

Raea Gragg

Shack In The Woods

*Horror*

It's Autumn. A chilly wind shakes the remaining leaves to the ground. The forest is still except... something slithers - brilliant green among the yellow and red leaf litter. It's a large iguana, struggling, slowly. Its whole body is shutting down from the cold.

It rolls over onto its side and dies.

LUCY, a black and white border collie, runs up to the dead lizard, sniffing its body. Somewhere nearby a boy calls out to her. Lucy runs out of the woods to TOMMY DUCKHAM, (11) a thin scrappy boy wearing dirty overalls. He pushes a wheelbarrow full of chicken poop towards the woods. He grins, calling Lucy to him. Behind him is Tommy's chicken farm where four long chicken broilers flank a small, dingy farm house entirely surrounded by thick Wisconsin woods.

Tommy takes a moment to scratch Lucy's head, telling her not to go into the woods, it's dangerous in there and she might get lost. With Lucy at his side Tommy pushes his wheelbarrow to the very edge of the woods and pours the chicken poop into a large ditch. Wind rustles the underbrush of the forest. Tommy stands paralyzed for half a second staring into the shadows until Lucy barks.

Tommy hurriedly pushes the wheelbarrow back to the closest broiler. Inside hundreds of white chickens are crammed on the floor. The chickens, make way for the wheelbarrow that sloshes through the muck that covers the ground. Tommy approaches his two older brothers, JACK (15) and NATHAN (13), who are busy shoveling. When Jack sees Tommy he angrily kicks a chicken to the side and slams his shovel into the shit. "It's all your fault Tommy! You go around messing everything up making us do all this dirty work, when will you learn, you little dweeb!" Nathan too is angry, "Yeah man up Tommy or else you're gonna to get eaten alive."

The older boys tease their little brother, trying to get Tommy to fight back. Jack pins him to the ground, pushing his head into the poop but stops leaning up. "Hear that?"

Tires rumble on gravel.

The three Duckham brothers jump to their feet and open up the long shutter windows. Jack pushes Tommy out of the way so he can't see out of the window. There on the one and only dirt road, a parade of vehicles pass by.

"Isn't that Old Man Beamer's blue Ford?" Nathan asks. It *is* Old Man Beamer - their reclusive, mysterious neighbor - followed by a funeral procession. Tommy barely manages to get a glimpse of the scene through the cracks in the walls.

Their father MR. DUCKHAM calls for the boys. The older two leap down in response. Jack exclaims that now, finally, something interesting is happening in their town. They run out but not before throwing their shovels toward Tommy and demanding that he put the stuff away and lock up.

Tommy takes the shovels and maneuvers the wheelbarrow outside, following his brothers. He closes the broiler door and fumbles with the keys to lock it up. Turning, he hurries after his older brothers, but the door to the chicken house creaks open just an inch.

At the small churchyard the boys are wearing nicer clothes and their hair has been smoothed back. But Jack wears a smirk on his face; he finds this quite entertaining. Only a dozen people have showed up for the funeral, mostly weathered old farmers. One woman nurses her baby. Tommy can't help but steal some glances at the infants face. Old Mrs. Beamer dots her tearful eyes with a handkerchief and keeps her other hand around a young girl, her granddaughter, RACHEL (8). Tommy, with Lucy at his side can't help but steal glimpses of Rachel. Tommy murmurs under his breath that he never knew the Beamer's had a granddaughter. Nathan remarks, how could they? He has never even seen their neighbors before.

The funeral comes to an end and the thin crowd makes their leave. The priest leads a sniffling Mrs. Beamer away. As she leaves, she turns and proclaims loudly, it was an accident! It was an accident!

An evil grin spreads across Jack's face. "Never seen our neighbor before? Well let's go meet him." He struts up to the coffin, flanked by his brothers and opens it just enough for the three to glimpse the old dead man. He has horrible claw marks over his face and neck. They quickly shut the coffin at the furious sound of their father's voice.

The older two rush off but Tommy is paralyzed with fear. Rachel comes up to him and looks at her Grandpa's coffin in dismay. "I let it out," she mumbles, heartbroken. Tommy doesn't know what to say to her. But Lucy licks Rachel's hand and she gives the pooch a pat on the head. Rachel turns to Tommy laying a sad carnation on the coffin. "Why is there so much death in the world?" she asks.

