

He was out inspecting a work site in the woods. Fallen trees lay tumbled on the ground for as far as he could see into the darkness, an impressive harvest, but he wasn't pleased. Why had none of these been hauled away yet? Was he the only one who knew what work meant anymore? Where were all his men? As if in answer, he heard laughter from the edges of the clear cut. Gleeful children's laughter. Suddenly, the uncut woods surrounding the site seemed too dark ... too wild . He turned to run back toward his truck, but his legs would hardly move. He pushed them forward as if through sand while the laughter grew louder behind him. He strained to make his legs obey him, and -

Ferristaff gasped awake.

The dream dissolved, but quiet laughter hung on the air just long enough to leave him certain there was someone in the house. He sat up and peered into the darkness.

"Who's there?" he called gruffly, but only silence answered him. Perhaps the dream had lingered longer than he thought. He glanced at the luminous clock face beside his bed. 3:30AM. Outside, tree trunks groaned, wind rushed sighing through the foliage, branches tapped and scrapped against a wall downstairs. Sounded like a storm was brewing. Ferristaff lay back and stared up at the ceiling. It had only been a dream.

But as he closed his eyes, it came again; a childish giggle from downstairs. He bolted up in bed, and pulled the top drawer of his nightstand open. The gun he kept there was gone. He began to fear. Hamilton's teenage vandals must be real after all. Well, children he could handle, gun or no. However fierce their masks might be, he knew that deep down children were scared of nearly everything. One just had to face them down. He got carefully out of bed and crept to the open doorway of his room where he could peer down the stairwell into the entryway and some of the dining room. All was dark.

"You'd better get out!" he called in an angry, no nonsense voice. "Now!" He expected to hear scurrying escape, or frightened silence, but was surprised with more laughter. There were more than one of them, then, and too dumb, or stoned more likely, to know trouble when they heard it. "You think I'm funny?" he demanded. "When you took my pistol, you missed the shotgun in my closet. That makes me a lot more dangerous than you are. Now get out of here, or no one will blame me for what happens to intruders in my home!" It was a bluff of course. He'd left his shotgun in the basement after cleaning it, but how could they know he hadn't two of them?

There was more hushed laughter, and a brief green glow of some sort through the living room door opposite the dining room. He knew where they were now, and that room had no exit but the one he was looking at. They'd hide when they heard him coming down, but he wouldn't go into the living room after them. Through the dining room, he could reach the basement and his shotgun. After that, there'd be no more bluffing. He'd faced much tougher customers in his time than a couple of rural delinquents with a pistol between them, assuming they even knew how to shoot it.

"I gave you a choice," he growled menacingly, "and you chose wrong. Now you're going to pay the price." he started loudly down the stairs, figuring the more noise he made, the more startled they would be. Before he'd gotten halfway down, however, the green glow kindled in the living room again, and grew until it lit the entire stairwell. Ferristaff had come to a complete halt, unable to imagine what such a glow might be cast by, when something large flew through the doorway, glowing like a giant firefly! Before Ferristaff had time to gasp, it wheeled to fly directly at him, talons outstretched, beak gaping wide, a piercing shriek preceding it as the huge burning owl rushed to rake his face! Ferristaff turned to run, but went sprawling on the steps instead, banging his shins painfully as he lunged at the railing for support. When he looked up there was no owl, but a child standing at the top of the stairs - dressed in glowing bark and leaves - a child with wings, and coal black eyes devoid of pupil - or all pupil!

Ferristaff remained crouched, utterly dumb, staring wide-eyed at the apparition, which was not entirely opaque, he realized. "W-what -" he croaked, but there was another peel of laughter from below him, and he turned to find at least five other creatures like the one above, gazing up at him with glee.

"Is it a toad?" chortled one of them.

"It's not pretty like a toad," said a second. "It's just an ugly lump."

"A stump then?" laughed another.

"It cannot be a stump," smiled a fourth, pointing at Ferristaff's disheveled thatch of iron hair. "It still has leaves."

"It must be a *tree* then!" exclaimed the second child. "An ugly stunted tree! Trees don't belong in stairwells though. What are we to do with it?"

“*Cut it down! Cut it down!*” shouted all the child-like ghosts at once, swirling into the air like great glowing, windblown leaves, slapping lightly at Ferristaff’s face and back and hands and hair as they flew past him up the stairs to join their leader.

Ferristaff yowled in wordless fright as they gusted by. “*Who - what - who are you?*” he babbled hysterically when they had passed.

“We are spirits of the wood,” said the creature who had been a owl, no longer grinning. No one smiled anymore. “The ghosts of all the trees you’ve murdered.”

Ferristaff gaped in blank incomprehension, then he murmured, “I’m still dreaming. ... You’re a dream.”

“Then *wake up!*” the spirit child screamed. “*WAKE UP!*” And they all flew around him once again, pinching, tugging, swatting, laughing cruelly. “Can’t you *wake up?*” cried the leader of them. “Don’t you know how to *wake up* from a *nightmare?*”

“Stop! Please stop!” cried Ferristaff. “What do you want from me?”

Immediately there was silence, and Ferristaff uncovered his head to find the ‘children’ settled all around him on the steps again, fixing him with melancholy stares.

“Stop killing us,” said their leader very quietly.

“Go away from here,” said a second creature.

“Take your saws and trucks and cranes away,” said a third.

“And all your men,” said a fourth.

Ferristaff looked from face to impossible face, and thought, ‘*this isn’t happening.*’ “You,” he said, rising to his feet in sudden fury, “You aren’t real! I don’t believe in ... in fairies!” shoving one of them aside he ran down the stairs toward his front door.

Sometimes in dreams, he thought, getting out meant waking up. But as he reached the polished redwood door, it’s grain began to twist, the wood to bulge and groan, and all at once a giant wooden mouth, yawned wide before him, screaming at a deafening volume, as if it’s owner were being flayed. Ferristaff crumpled to the floor in terror, covering his ears, and wailing like an infant. “*Stop!*” he screamed at last. “I’ll do anything you want! Just let me go!”

The giant wooden mouth melted into the form of a small wooden boy, who walked out of the door itself to become another glowing spirit like the others. “We will let you go,” it said, “if you’re gone before tomorrow.”

The other spirit children were drifting in the air above him now, settling to the floor around him like huge snow flakes. The leader of them stepped forward and bent down until his face was only inches from Ferristaff's own. "We *want* you to go," the creature said, its eyes suddenly slitted with malice, its mouth stretched impossibly wide, full of terrible needle teeth. It thrust this terrifying visage further forward until their noses almost touched. "And don't come back," it growled. "For *we* are far more *dangerous* than you." His teeth grew longer before Ferristaff's eyes. His mouth stretched even wider.

"How ... how can I be out that quickly?" Ferristaff stammered, numb with terror. "I have all these things to pack, my business to -"

"*Let someone else do that!*" the toothy creature shouted, and Ferristaff felt his bladder go, a wet warmth spreading from his crotch.

"I'll get out," Ferristaff sobbed. "I'll make it up to you. I'll be gone by morning, and I'll have one of my people -"

"Just *go*," hissed the apparition.

"And so you do not think us just a dream," said the fairy boy who'd stepped out of the door, "We leave you with a gift." He spread his arms, and, from nowhere Ferristaff could see, a flood of stones and bones and broken shells poured from between them to pile up on the floor. Ferristaff stared down at the jumble for a moment, then looked up again to find himself alone. Only their 'gift' remained, and he knew with terrible certainty that it would still be there in the morning, though he, himself, would not.

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