I have a wife, and, and two boys.”

“Hey look,” the clown said cheerfully, “I’ve got two little boys, too! And now *I* have a family! We’re all only waiting for one more person to join us.” As he said that, Robin’s old four friends turned to look at him, all pale and lifeless. “Come on, Robin. What d’you say?” asked the clown.

“No,” Robin mumbled.

“Sorry?”

“I said no...” his voice was quiet and pathetic.

“That’s a funny way to say yes.”

Robin tried to push the clown away, but he only gripped him again, harder. “You know, I will admit that I did *kill* Todd first. And I will also admit that I did it in quite a brutal way. It was *bad*, I could see his red heart and everything. But you? I don’t have to kill you first. Or at all. You could just join us and our little family - well, I say *little*, it’s got quite big now. The others are really missing you, especially Jack.”

“Please.”

“Look, it’s pretty obvious I’m not going to let you back out of my house now, isn’t it? But I’d still choose your next words with care.”

Robin didn’t say a word. He took another look over his four friends. Why did this happen to them? They were all friends, just kids when this all started. Oh if only Ben hadn’t taken them to this house all those years ago...

“Is there nothing you want to say?”

Robin felt the tears pouring down his cheeks. He pictured Lucy and his two boys all together. Despite himself, he smiled. And then he closed his eyes and said the words he knew would get him killed. “Let me go.”

“Nah,” said the clown.

The last thing he saw was the red knife.