Mr. Duckham yells at Tommy who turns and runs, hopping into the back of the pick up truck with his brothers. Jack is laughing, making crude jokes and playing with his pocket knife. Mr. Duckham slams Jack's head into the bed of the truck calmly. He threateningly whispers into Jack's ear, "that's no way to pay respects. You need to be more of a man and listen to what you're told. Keep away from Old Man Beamer's property or else you and your brothers will spend the rest of your days shovelin' chicken shit up with a spoon."

The boys are stilled by their aggressive father and not one of them speaks a word as they pull away from the church's gravel parking lot.

Tommy huddles in his coat and watches the coffin be lowered into its grave as Lucy, from at his side, barks at a flock of vibrant Hyacinth Macaws flying overhead, brilliant blue against a grey overcast sky.

Tommy is in his room lying on the floor with Lucy at his side. He is drawing a picture of the parrots he saw at the funeral with a blue crayon. He hangs the drawing up on his wall with lots of others - butterflies, summer cicadas, squirrels, a deer and a couple dozen chickens

drawings. He looks at Lucy and sets about drawing her. As he does he tells her a story about how he found her as a puppy, he then asks Lucy if she remembers her Mom. Tommy takes the drawing of his dog and hangs it up with the others on the wall, he nervously lifts up a few drawings where underneath hangs a picture of Tommy's mother "I don't remember my mom." Then all of a sudden his bedroom door bursts open. His father stands there, blistering with rage.

He grabs Tommy by the cuff of his neck slams the door on Lucy who yelps and scratches angrily at the door. Mr. Duckham drags Tommy downstairs. His brothers follow the commotion. Jack has a grin on his face, demanding to know what the little twerp has done this time.

Storming outside into the chilly night Tommy is terrified, they pass the chicken broilers one by one until they reach the last one. Mr. Duckham points to the lock on the ground, yells at Tommy for not locking the door, and throws the boy inside. There on the dirty ground countless dead chickens litter the floor. Blood is strewn everywhere. It's a chicken massacre. Tommy is stunned. "Look what you've done Tommy! A fox got in here and killed my chickens! What do you have to say for yourself? Huh? Huh?" Mr Duckham shoves a frying pan and wooden spoon into Tommy's hands and drags him back outside, still trailed by the other boys. They reach the edge of the woods and Tommy is white with fear.

"Nothing to say? You're going to man up and fix this! Now get in there and scare that fox away and don't come back here till you do!"

Tommy is horrified. He's left alone in the woods with nothing more than a frying pan and a wooden spoon. The woods are dark and eerily silent. "Be brave Tommy. Be brave," he mumbles to himself, setting out into the night, banging the frying pan with the spoon.

Something breathes heavily in the dark. Something big.

Tommy's hands shake with fear. He drops the spoon.

A huge dark shadow stands in front of him, cat eyes glowing, a dead chicken drops to the forest floor between the shadowy creature's legs.

Tommy eyes well up with tears. He turns and runs for his life, screaming.

The beast chases him. Tommy runs as fast as he can out of the woods, hurdling the giant poop ditch and racing across the empty space between him and the house.

He dashes to the front door and slams it shut. Somewhere outside in the night a murderous screech from the creature tears the night air apart.

Tommy falls to the floor sobbing as his brothers come around.

“It’s out there... it wants to eat me...” Tommy cries, choking on his fear. Jack mocks him.

“God, you're such a pathetic crybaby. There are no monsters in the woods.”

It's morning and Tommy sits red-eyed, still shaken as his fork spins in sad circles around his scrambled eggs. “I know what I saw. I know what I saw.” He mumbles to himself. Lucy scratches the door wanting to get outside. Tommy turns to his dog, “you believe me right, Luce?”

Nathan pounds downstairs wearing a raccoon tail hat. “It's SATURDAY!” He yells excitedly. Jack pounces on Tommy, nearly causing a heart attack, “yeah let's go hunting.” The older boys prepare for their hunt. Tommy begs them not to go out there, there's something horrible is in the woods. But they just tease him again, telling him to man up. Tommy pleadingly follows his brothers to the edge of the woods but stops at the chicken poop ditch. Jack teases him, “if you ever want to be a man then you gotta learn how to kill something. Or do you want to stay over there and piss your pants like a little girl?”

Reluctantly, Tommy follows his brothers into the woods with Lucy close behind, on a short blue leash.

The group walks through the forest. Nathan whistles softly and Jack is on the lookout for any game. Tommy looks absolutely miserable, nervously jumping at any and every sound.

Nathan spots a possum and lunges for it using his slingshot. Jack stabs it with his switchblade. It’s down, but still moving. Jack kills it by swinging it by the tail and smashing its head on a tree. He shakes the possum in front of Lucy trying to get her to play with it, which upsets Tommy. Nathan spots a jackrabbit and the boys madly chase after it. Lucy barks wildly as

they run through the woods. She breaks free of Tommy's grip and darts off into the woods blue leash trailing behind her. The older boys come back with a squirming, kicking jackrabbit. Tommy is in despair crying. The older boys pick up the teasing again, "don't be stupid, Tommy. She's a dog. She'll be fine."

On their way back to the farm Jack chucks his switchblade at anything that moves. Nathan sympathetically, plops an arm around Tommy's shoulder, "Luce is a tough dog, Tommy. She'll find her way home; I know she will."

They make it back to the farm as the sun is setting. Jack and Nathan argue about the jackrabbit and who caught it. Jack doesn't want to eat chicken again; he wants jackrabbit but Nathan insists that he was the one who caught it. Jack gets so mad that he tears the rabbit to pieces. Nathan storms off back into the house. Leaving Tommy alone with Jack. Jack turns his rage on Tommy, grabbing his arm and forcing him inside one of the chicken houses.

Jack demands that Tommy kill one of the chickens, giving him his switchblade knife and ordering him to cut off the chicken's head. Tommy is crying, he doesn't want to kill the chicken. "Don't be chicken Tommy, now KILL IT!"

Jack grabs Tommy's hand with the knife and together -forcingly- Tommy and Jack slice off the chicken's head. It runs around with blood spurting out of its neck. "I'm not even hungry. There are hundreds of chickens what's the matter if we kill one?"

Later Tommy is in the bathtub rubbing off all the blood and chicken poop. He tries to muffle his sobs. "Be brave, Tommy be brave," he whimpers to himself.

That's when he hears the screaming. Horrible, horrible high-pitched, murderous screams. He jumps out of the tub and throws on some clothes. Running to the window, he looks out over the nighttime woods: the screaming is so real and close.

"Lucy!"

Tommy runs next door into his older brothers' room, "do you hear that? D'hear it!"

The boys mock Tommy again until they hear it too: long, high-pitched, earsplitting wails of horror. All three of them have a new look of fear, if only for a moment, staring out the window over the woods.

Jack is the first one to speak. "Do you know about the shack in the woods?" he asks. Neither of the younger brothers knows about the shack in the woods, so Jack tells them a story about the family that used to live on this property before they moved in who had two identical twin brothers, back in the 80s. The twins found a shack in the woods on Old Man Beamer's property.

"What was in the shack?"

"No one knows, for one of the twin brothers never came back."

The screaming stops and Nathan tells Jack that there's no hidden shack in the woods and that first thing tomorrow morning all three of them are going out there to find Tommy's dog. Jack shrugs, "fine by me. I'm not scared of anything."

The next morning, Tommy is in his room looking at his drawing of Lucy, "I'm going to find you Lucy, even if it kills me." He stifles a tear and grabs his weapon of choice: the frying pan, and sets off down stairs.

Jack mocks him again calling him a baby. Nathan grabs his slingshot and while Jack plays with his switchblade. "Everyone ready to go slay a monster?" Nathan remarks jokingly.

The brothers set out. Tommy looks into the woods and bravely takes the lead, calling out Lucy's name.

They search everywhere. They search all over their property but they can't find her anywhere. Afternoon sets in and Jack becomes irritable. "This is stupid, the dumb dog is gone, she isn't coming back." For the first time Tommy can't stand it anymore. He turns to Jack, "Shut up! I'm going to find her!"

"We're going to find her." Nathan steps in trying to help out, "right Jack?" But Jack laughs, telling them they're both wasting their time. Just then Tommy finds Lucy's blue leash - at

the edge of the creek. The property line between Old Man Beamer's property and theirs- a boundary that makes all three of them nervous for a moment.

"No way, we can't go over there," Nathan says.

"I have to find her," Tommy insists. But it's Jack who steps in arrogantly, "you're both chicken." As he stubbornly jumping into the water.

So setting out, they wade across the creek and into forbidden territory just as the first specs of winter snow begin to fall.

It's getting dark and Tommy is starting to shake nervously out of cold and fear. He is downright terrified and sticks closer to his older brothers' sides.

"You hear that?" Nathan whispers.

A small pitiful whimpering calls out from the shadows.

"Lucy?" Tommy mutters hopefully.

Jack pushes some underbrush out of the way. It's not Lucy. It's a Wallaby.

"What the hell is that? A kangaroo?"

The boys inspect the poor animal. A horrid bite has taken out of one of its hind legs and steaming guts have poured out of his stomach. They speculate what kind of animal could do such a thing. Certainly no coyote or fox.

Jack slits its throat ending its life.

They get into yet another argument; they have no idea where they are and of course it's all Tommy's fault. Nathan brings up yet again that they shouldn't be there. Nathan tries to keep everyone cool but Jack is beyond reason as he turns on Tommy. "This is bull shit! Tommy lost his stupid dog, it's his problem, not mine. Tommy is always messing everything up, he is pathetic! What do I care if his dog dies?" says Jack. He then launches in the biggest attack of all, "It's all Tommy's fault. It's Tommy fault that Mom died! So what do I care? Huh? Huh? What do I care!" Jack grabs Nathan slingshot and starts pelting rocks at Tommy yelling that he needs to grow up and stop being such a crybaby girl.



Tommy tries to block the rocks being pelted at him. Nathan tells Jack to knock it off, he's gone too far.

Tommy ducks and one of the rocks sails overhead crashing into the underbrush.

Tommy senses something is horribly, terribly wrong and sticks a hand out for his brothers to stop. Tommy shushes them, “shhhh listen.”

Jack is about to fling more rocks when a heavy breathing sounds from the shadows.

The brothers are not alone and it has suddenly gotten very, very dark. The only thing that moves is the silent fall of snow.

Everything stands still.

Tommy gets up off the ground. “It's the beast!”

Jack mocks him, “there's no beast, you dweeb.”

Then out of the shadows an enormous 700 pound liger pounces. The cat pins Nathan to the ground, clenches his powerful jaws around his bicep and tears off his right arm at the socket. Nathan screams bloody murder. Jack madly curses and starts pelting the cat with rocks allowing Nathan to crawl away crying.

Tommy helps Nathan to his feet and the three brothers run for their lives. The large cat screeches from the blackness behind them.

There ahead, a shack emerges, the shack in the woods, Old Man Beamer's shack. The boys runs for it, Nathan clutching his gaping, bleeding shoulder.

Tommy has peed his pants but doesn't seem to notice as they reach the shack. The only openings are small barred windows. “Hurry hurry hurry!”

Jack grabs a log and crams it into the iron bars. Tommy helps him pull the log, levering the metal bars just enough to create a gap just big enough to wiggle through. Jack dives through the hole as fast as he can, ahead of his brothers.

Tommy is too short to reach the gap; Nathan with his remaining arm helps push his younger brother up through the hole.

Tommy wiggles inside and falls beside Jack.

Nathan tries to wiggle through the gap in between the bars. Fresh blood gushes out of his socket, he whimpers in agony. Tommy jumps up onto a crate and grabs fistfuls of Nathan's shirt trying to help pull him inside. "Help me Jack! Help me!" Tommy pleads. Jack is paralyzed on the floor and does not move.

Then, something grabs hold of Nathan and rips him away into the dark night. He screams, the cat roars and then all is silent.

Tommy steps down off the crate horrified and covered in his brother's blood, trembling. Tommy looks at Jack, "Why didn't you help me?"

Jack gets to his feet, recovering. "It doesn't matter; he was dead from the start."

Jack and Tommy survey their new surroundings, crates, cages and leaves are strewn about, it looks like a decaying pet shop.

"What the hell is this place?"

Tommy looks around and peers into a glass terrarium filled with Mexican red legged tarantulas.

The boys move through the shack, which is very long and filled with compartment after compartment of cages, some with half starved exotic animals inside. However, some of the cages have been opened and have no creatures inside. Jack grips his knife. It's very dark inside. As they move through the shack Tommy steps on something that cracks he lifts up his shoe, it's a photo he picks it up. Tommy can't believe his eyes. Its picture of Old Man Beamer standing next to his dad, as a boy in front of the shack with what appears to be an identical twin brother. He shows the picture to Jack. Both brothers stare at the picture and realize the story- about the boy who found the shack in the woods, was their dad. Tommy asks Jack about this uncle they never new existed.

They keep going. Tommy can't stop shaking with fear. The animals' eyes follow them as they pass by the cages. Tommy trips on a 17-foot-long Burmese python slithering across the floor.

All of a sudden an Aye Aye drops from the ceiling onto Jack's back. He screams, twisting as the small marsupial crawls across his back. Jack stabs it dead. Jack peers down at the hideously ugly dead creature. He then turns to Tommy - the only thing he has power over in the present situation.

“Look what you got us into you little piece of shit, you messed up big time Tommy. Nathan’s dead! Your dog's gone and look, you pissed your pants. What are you so afraid of huh? Huh?”

Jack hassles Tommy with the end of his knife. The animals croak, hiss and sneer from the shadows as the boys tackle one another. Tommy finally finds the courage to face the true beast in his life. He starts to fight back. The two tumble and crash through the decaying wall into the largest cage of all. It's empty. There’s a small opening at the far wall; it’s their chance to get out.

Jack looks at Tommy, pinning him to the floor with his considerable strength. “You know what it means to be brave?”

But Jack never gets a chance to say what, because coming in through the opening is the liger. It’s standing in all its might blocking the only exit out of the room.

They’re trapped.

Jack throws Tommy towards the big cat as a sacrifice. “Take this.” Tommy ducks, cowering on the floor. “Come on, you mangy mother fucker!” Jack screams.

The liger pounces, smacking Jack to the floor beside Tommy. Jack is tiny and helpless, pinned under the large feline as it tears his chest apart and goes into the final death blow by sinking its fangs into Jack’s throat.

Too afraid to cry or move Tommy lies in a fetal position, face to face with his dead brother as the cat swings its head over his body. Whiskers brush Tommy’s face, blood drips into his hair. He does not move or blink. He lies perfectly still, eyes wide open.

“Be brave Tommy. Be brave,” he whispers ever so slightly to himself.

Tommy peers into the eyes of the Liger. It is immense, it is beautiful, it is wild. It is terrifying.

Tommy eyes the switchblade in his brother's hand and slowly, slowly reaches for it.

He makes his move, but the cat is too quick, knocking the knife out of his hand. Tommy backs up till his back is against the wall. The liger lunges.

Lucy jumps onto the liger's back biting viciously into its hide. The liger screams that horrid ear splitting shriek. Dog and cat fight ruthlessly.

"Lucy no! Run!" Tommy gets to his feet. The liger clamps hard on Lucy's hind leg and shakes her around sending her limp body smacking against the wall where she drops into a motionless pile on the floor.

Tommy steps over Jack's dead body, eyeing the liger. It's just him and the cat now.

"I'm not afraid of you!" he shouts.

The cat makes its move but is shot dead right between the eyes, it slumps to the ground.

Tommy turns, Rachel is standing there holding an enormous shotgun. A tear slips out of her eye.

Tommy is speechless.

"Why is there so much death in the world?" Rachel walks over to the liger and looks at it solemnly. "I let Mr. Whiskers out and he attacked Grandpa."

Rachel looks at Lucy's body then Jack's.

"I'm sorry."

Tommy doesn't say anything. He looks at the liger and then suddenly mewling emerges from a dark corner as three tiny cubs wobble to their fallen mother's corpse trying to suckle.

Tommy stares at the cubs deeply saddened, "I'm sorry too."

It's snowing heavily and an obnoxious newscaster speaks into her microphone. Behind her a small funeral procession is taking place in the small churchyard. The lady announces the

discovery of 43 exotic animals found on late Mr. Beamer's property, one of which was a liger responsible for the death of two local boys. All the animals are being relocated to national zoos around the country as the cameraman swings around to show animal patrol cars leaving on the small dirt road.

Tommy peers over his shoulder watching the animal control cars drive by before looking back at his brothers' coffins as they are lowered into their icy graves.

Tommy's ucle puts a hand on his shoulder and the two leave to their car. Tommy's Uncle opens the door for him and he is about to get in when Rachel runs up to Tommy pushing through the snow.

"Tommy wait!"

She side steps and there hobbling on three legs through the snow is none other than Lucy, happily grinning, tail wagging. Rachel smiles, "the animal patrol fixed her up." Rachel hands over the blue leash but Tommy is on his knees giving his beloved pooch the biggest, happiest hug. Tommy thanks Rachel. Rachel remarks how dogs make good pets, not ligers. The two laugh a little before Tommy gets inside the car with Lucy.

They pull away and Tommy waves goodbye to Rachel through the window.

Tommy's Uncle looks around at his nephew. He asks Tommy if his is all right. By which he doesn't say anything. Tommy's uncle tells him about how he and his brother, Tommy's dad would sometimes help out Old Man Beamer. He hands him a new box of crayons. "You can use these when we get to our new place, out in California."

"You're a brave boy, Tommy, you know that? Now, let's get out of these woods."

Tommy scratches Lucy's ears and looks at the box of crayons in his lap then looks up at his Uncle, "I don't want to be brave."